The Nice Guy & The Spoiled Rich Girl

by AlwaysSpeaksHerMind

Summary

A collection of random one-shots centered around my favorite Riverdale pairing. Other characters will probably appear since I love everyone on this crazy show, but the stories will mainly be from Archie or Veronica's perspective. They're just so beautifully never-judge-a-book-by-its-cover that I can't help myself.

Tags will be updated as needed (I'm bad at remembering, but I'll try).

Notes

Inspired by a prompt from Carla (apologies, Carla, because this didn't go quite according to prompt/how I planned).

See the end of the work for more notes.
Hey. Stopped by ur place & S said u went out hrs ago. U ok?

Yeah, I'm good.

U sure?

Lol, yes. Just had a small chocolate craving and forgot to text you change of location.

Pop's?

Gasp. Archie Andrews, Private Eye. You know, you should really open your own detective agency.

Yeah, yeah. I'll be there in 5. U sure ur ok?

YES. I'm fine.

K then. See u soon.

Veronica sighs, placing her phone on the table and pushing it toward the wall. To anyone who doesn’t know her very well, there’s nothing at all unusual about sitting in the corner of the farthest back booth at Pop’s. She is, after all, still visible to most of the restaurant.

But Archie isn’t just anyone. He hasn’t been, not since the day they met. The second he lays eyes on her he’ll recognize the move for what it is (hiding), and he’ll know she’s been lying about the whole I’m good thing. In all honesty, he probably already suspects. His texts sound as though he’s humoring her, playing along with the charade like he always does when he can tell she doesn’t want to talk about something. For whatever reason, he reads her better than anyone she’s ever known. She’s never yet managed to fool him, and she’s starting to think it’s useless to even try.

And it really should scare her, she thinks, listlessly stirring her milkshake and staring into its creamy depths as though it’ll reveal something important to her if she only looks long enough. She’s never cared much for the idea of being predictable. Of being truly seen, because what is she, some insecure protagonist from a mediocre YA novel whose author fondly and erroneously imagines themselves to be the next J.D. Salinger?

Heaven. Forbid.

No, if anything, she’s spent most of her life upending expectations and enjoying every second of it. The idea of someone knowing her well enough to gauge when she’s worried and putting up a front ought to unnerve her. In a way, maybe it does. But there’s something about him that makes her want to let go. Something reassuring that tells her it’s okay to drop the mask, lay off the act, to trust that if she falls, he won’t just be there to catch her—he’ll also be happy to do it.

The rusty old bells that have probably announced the entrance of the entire town at one point or another jangle cheerily at the front of the shop, but she doesn’t bother to glance up. Which is very unlike her, yes, but at the moment she just doesn’t have the energy for it. Besides, she already knows exactly who it is, and if she sees him coming toward her looking all concerned and sympathetic, she’s not sure she can handle it. So she focuses her attention elsewhere instead, studying the grooves and scratches embedded in the table’s surface. Resolutely, she keeps the fears that drove her from home in the first place out of her head, hoping against hope that they won’t show on her face. Pop’s isn’t a bar, but the principle is the same: she came here not to remember her troubles but to forget
them, and she has no desire to broadcast her current vulnerability to the other late-night inhabitants, however few and oblivious they may be. Even when the footsteps that have been drawing steadily nearer scuff to a stop in front of her table, she keeps her head down. It’s maybe okay if he sees. It’s not if anyone else does.

“You’re not fine.”

He says it quietly, sliding into the booth beside her, angling his body so that he’s both facing her and blocking her from the rest of the place’s view.

“Are you?” he asks when she doesn’t respond right away.

She hesitates, habit about to force the usual flippant denial from her. And even when she recognizes that it’s habit about to take over again, a big part of her still wants to stick with what’s familiar. To insist there’s nothing wrong, no matter what appearances suggest. But she makes the mistake of looking at him, and there it is—the Archie Andrews expression of worry that undoes her every time. Her attempt at a smile fails miserably, so she sets her mouth in a hard line, afraid to move (let alone speak) lest it jar the tears loose. Only...he’s watching her so closely that she knows he intends to wait her out. She has to say something. It’s up to her whether or not it’s another lie.

“No,” she mumbles at last, getting the word out with difficulty. “No, not really.”

Archie nods. Shifting slightly, he rests his arm atop the seatback. It’s a gesture uniquely him—an offer of comfort that he’s giving her the chance to refuse just in case she doesn’t want his help—and she appreciates it more than he’ll ever know. Because honestly, who is she trying to kid? She’s worn out, and she’s tired of pretending she isn’t. Without a second thought she leans into him, closing her eyes when the arm drops down around her and he pulls her in close, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“Your dad?” he asks, his voice ruffling through her hair. When she nods he sighs, reaching over to take one of the hands that’ve fallen into her lap. “It’s going to be okay, Ronnie,” he whispers. He laces their fingers together, his thumb stroking hers. “I don’t—I don’t know how, but it will. I promise.”

“I hope so.” It takes almost Herculean effort and it’s unconvincing at best, but she manages to smirk up at him. Sure, it’s probably a fruitless attempt to stave off the waterworks, but she has to try. Do not go gentle into that good night, and all that. “I can’t believe it, though. No matter how badly I want to.”

“It’s okay if you do, you know.” He uses their interlocked hands to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear, making her smile (for real, this time). “There’s nothing wrong with a little optimism every now and then.”

“Of course not. But there’s a huge difference between optimism and blind optimism,” she reminds him, jaw aching as she fights her swelling throat and rapidly-clouding vision. “I strongly suspect this is the latter.”

“Hey.” Releasing her hand, he pulls her into a hug so warm and solid that it makes the tears spill over. When she buries her face in his chest, an undignified sniffle breaks free and his grip tightens around her in immediate response. “If it is, we’ll figure something out. I promise.”

A shuddery laugh escapes. She loves how he’s always ready to charge headlong at windmills for the people he cares about, Riverdale’s own Don Quixote in a letter jacket, but this is different. It can’t be fixed with determination and bigheartedness alone. And if Hiram Lodge really is the man she now
fears him to be, she wants Archie as far away from him as possible. There’s an ugly side to her family that she hopes to God won’t infect the boy sitting here beside her, his faith in good things somehow not completely destroyed by everything he’s seen and experienced in this stupid world.

“What?” she questions, almost choking as she struggles to not sob vociferously right in the middle of a dingy diner. “Don’t get me wrong—I appreciate the thought, but what could we possibly figure out?”

“I don’t know,” he answers, undaunted. “But we will. I’m not going to let you get hurt, Veronica, okay? Not if there’s anything I can do to stop it.”

“But there isn’t.” She sits up, sighing when she sees the stubborn set of his face. “Look,” she says, tugging gently at the collar of his jacket, “I don’t want to get hurt. Believe me, I’ve got a very healthy sense of self-preservation. I’m not trying to borrow trouble, or set myself up for some fall. But this—is a mess, Archie. Something bad could potentially happen to someone, and if it has to be anyone at all, I’d really rather it was me.”

“And I’d really rather it wasn’t!” he retorts, covering her hand with his. “Ronnie, if you’re trying to hide all this because you want to protect everyone else, you’re going to have to come up with a new plan. Because I’m not going anywhere.”

“Archie—”

“No, I’m serious.” He squeezes her hand, eyes locked on hers. “This is—well, I don’t even know what this is. But I do know that it’s not one of those things you have to do on your own. I mean, if you’re wanting to, I get it. I do. But I’m not just going to sit here and watch you act like everything’s okay because you think it’s better for everyone else, or for me, or some other crazy, off-the-wall crap idea. You’d never let me do that. Please don’t try to do it to yourself.”

She stares at him in exasperation for a long moment, searching his determined expression for any sign of weakening even though she’s well-aware of how futile a move that is. He won’t weaken. She’s now known him long enough to understand that for all the patient niceness he exhibits on a regular basis, he’s every bit as bullheaded as she is. And as usual, she can’t decide if she loves or hates that more.

“And I’m not going anywhere, huh?” she says finally, cocking her head to the side. “So what, you’re my self-appointed stalker now?”

He relaxes, face breaking into a grin. “If that’s what it takes,” he jokes, wiping a straggling tear out from under her eye. “But seriously,” he adds, sobering. “I want to help you, Veronica.” Her breath hitches as he leans down, kissing her lightly on the temple. “Any way I can. Will you let me?”

“Yeah,” she murmurs, resting a hand against the side of his face as he bends again, this time touching his lips to hers. But then his words really sink in and a thought pops unbidden into her mind, making her smile into the kiss.

“What?” he says, pulling away just enough to grin at her in confusion.

Veronica chuckles, marveling inwardly at the roller-coaster ride he’s taken her emotions on tonight. “Any way I can?” she repeats, deepening her voice to mimic his. “Maybe I’m losing it, but that sounded very like a pathetic come-on, Sir Galahad. I always thought you were a little more suave than that.”

He lets his head fall back, his attempt at heaving an annoyed sigh hampered by the laugh she can see
he’s fighting. “Wow. You had to ruin the moment, didn’t you Ronnie?” he says good-naturedly.

“Don’t worry,” she answers, wrapping her arms around his waist. The lazy grin he gives her warms her from head to toe as she smiles up at him, wondering why she’s spent so long resisting the idea of letting him in. “I’m sure I can figure out a way to make it up to you.”

The laugh he’s been holding back bursts loose, rumbling against her as he brings his forehead down to rest against hers. “Please tell me you meant that as a pathetic come-on?” he says, eyes crinkling in merriment. “Because I was going to go buy you another shake, but if you have other plans, that can definitely wait.”

“Oh, it can, can it?” She smirks, sneaking a hand up to prod him lightly in the chest. “Well. Change that shake to some fries, Andrews, and you just might find out what my plans are.”

“You got it. Large order of fries, coming right up.”

As he slides out of the booth and heads over to the counter, Veronica’s smile softens. She can’t even begin to fathom how a boy like Archie from a town like Riverdale can have this kind of heady-yet-grounding, pulse-racing-yet-calming effect on her, but maybe it doesn’t matter. She’s spent practically her whole life playing Heartless Ice Princess.

It’s about time she admitted a thaw might be possible.
**Chapter Summary**

After the events at the end of Season 1, Archie volunteers to take over the business while school is out until his dad is back on his feet. The trouble is, he's running tired and forgetful, and time flies when you're not paying attention.

Archie's POV inspired by an anonymous prompt on tumbr (Archie as the shy, forgetful boyfriend).

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes

No. It couldn’t be.

Horrified, Archie stared at the daily calendar on his dad’s office wall, the giant FRIDAY staring right back at him. He’d already had the worst day ever—dropped his phone on the way down the stairs and somehow broken it, spilled half a gallon of milk all over the counter just trying to pour a bowl of cereal, tripped over the stray cat that had been stalking their house on his way out the door and gotten scratched up by both the cat and the bushes he landed in, broken his key off in the door to the office and had to break and crawl through a window, knocked over a stack of already sorted invoices, realized he’d forgotten to bring the lunch he’d actually remembered to pack the night before, and now this had to happen.

How could he possibly have forgotten that it was Friday? As in Veronica’s birthday Friday. Sure, he’d been working hard trying to keep things running the way his dad always did and he hadn’t noticed the calendar all day, but how could something like that have just slipped his mind? He’d remembered well enough last week. Even planned on making sure he got everything done and closed up in time to go home, shower, and take her out to dinner. Now he had…two-and-a-half hours before he had to be there? He checked his watch. No, he had one hour. One. Sixty minutes to finish re-sorting the five billion or so stupid bills he’d knocked over climbing in, board up the window, lock up everything with the spare keys, check the grounds to make sure everything was secure, and then get home and get cleaned up.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he muttered.

Running his hands over his head until his hair stood straight up, he let out a frustrated cry. If he were lucky, he might get the bills sorted by the time he was supposed to pick up Veronica. Which wouldn’t matter anyway, because to make it there even close to on time he’d have to leave the office like a shot just to arrive on her doorstep sweaty, greasy, mud-spattered, and smelling like a four day old gym sock. Boy, would her parents (who already looked at him like they would have definitely picked a different guy for their daughter) ever love that.

He heaved a sigh. Pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers, he headed over to the desk and grabbed the phone. There was nothing he could do except call her and explain, and then apologize until he was blue in the face. But as he propped the receiver on his shoulder, the flaw in his plan became all too apparent.
He didn’t have her number memorized. At all.

And he couldn’t call Betty or Jughead and get it from them, because he was an idiot who relied too much on his contacts list, and he didn’t have either of their numbers memorized either. Calling home defeated the whole purpose of Archie filling in at the company—his dad was supposed to rest, not get up to answer phones or head over to the neighbors’ to find out if he could borrow a phone to send his son’s girlfriend’s number to his son because his son was a moron who apparently couldn’t remember anything important. Thoroughly disgusted, he slammed the phone back down, the impact rattling the desk and somehow knocking the glass jar of pencils off so that it fell to the floor and shattered, shards of glass flying everywhere.

“Oh, come on!” Crumpling up a wad of paper, he threw it furiously at the window, seriously considering one good, long scream. He’d cleaned this kind of mess once already, when he broke the window. “This isn’t funny anymore!”

“Um, was it ever?”

Whirling around, Archie gaped at the person standing in the doorway. “Veronica! What uh, what are you doing here?”

Her lips twitched. “Well, judging by that last performance, I’d say I’m watching Riverdale High’s starting QB attempt to revive some classic Laurel and Hardy skits all by himself.” Stepping daintily over a sloppy stack of papers, she pushed the door shut and tilted her head, surveying the area with her hands clasped behind her back. “Going by the state of this room and considering the fact that I just came from your house and found out from your dad that you busted your phone earlier, I’m going to hazard a guess and say that you are having one hell of a day?”

“Yeah. Wait.” He froze. “You went by my house? I wasn’t supposed to meet you for lunch, was I?”

“No. I was at the drugstore though. The pharmacist said you hadn’t been by yet to pick up your dad’s prescription—”

“Oh, my God.” Archie covered his eyes. “I totally forgot about that. I have to go!”

“No, you don’t.” She held up a hand as he started toward the door. “I couldn’t get ahold of you, so I called your dad.”

He halted, confused. “You have my dad’s number?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, it was all he could do to not slap himself across the forehead. Duh, of course she did, and Dad had hers. He’d been there when that whole thing had happened right after he volunteered to run the business. Veronica had insisted that she be called in case of emergency since Archie would be working and the majority of the Coopers wouldn’t be home during the day, and Dad had pretended to be all annoyed by what he called ‘the babying.’

“Yes,” she said slowly, giving him that you-should-know-this look. “He gave permission for me to pick it up, and I took it over. That’s when I found out about your phone.” Reaching into her purse, she pulled out a plastic tub and wiggled it back and forth. “That’s also when I found out that some busy little worker bee left their lunch in the fridge.”

“Thank you,” he told her, gratitude warring with self-loathing for dominance. “You have no idea how much I appreciate that right now.”

“Not a problem.” She tossed him the carton and then dug back into her purse and extracted a can of soda. “Should I throw this too?”
He nodded, already halfway through his sandwich. “Please,” he mumbled, snagging it in midair.

“So what’s going on?” she inquired, strolling around the room as though she were at an art gallery while he finished the last bites of food and gulped down the soda, his stomach practically singing.

He set his trash aside and slumped against the desk. “Oh, nothing,” he answered. “I’m just losing my mind, that’s all.”

“Wow. Well, at least you’re not taking it lying down,” she teased.

He exhaled loudly, digging the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Veronica, I…” Ugh. All he had to do was remember his stupid days of the week. Normal people did it all the time. Why did he have to be that guy? “I just don’t even know where to start.”

Her heels clicked across the floor toward him and a few seconds later he felt her hands slide up his forearms to grip his wrists.

“Ronnie, don’t,” he muttered, trying to back away but the desk kept him in place. “I stink.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that, thank you.” She tugged hard, practically prying his hands from his face. “But you know, if it makes you feel any better, you smell a lot worse after playing football.”

In spite of his self-inflicted blues, he snorted. “Gee, thanks. Good to know.”

“You’re very welcome.” She grinned up at him, dimples flashing. “Now are you going to tell me what the problem is, or do I have to guess that, too? ‘Cause if I’m being honest, you seem like you’re dealing with a little more than just a series of unfortunate events.” She tapped him lightly on the chin with her knuckles. “Elucidate, Archiekins.”

_Here goes nothing._

Archie pointed toward the calendar. “That’s the problem.”

She glanced from him to the calendar, back to him, a small wrinkle in her forehead. “That’s the problem? What’d it do, refuse to be recycled?”

He stared at her, trying to figure out if she was teasing again or if she honestly had no idea what he was getting at.

“Look, Ronnie—I’m sorry, okay?” he said, picking up her hand and squeezing it. “I-I wanted to make the day special for you, but I blew it.”

“What?” She tilted her head again, her small face creased with a frown. “Archie, what are you talking about?”

“Your birthday,” he explained, waving toward the calendar again. “I’m sorry, but I just zoned what day it was. And I guess I might’ve noticed on my phone, but you know…” he grimaced. “I kinda broke it this morning.”

“What?” Veronica stared at him. “Archie, how could you forget today’s my birthday when—”

“I know, I know! I’m sorry,” he interrupted, tightening his grip on her hand. “And I swear I want to make it up to you, but I can’t even figure out how to do that! I’ve got all this, this absolute crap to take care of because I told my dad I would, and by the time I finish with that, it’s going to be like nine, and I’ll still need a shower before anyone will let me set foot in a restaurant that isn’t Pop’s or a
bar.” He rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand, frustration mounting. “Look, I’m just… I’m just sorry. I don’t even have anything good to say, because it’s a stupid mistake. I was an idiot, and there’s really no way to fix that.”

“Archie, you’re not an idiot.”

He shook his head, refusing to be comforted. “No, you don’t have to act like it’s not a big deal. I mean come on, I forgot your birthday? What kind of boyfriend does that?”

She crossed her arms. “I don’t know. Maybe losers who don’t care enough about who they’re dating to remember?”

His eyes closed. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“But,” she continued, hopping up to sit beside him on the desk, “then again, maybe loser boyfriends aren’t the only ones who get a little confused about dates. Maybe sweet boyfriends who care so much about their fathers that they’re willing to take over a job they hate while said father is out of commission can forget birthdays, too. And maybe despite what those sweet boyfriends think, that’s not such a big deal.”

He glanced over to see her watching him, head cocked to the side, a little smile on her face. “Do you really think that, or are you just saying it to be nice?” he asked suspiciously.

Veronica laughed, her eyes crinkling up. “Yes, Archie. I’m just saying it to be nice, not because I have all the evidence right here in front of me.”

“Evidence?” His brow furrowed and he looked around, half-expecting to see the word emblazoned across one of the tons of manila folders in the office. “What evidence? Ronnie, I didn’t even have that much to do today. I just messed it all up. That’s why it’s taking so long.”

“Oh, please.” Rolling her eyes, she swung her feet briskly. “Maybe I should take back that ‘you’re not an idiot’ thing after all.”

“You probably should.”

She scoffed. “Ugh. For heaven’s sake, Andrews, pull yourself together! Do you see this?” Extending an arm, she waved it around, encompassing the whole room. “This is not meant to be run by a sixteen-year-old. You’re doing a job that isn’t yours because it’ll help someone you love. There’s not a lot of people who would do that. You need to stop selling yourself short.”

She was so adamant that he almost smiled. Of all the people he knew, Veronica Lodge was the one he could count on to never let him get away with anything. A lot of times, it could be really uncomfortable, because she wasn’t big on mincing words. But a lot of other times—like this one—it was reassuring. She was serious, and that was a comfort, because it meant he could depend on what she was saying.

“So you forgive me?” he asked tentatively, reaching out and flicking a little piece of her hair.

“Yes.”

“Of course.” Kicking her feet out, she launched herself off the desk and came around to stand in front of him. “Not that there’s really anything to forgive,” she added, bumping her fist lightly against his chest. “Because actually, my birthday is tomorrow. Your calendar’s a day ahead, Mr. Boss Man.”

“What?” Archie vaulted upright. “No way!”

“See for yourself.” She held her phone in front of him and he stared at the date on it in disbelief. “T-

In a flash it all came back to him—how big of a hurry he’d been in, how he’d planned to fix it. “I accidentally tore two pages off it on Monday,” he muttered. “I was going to leave it so I wouldn’t get off on the days.”

She cleared her throat. “And how exactly did that work out for you?”

He groaned, making her laugh. “Veronica, you know, I’m not even kidding anymore.” Shaking his head, he stared dully at her. God, he felt stupid. “You might want to rethink this relationship.”

“Not a chance.” The dimples appeared again, even though she wasn’t technically smiling. “I’ve got too much invested in this to back out now. Even though you have committed the unpardonable sin of getting your days of the week wrong.” She mockingly fanned her eyes as though trying not to cry. “How dare you, Archie Andrews? How dare you? Have you no shame?”

He mashed his lips together hard to keep from laughing. Convincing her that he wasn’t kidding was going to be difficult enough without cracking up at her sarcasm.

“Seriously, Ronnie,” he told her when he’d got himself back under control. “I’m really bad at this kind of stuff. I mean, just ask Val—I kinda suck at being a boyfriend.”

“So?”

So? Archie frowned. “So, you could do a lot better than me! I mean don’t get me wrong,” he added, chuckling nervously, “I don’t want you to; it’s in my interest if you want to slum it, but—”

“Okay, Saint Andrews,” she interrupted, putting a hand over his mouth. “I’m going to stop you right there.” Crossing her arms, she fixed her eyes on his, expression determined. “You remember when you asked me if I had a boyfriend in New York?”

He nodded. That had been the night of the dance, the first time they’d kissed. Even he couldn’t forget that if he tried. “You said no.”

“That’s right. And you want to know why I didn’t, Archie?” she demanded. “Because I was a horrible person. I was. I used people all the time to get what I wanted. I was even proud of being good at it. When I say I was my father’s daughter…” She raised a shoulder, dark eyes boring into his. “It’s not some recommendation letter or a five-star review on Yelp from a reliable source. I was awful. Period, end of paragraph, end of chapter, end of story. If we’d met each other back then you would have hated me.”

“Yeah, I don’t know about that, Ronnie,” he said, lowering his voice.

She made random jokes like that every now and then and he always refuted them, but he’d never given the matter that much thought. Considering it now though, he discovered that no part of him actually believed she was right. The second he saw her it was like he knew her and she knew him, and that feeling had only gotten stronger with time. The idea of him ever being able to hate her just seemed impossible.

“Agree to disagree then,” she responded, “but I truly do think you would’ve. Or you ought to have, anyway. Bottom line Archie, I’m terrible at relationships too.” She dropped her gaze finally, breathing out a laugh. “I mean, do you have any idea how many times I’ve been told that my picture is in the encyclopedia next to the words high maintenance?”

“Hey.” He angled his head, trying to see into her face. “I do not think you’re high maintenance,
“Okay?”

“I know you don’t,” she answered, looping her arms around his neck, her smile soft as she looked back up. “Hence my point.”

“Which is?” he asked, locking his arms around her waist in response.

“There aren’t a lot of people who can endure being around me. Even fewer who want the bother.” Her smile widened and her hands cupped the back of his head as she stretched up on tiptoe to kiss him. “At the risk of sounding abominably cheesy,” she whispered, “you, Archie Andrews, are one in a million. And for the record, there’s no one I’d rather have forget my birthday.”

A big, really dumb grin broke free as he pulled her in close, wondering if he’d ever get used to the rush he felt whenever he was with her. “No kidding, huh?” he murmured, lips brushing against hers.

“No kidding.”

She brought a hand over to the side of his face and leaned in, kissing him so decisively that he stumbled a little and nearly knocked them both the ground. Which, seeing as how a good portion of it was still covered in glass, would have been disastrous.

Her breath tickled his chin as she laughed.

“Easy there, Casanova,” she teased, settling her hands on his biceps as he sheepishly steadied them. “You’ve had enough accidents for one day, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, definitely.” He matched her grin. “Happy early Birthday, Ronnie.”

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders in an awkward but tight hug. “Thank you. Now,” she added briskly, slapping her palms down against his shoulders, eyebrows raised. “Turn me loose. The sexy, flannel-shirted construction worker look is great in theory, but in practice it doesn’t smell so hot. And that sandwich was tuna, wasn’t it?” She made a face. “No offense, but…not your best flavor.”

He burst out laughing, a little embarrassed but unable to actually regret kissing her. “I told you—you might want to give this a second thought.”

“Yeah?” Squatting down, she began stacking papers. Her eyes twinkled as she looked up at him, smiling. “Fat chance, Archiekins.”

Chapter End Notes

*I have no idea when Veronica's birthday is or when Archie's is, so I'm operating on the assumption that he's had one since this takes place somewhere around May?

*Okay. DOES Camila Mendes have dimples, or no? I spent way longer than I should have trying to figure out how to describe what happens to her face when she smiles because the only word that came to mind was "dimples," but I have what she has and I would never refer to that as dimples. So I left it in, but I'm not crazy about it. And now I'm arguing with myself over it.

*I'd like to think the situation in this was subconsciously inspired by the Riverdale cast getting KJ Apa's birthday wrong, but sadly, I came up with the idea before all that, so
the story behind this is less cool than it could've been.
*Just for future reference, the tense I use will probably vary from story to story
depending on what feels right when I start it.
*A couple of prompts (including this one) have spawned ideas for one or two other
stories in addition to the prompt itself, so as long as this week isn't as busy as last was,
there should be some more updates coming toward the end of the week/beginning of
next.
*Thanks for reading/commenting! Hope everyone has a great week :)}
Veronica and Archie are in their junior year, and have been broken up for several months now. They describe themselves as friends, but when Veronica decides to go to Reggie's party and Archie thinks it's a bad idea, some doubts and maybe some unexpired feelings begin to creep in.

[For best results, assume everyone's parents are out of town like TV parents always seem to be.]

**I'd consider this PG, not Teen, but because everyone's underage, there's a mention of Grundy *shivers* and I'm paranoid about ao3’s guidelines, I changed the rating to be on the safe side.**

**(I will probably do a prequel to this at some point since I just couldn't figure out how to make Reggie appear because he wasn't in enough scenes for me to get a great idea of his personality..."Bully/Jock" was a little too flat to go on ;D)**

Chapter Notes

From a really great prompt by izzy--bella004 on tumblr:

["Archie and Veronica are together and Veronica is head cheerleader and Reggie is the captain and he always talks and flirts with Veronica and Archie gets jealous of Reggie and Betty and Jughead reassure him..."]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Veronica and Archie had first agreed that a breakup was in both of their best interests, things between them cooled. They hadn’t dated that long, true—just five months—but transitioning from friends, to coupledom, then back to friends wasn’t exactly a simple maneuver, and Veronica hated it. It sometimes took enormous effort for her to remember that she couldn’t just lean her head against his shoulder when she felt like it, or smack him playfully when he said something funny, or ruffle his hair when she passed just to mess with him, and it frustrated her because none of those things should have felt awkward. She did it jokingly with Betty and Jughead all the time—Jughead in particular loathed the hair-ruffle—and she’d been fairly touchy-feely with Archie long before they started dating. It bothered her that their friendship had been solid enough for them to come to a mutual agreement regarding their relationship status with a busy schoolyear and scads of family drama looming on the horizon for both of them, but not solid enough for them to return to their old habits.

But then suddenly, it had gotten better. Summer faded into autumn, and they seemed to both relax. School started up again and even though they spent a lot of time together, it didn’t feel even half as uncomfortable as it had earlier in the year. Both of them experienced a slew of personal triumphs: Archie lost the title of captain of the football team to Reggie, but excelled on the field. Veronica was officially dubbed head of the River Vixens and given her very own HBIC shirt (no one but she and Cheryl knew that she already had one, and neither of them was telling). They stopped trying to avoid
sitting on the same side of the lunch table or the booth at Pop’s, to Betty’s unspoken and Jughead’s vocal relief, and when homecoming rolled around and they both decided to attend on their own, they high-fived and even danced together a few times to some of the faster songs. She got back in the habit of texting him random thoughts and jokes as they came to her, and he started teasing her again. It was nice and she enjoyed it, but she couldn’t help feeling every now and then that they were like a dam about to break—that it was only a matter of time before whatever it was that still seemed to linger between them boiled to the surface, and she honestly wasn’t sure what she thought about that.

He was, after all, still one of her best friends, and in moments of unguardedness, he was always her first call. There was just something about him—something in his nature maybe—that she enjoyed and relied on. Like, for example, when Reggie Mantle materialized by her locker one day and invited her and whomever she wanted to bring with her to a ‘pretty sweet bash’ (Veronica translated that as ‘closest thing to a college kegger that a bunch of high schoolers can get’) at his house on Friday night. She hadn’t been having the most stellar week in history, what with her parents skipping off to Argentina on an impromptu vacation getaway that smelled strongly of business trip and faintly of corruption, so without a second thought, Veronica dropped by Archie’s after school to ask him if he intended to go. To her surprise, she found out that not only did he not plan on attending, but he thought she should stay away as well. It started out innocently enough, but before long they became embroiled in an argument, both of them refusing to budge on their position.

“But why?” she asked for what felt like the hundredth time from her spot at the foot of his bed, linking her fingers together atop the bedpost and resting her chin on them. “I thought you and Reggie were all buddy-buddy now.”

“We’re teammates, Ronnie.” He plucked at a string and then reached up to tighten the frets. “It’s not the same thing as friends.” Glancing up at her, eyes serious, he shook his head. “Some not-so-great stuff has happened at his parties before, and he can get a little nasty when he’s drunk.”

“Archie, for heaven’s sake, you’re blowing this all out of proportion.” Rolling her eyes, Veronica tapped a fingernail against the worn surface of the bedpost. “He’s a teenaged boy, not the devil incarnate.”

“No.” Archie plucked experimentally at a guitar string. He didn’t look up, but she could see his jaw clenching all the same. “He’s not. But he has had a thing for you for a while now, and I wouldn’t put it past him to try something.”

“Try something?” Her brows rose, a skeptical laugh bubbling out. “Archie. I’m from New York, remember? I’ve seen every ‘something’ that exists to be tried! What tricks could Reggie Mantle possibly have up his well-filled sleeve that might surprise me?”

“I don’t know, okay?” he snapped, finally tossing the guitar aside and swiveling to face her. “But Ronnie, just because you’ve seen it all doesn’t mean you have to see it again! That’s like—like seeing how close you can hold a blowtorch to your arm before it burns you. Remember what happened with Chuck? You thought he was okay, too.”

Veronica stiffened. In the calm, distant, logical part of her brain, she recognized that he was worried about her and trying to help. That he was getting upset and losing all tact because she remained unconvinced. But she’d had an exhausting week, and quite frankly, she was sick of being cool and rational, and she had already made up her mind to go to this party come hell, high water, or interfering ex-boyfriends who’d displayed an astounding lack of common sense where matters of the heart were concerned.

“Before you start pointing any fingers Archie Andrews, might I remind you of a certain Geraldine Grundy?” she bit out, crossing her arms. “AKA, the pedophilic love of your life at one time?”
The instant the words left her mouth, she regretted them. It was the shot that was uncalled for; the kind that silenced further arguments and reduced the hearer—her victim—to tears. The kind she eternally made due to that very fact. It was a hurt-them-before-they-hurt-you tactic, and despite all her resolutions to change from the person she’d been before Riverdale, she hadn’t blinked when she’d done it to Cheryl at Jughead’s God-awful birthday party once upon a time. But Archie was different. He wasn’t the type to deliberately set out to inflict pain on others with his words, or to take a perverse kind of joy in watching those same words shatter someone the way she and Cheryl both were. Seeing his face whiten, Veronica recoiled inwardly. Rather than apologizing, however, she kept her mouth shut.

“Just don’t go, okay?” he said quietly after a minute or so, his eyes locked on hers. “Take it from someone who’s practically made a hobby out of being an idiot…it’s a stupid idea, Ronnie. The guy can be a real douche.”

“Yeah, well.” She stood up and strode toward the door, kicking a sock out of the way. “So can I. Sounds like we have more in common than I thought.”

The temptation to slam the door on her way out was huge, but because she knew he was expecting it, she closed it gently and hurried lightly down the stairs, fuming. She’d lived most of her life without Archie Andrews in it, and there really were hunks galore at Riverdale, example: Reggie. What was it about that stupid, sweet, infuriating boy that made her think she needed him in her life?

Blowing out a frustrated breath, she ran up the steps to the prim little Cooper residence, ringing the bell with unnecessary energy and tapping her foot against the bricks as she waited. On the fifth successive ring, the door was finally yanked open.

“Jeez, V.” Betty stared at her, her expression somewhere in the zone between laughter and annoyance. “What the hell?”

“Sorry not sorry,” Veronica answered, folding her arms. “Want to go to a party tonight?”

“Well…” Betty hesitated, looking back over her shoulder. “Jughead’s here, and we kinda made plans to watch a movie…”

Right. Mentally, Veronica kicked herself. They were always doing things like that on Friday nights, and if she hadn’t been so irritated with Archie, she would’ve remembered and not even bothered.

“I totally forgot. Never mind then,” she said brightly, pasting on a quick smile. “Just thought I’d stop by and ask. Tell Jughead that if he’s dying for a recommendation, Double Indemnity is never not a good choice. Bye!”

“V, wait a sec.”

Veronica turned to see her best friend frowning at her. “Yes?”

Stepping outside, Betty shut the door behind her. “Whose party are you going to?” she asked, pulling her cardigan closed around her as the chilly breeze set the ends to fluttering. “Not—not Reggie’s, right?”

“Yes, actually.” Veronica cocked her head to the side, annoyance flaring again. “What, don’t tell me you have something against me going, too?”

“Too?” The taller girl blinked confusedly, then glanced toward the house next door. “Oh. No. No, not exactly against...”
“Good.” Tossing her hair back, Veronica smiled tightly at her friend. “Because I’m going, and that’s that. I’ve entertained arguments on the subject once already, and for the sake of our friendship, I suggest we don’t go there. My current mood could ensure we never speak to each other again.”

Betty sighed, rubbing her arms briskly up and down. “Look, V—I know you don’t want to hear this, but…I think Archie’s right.”

Almost reflexively, Veronica’s chin jutted out.

“Just hear me out,” Betty put in quickly. “I’m not saying Reggie’s Chuck Clayton, and I’m also not saying you can’t take care of yourself, but…” She grimaced. “You didn’t grow up with him. Arch, Juggie, me—we did. He can be all right some of the time, and then other times, he can be really just…ugh.”

“Just ‘ugh’?” Veronica raised her eyebrows, a laugh jerking free. “Well, thanks for the tip. I’ll keep that in mind. No,” she added, seeing her friend start to protest. “Don’t worry about me, B. I’ll be fine. When am I not?”

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“You told her to wait too, and she still went?” Archie demanded, doing his best to not shout. After Veronica had left, he’d spent about two hours meandering around the house trying to forget the whole thing before he finally caved and went over to Betty’s to ask her and Jughead what had happened. Now, hearing Betty relate the story, it was all he could do to not jump in the truck and head straight over to Reggie’s stupid party just to assure himself that she was all right.

“No. Obviously, she’s still here,” Jughead answered, waving a hand lazily. “Can’t you see her milling about?”

“Oh, this is just perfect.” Resting his hands atop his head, Archie groaned. “She wasn’t even sure she was going until I said all that about Reggie being bad news. Then it was like—I don’t know; she just made up her mind and that was it, and nothing I said made any difference.”

“I mean…” Betty held her hands out helplessly, chin resting on her knee as she sat with both feet pulled up on the couch. “I don’t know what to tell you, Arch. You know how stubborn she can be.”

“Yeah,” Archie muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers.

If anyone knew that about Veronica, it was definitely him. Her unwavering ability to stand on her own two feet and command a situation was one of the things he’d first (and still) admired about her, but it was also one of the things that could drive him crazy faster than anything. Because she just. Wouldn’t. Let him. Help.

“I also know that she wouldn’t even be considering hanging out with Reggie if she weren’t feeling weird about something,” he added, running a restless hand through his hair as he moved around the room, thinking hard. “Probably her parents. And I know that if she goes to that party in the mood she was in when she left, she’s heading straight for trouble, because he’s had his eye on her for a while now, and no way does he not try to make a move tonight.”

“Interesting. Do you also know that you’re going to die a vicious death at the hands of Betty’s mom if you wear a hole in her carpet with all this pacing?” Jughead inquired, smirking when Betty smacked his arm. “What? I’m just saying.”

“Be nice,” she told him, rolling her eyes.
“Jug, this is serious.” Archie pointed toward the window. “You know Reggie. You know what that party’s liable to be like.”

“Yes, and I also know Veronica,” Jughead responded coolly, tucking his arms behind his head as he slouched deeper into the couch cushions beside Betty. “As do you. Better, I’d venture to guess. My question is... why are you so worked up over this?” He lifted his eyebrows. “Not still carrying a torch for the Princess of the Pembrooke, are we?”

“What?” Archie scoffed. “No! We broke up. We’re just uh, just friends. That’s—that’s ridiculous.”

“Mm. Is it, though?” Jughead leaned toward Betty. “Methinks the ex-boyfriend doth protest too much,” he muttered in loud aside.

Archie rolled his eyes when Betty snorted and clapped a hand over her mouth. “That’s not funny.”

“Hey, he has a point, Arch,” she said, shrugging. “Whether you want to admit it or not, you’re worried about Veronica—”

“Yes! Exactly! I’m worried about her,” he interrupted. “Why is that such a big deal?”

—because you still care about her,” Betty finished, giving him a look that was way too mom-ish for a person still in high school.

“Yeah. Of course I care about her,” Archie responded, throwing his hands out and letting them fall back to his sides with a slap. “I thought we established that when I said I was worried?”

“No.” Jughead pointed at him. “When you said that you are currently worried, we established that you are currently worried. That’s called the what. Now we’re trying to establish the why.”

Archie gave his friend a disgusted look. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

Jughead shrugged. “Surprisingly, no.” He tilted his head, eyes narrowing. “You seem pretty ragged around the edges, and it doesn’t do you any favors. Plus, I don’t actually revel in the misery of my friends. I just pretend like I do.”


“Okay, seriously,” Betty interjected. “All jokes aside, Arch. Are you freaking out about Veronica going to Reggie’s because you think something bad might happen to her, or are you freaking out because Veronica’s going to Reggie’s to probably hang out with Reggie?”

Archie gritted his teeth. “That’s not—”

She folded her arms, sighing. “We’re your friends. Just tell us, okay? To be honest, we’re already drawing our own conclusions.”

Yeah, because telling your best friends how you felt about your other best friend was just so easy to do. Staring hard at a really ugly vase in the windowsill, Archie shook his head.

“It’s both, I’m guessing?” Jughead volunteered after a few minutes rolled by.

Archie groaned, dropping down onto the arm of the one seater couch. “Yeah. Okay. Fine. I’m jealous of Reggie. I mean, I thought that Veronica and me breaking up was a good idea. We were both—so busy, and it seemed like if we tried to do a relationship on top of all the crap going on in our lives, it was, I don’t know—doomed to failure? It made sense at the time.”
“Really. And how’s that working out for you now?” Jughead questioned, not quite managing to evade Betty’s light punch.

“It’s just…” He trailed off, shaking his head again. “I thought I’d be okay seeing her with other guys because we both agreed on the breakup. But I’m not, and on top of that, I just have a really bad feeling about that party.”

“Well…” Betty sent him a sympathetic smile. “I hate to be the one to say it, but you missed your chance to go with her, and now there isn’t really anything you can do about it unless she calls.”

“Yeah.” Gloomily leaning back so that he was draped in an awkward half-circle over the couch, he sighed. “How mad do you think she’d be if I swung by?”

“I don’t know, Archie.” Jughead tossed a pillow at him that landed on his face. “How mad do you think she’d be?”

“Yeah, you’re right.” He shoved the pillow away and sat up. “Thanks, guys,” he added, nodding gratefully at his friends. “I’ll get out of your hair now. Let you finish movie night.”

He knew they were saying the usual no problem, it’s gonna be all right stuff as he left, but he didn’t really concentrate on it because he couldn’t. No matter how much he told himself that he was being an idiot, he couldn’t shake the sinking feeling in his stomach that something was going to go wrong. For the next few hours, he worked extra-hard to distract himself, messing around with chords on the guitar, watching TV, even doing the dishes. But nothing seemed to work, so eventually he just gave it up and stretched out on the sofa, mentally listing off all the reasons why he was being stupid until he dozed off.

The next thing he knew, it was sixteen past one, his phone was shrilling in his ear, and he was rolling off the couch in his attempts to grab it. When he saw the name, his breath quickened.

“Veronica?” he blurted out the second he answered.

“Yeah.”

Her scratchy, whispery voice sent his heartbeat skyrocketing. “What is it? What’s wrong?” he demanded, already on his feet. “Are you okay?”

“I…yeah. I’m fine,” she answered, making a funny little choking sound that he knew meant she was trying not to cry. “I’m okay. I just…I left the party. Can you um…” She cleared her throat, voice cracking. “Can you come get me, please?”

“Yeah, yeah. Of course,” he answered, snagging his jacket on his way to the door. Please, please let her be all right. “Just tell me where you are, okay?”

She took a shuddery breath. “I’m about a block and a half from Reggie’s. I don’t know what street, but there’s some houses that look like they belong to ghosts on one side and a lot of big empty fields on the other. And I can see some woods.”

“Yeah, I know where that is.”

Sprinting down the porch steps, Archie hopped in the truck and started the engine, trying not to think about how hard the rain was currently coming down, or how abandoned that whole area was. Come to think of it, no wonder the party had been at Reggie’s. His house was huge, surrounding by acres of land, and the nearest neighbors were an older couple who traveled a lot and were pretty far down the road, anyway. With his parents out of town—not that they’d care all that much except about the
noise—you could run riot over a hell of a lot of land.

“Hey, Ronnie, don’t hang up, all right?” he said into the phone as he backed out of the driveway with more speed than caution. “And stay off the road ‘til I get there, if you can. I’m on my way.”

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By the time truck-height headlights split the darkness around her, Veronica’s head felt ready to explode. Archie had refused to get off the phone the whole time he’d been driving, and while she appreciated the fact that he didn’t want to lose contact, she didn’t want to break down crying while he was on the other end, unable to do anything. And because she didn’t want him doing anything stupid like bursting into the party to punch heads, when she climbed into the passenger seat she made him promise that he wouldn’t try anything before she would explain why he’d found her sitting barefoot on the side of a godforsaken semi-country road, wet and muddy and utterly pathetic.

Not that it was a long story.

“He assumed I was a little more into him than I am,” she said quietly, gritting her teeth to keep them from chattering. Archie had insisted she take his jacket, but even with pounds of garish yellow and blue leather around her, Veronica was still freezing. “It was all ‘Me Captain of Football Team. You Head Cheerleader. We go upstairs?’ I said I wasn’t particularly interested, he went in for the kiss anyway, and I shoved him off.” She slumped against the seat, turning her head to stare out the window as a tear slipped out. “Told him if he did anything like that again, I was going to punch him. So naturally, he tried to back me into a wall.”

“He what?” Archie demanded, the truck swerving a little as his head whipped around toward her.

“It’s fine,” Veronica assured him dully. “He’s going to have a black eye for the next few days. And trouble walking.”

“That’s still not okay!” he insisted, scowling. “Seriously, Ronnie, why can’t I hit him?”

“Well, if you really want to know, call Kevin,” she responded, smiling a little in spite of herself at his indignation. “I’m sure he’d be happy to tell you what kind of penalties his father will give you for assault and battery. Besides…” She sighed, burying her face in her hands. “Reggie’s hammered, Archie. And do you know why? Because a bunch of stupid frat guys who are like…friends of his cousin or something were there, and they were practically pouring shots down his throat.”

Archie exhaled loudly. “He still—”

“I know. I do.” Reaching out, she squeezed his arm, a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold running through her when he took one hand off the wheel and placed it over hers. “I’m not absolving him of all blame, but I honestly don’t think he’ll remember this tomorrow.”

“Probably not.” He glanced over at her, jaw set, as they pulled into his driveway. “Just so you know, though, I didn’t promise not to flatten him next chance I get in practice. And I’m definitely calling the cops the second we’re inside.”

“Archie—” she began, but he was already out and running around to her side, apparently impervious to rain. “Just let it be, okay?” she told him, pulling the jacket up to act like a shield over the both of them when he opened the door to help her out. “Please.”

He hesitated, pushing the jacket back over her. “Ronnie…”

“Please?” she repeated. When he didn’t respond immediately, she rolled her eyes. “You’re going to
“Yeah. Right.” He gave his head a quick shake and grabbed her by the hand, trying to keep the rain off her anyway as he steered her toward the front door. “Hold on a sec,” he told her once they were inside. Dashing into the living room, he returned with a thick blanket and wrapped it around her. “Here.”

“Thanks,” she said quietly.

“Not a problem,” he answered, giving her a quick smile. “But I’m still calling the cops.”

“No.” She couldn’t help it. Tears ran down her face so suddenly that she turned her back. “Please Archie, just don’t. I don’t want to think about it anymore. If you call Sheriff Keller and he busts the party, it’s going to turn into a big mess and no one’s going to let it die.”

“All right. All right, it’s okay, Ronnie.” His arms went around her and she turned into the hug, shaking with suppressed sobs as he rested his chin on her head. “I won’t say or do anything if you really want me to. But if he says something to you at school—”

She shook her head, pulling away to wipe furiously at her eyes. Not that it made much difference, considering that they were both dripping water from head to toe. “No. Don’t. I can handle it. And anyway, he won’t.”

“All right,” he said again, looking and sounding reluctant. He moved as if to hug her again, then seemed to think better of it. “Well, uh...at least let me get you some stuff so you can shower and get warm.”

He was at it again, she thought numbly as he ran all over the place, bringing her towels, apologizing for not having anything except faded old t-shirts and pajama pants for her to wear like it was his fault she was in his house at two in the morning looking like a drowned rat. But it was so like him to want to take the blame for someone else that it somehow tied her tongue. Long before they were both showered, changed and relatively dry, she knew she had to say something, but what that something was, she still didn’t know. It was a trait she loathed in herself—how she could always find the precise words to best drag someone, but never, somehow, the right words for an apology. Everything she came up with sounded stupid and inadequate to the offense, especially considering he hadn’t said one word about it since she’d first delivered it.

By the time he finished pulling out the air mattress—for himself, of course, because heaven forbid that she, the interloper, sleep on it—and she was crawling into the bed he swore he hadn’t made up just for her while she was in the shower (she didn’t believe him for a second considering the crispness of the sheets), she was becoming desperate. She had to say something. Even if whatever came out of her mouth sucked more than any apology in the history of sucky apologies, she had to do it. So when he got up to turn out the big light, leaving only the little bedside lamp on, she took a deep breath and plunged.

“Archie,” she said, staring fixedly at the ceiling above his bed.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

“What?” His head popped up above the edge of the bed, hair sticking up in odd places. “Why?”

“Why?” She tried to laugh, but she was too close to tears now for it to be much of a success. “For being a bitch, obviously. I jumped all over your case when you were just trying to help, and I
dragged Grundy into it to hurt you.” Shaking her head, she pressed her lips together, willing herself to stay calm. “I’m just…so sorry.”

“Veronica.”

She put a hand over her mouth, squeezing her eyes shut. “Yes?” she managed. She’d thought it was safe to speak again, but her voice emerged as a hoarse whisper, and in a second Archie was on his knees beside the bed, face concerned as he caught her hand and held it between his.

“You don’t have to apologize,” he told her steadily. “It’s fine.”

“No.” Veronica massaged her forehead with her free hand, desperately trying to keep the tears at bay. “No, it’s not. It was inexcusable, Archie,” she told him through clenched teeth. “That was a low blow I had no business making, and the worst part is, that’s exactly why I said it.” Inhaling sharply, she stared up at the ceiling again in an attempt to regain control. “I hate that woman for what she did to you. And sometimes, the fact that you seem like you don’t makes me hate her so much I can hardly see straight, and I should never have taken out my frustration with my parents on you. Not at all, and definitely not like that.”

“Ronne, I said it’s fine.”

She shook her head vehemently, face crumpling. After a moment, he squeezed her hand again and stood, sliding in next to her under the covers.

“I mean it, you know,” he said softly, gathering her into his arms and hugging her close. “It really is fine.”

She blinked rapidly, his solid, comforting warmth forcing her to pinch her mouth shut before attempting to speak again. “I don’t want to hurt you, Archie,” she whispered, holding onto him with all her might as the tears finally spilled over. “Ever. I’m just the most stubborn, sadistic fiend in the whole entire world, and I say stupid stuff like that to the people I care about most when I want them to leave me alone.”

“I know,” he whispered back. Reaching out, he pushed a chunk of damp hair back behind her ear before clumsily brushing at the absolute rivulets running down her cheeks. “Me too. Except I do it when I’m worried about them, too. And when I’m jealous, like I was earlier, it’s even worse.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled, “but ‘worse’ is debatable. Who knows where I would’ve gone if I’d stayed? I mean, love of your life? Where did that even come from?”

His laugh rumbled around her and he leaned back, smiling down at her in the way that turned her into what felt like the most idiotic human on the planet.

“I don’t know,” he responded. “Because I’d be willing to bet that’s probably the dumbest thing you’ve ever said.”

She frowned. “What?”

“Veronica…” He took a deep breath, his arms tightening around her momentarily. “Look, I don’t know how to say this except to just say it, but—I hate being friends with you. As in ‘just friends’ and nothing else. I—I’ve had a hard time doing that since the day we met.”

Staring up at him, Veronica sternly repressed the flutter of excitement his words raised in her. “Really?” she said softly, her voice little better than a whisper.
“Yeah, what uh, what I’m trying to say is…aw, damn it.” He groaned, head sagging back against the pillows. “Veronica, Grundy’s not the love of my life, okay? And when I told you that time at Cheryl’s that I’d felt whatever it is you’re supposed to feel with someone in the summer, I was lying. I didn’t feel that with Grundy. I felt it with you.”

In an instant, she was back in the dark of the Blossom coatroom, standing less than a foot away from a boy she’d only just met—a boy with red hair, an aw-shucks smile, and eyes that told a story totally different than the one she’d imagined when she first saw him. She hadn’t understood the attraction she felt for him then, nor had she bothered to try. But now…

With difficulty, she cleared her throat. “There’s no such thing as love at first sight, Archiekins.”

“I didn’t say there was,” he answered. Twirling a small piece of her hair around his finger for a second or two, he slid a hand just underneath the line of her jaw. Carefully, he tilted her face up so that she had to look straight at him, a new seriousness in his expression. “But this isn’t the first time I’ve seen you.”

She shook her head, leaning into his palm as her heart stuttered in her chest. “You know you’re just asking for trouble.”

“Says who?” he murmured.

“Says me.”

“Oh, yeah?” He smiled, eyes soft. “Well, did I ever tell you how much I really, really, really like trouble?”

Veronica sighed, a laugh slipping out. “You’re actually serious, aren’t you?” she queried.

“Hundred percent,” he said without hesitation.

“Good.” She touched his face gently, drawing a deep breath. “Because I really hate being just friends with you, too, Archie Andrews.”

Matching his grin, she stretched up to meet his kiss. Warmth, joy, adrenaline—it all poured through her when their lips collided, the heady familiarity almost making her whimper. As smoothly as though they’d rehearsed beforehand, he rolled onto his back, pulling her over so that she was half-sitting, half-lying on him, hands resting atop his shoulders as he tugged her closer still.

“I missed you,” she gasped against his mouth.

“Me too,” he mumbled, ducking his head and pressing his lips to her neck. “Can we please not do this again?”

“What, this?” she teased breathlessly. Ever so slightly, she tightened her legs on him. “’Cause I may have to disagree with you there.”

“Well, not exactly this,” he amended, his chuckle tickling her throat. Gripping her waist, he leaned back to smile up at her, his grin so big that his eyes crinkled at the corners. “This I could definitely get used to.”

“Oh, you could, could you?” Something dangerously close to a giggle burst out of her, and she marveled again at his uncanny ability to make her drop her guard.

“Yeah.” He sat up on his elbows, this kiss long and slow, and full of an assurance that almost
terrified her in its scope. “I want to be with you, Veronica,” he said, stumbling a little over the words. “Even if it’s just us sitting around talking about nothing and arguing over, I don’t know, ice cream flavors—I want to be with you.”

“Really?” she asked, lightly tracing the edges of his face.

He nodded.

“Yeah,” she whispered, leaning down to kiss him. “I want to be with you, too.”

And if she woke up next morning in a tangle of arms and blankets with the worst case of bedhead she’d ever had in her life and Riverdale’s star running back snoring like a diesel motor inches from her ear, she wasn’t going to complain. There was no point fighting a truth that couldn't be denied, and for Veronica, Archie Andrews was that truth.

Could she live without him? Yes. Absolutely.

_Did_she want to?

No. Hell, no.

And she wasn’t going to. Ever. Not if any part of it was up to her.

Chapter End Notes

*Okay. For whatever reason, I was remembering Archie's position as quarterback (probably because the hero of a HS drama always plays QB). But I re-watched the scene in "Heart of Darkness," and nope, based on where he’s standing in that scene and the route he blows, he's playing running back, so that's what I'm going with unless the show changes it next season.*

*Title taken from the song "Just A Friend" by Austin Mahone because my music was on shuffle and it seemed appropriate.*
Classifying

Chapter Summary

Random Archie/Veronica moment where Archie tries to figure out what he feels about Veronica. In my head, this fits somewhere between Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 on the show, so it's been a little bit since the Grundy incident, but Archie isn't yet with Val.

Chapter Notes

Inspired by an anonymous prompt on tumblr (“Fluff where Archie and Veronica are in class and maybe like each other”). This starts out in class and then goes elsewhere, so hopefully that's all right.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Archie covered a yawn with his hand. Whoever had invented the concept of early morning workout sessions had to have forgotten what is was like to be a kid, he thought. It was tough enough just dragging yourself out of bed to go to school. Working out once you got there and then having to go to class after that and actually think when all you wanted to do was lie down and sleep for the next ten years…yeah, that was a challenge. Coach’s decision to switch the weight training and heavier conditioning from afternoons to mornings wasn’t Archie’s favorite thing in the world. One week in, and he was already convinced that he was going to die. Probably in class, right on top of an experiment or something.

And speaking of experiments…

Crap.

Straightening up, Archie blinked fast. The dull hum he’d been half-listening to for the last eight minutes or so was apparently the instructions for whatever today’s lab assignment was, and from the way the whole room was shifting, he guessed he’d missed a lot.

“Betty!” he hissed, seeing his friend gathering up her neat little stack of books and supplies as she stood. “Betty, what are we doing?”

She gave him the kind of look that said she was debating on whether or not he’d lost his mind. “Uh, switching partners?”

“What?” Horrified, he scanned the room. “Why?”

All he could think about was that if Betty wasn’t his partner for whatever it was they were doing today, he was in trouble. Big trouble. Biology had never been his greatest subject, and since he didn’t even know what he was supposed to be doing in the first place, he was doubly screwed. Maybe even triply. Because the way things were shaping up, Dilton, Cheryl, Reggie, and Moose were all starting to look his way, and none of those were great partner options—Dilton would announce from the rooftops that Archie hadn’t been listening the second he found out, Reggie and
Moose were pretty much guaranteed to have even less of an idea of what was going on than Archie did, and he was never doing anything biology-related with Cheryl ever again if he could help it. That last time with the frog had kind of freaked him out.

“We’re switching because Dr. Phylum thinks certain people might be cheating,” Betty answered, inclining her head slightly toward the back where Moose usually sat, and always with at least one of the scrawnier (and best) students. “You can’t go with anybody you worked with this month. Good luck on the quiz.”

Quiz? There was a quiz, too? Archie tried not to groan as Betty headed off to join Ethel.

“Great,” he muttered.

No working with a partner you’d worked with during the month. Well, that eliminated Val and Kevin, and definitely explained why Jughead and Josie were sitting together, both of them wearing bored expressions. And at least it meant Cheryl was out, and he had a valid excuse for not joining Reggie, too. But the prospect of working with either Dilton or Moose wasn’t exactly cheery, so he spun around on the stool to look for anyone else who was still partner-less.

And instead found himself staring at a very familiar set of pearls clasped around a very familiar throat. Tilting his head up slightly, he swallowed hard when their eyes made contact. He was really, really going to have to work at getting over this staring thing.

“Mind if I join you?” Veronica inquired.

Mind? Archie caught himself just before he snorted. He hadn’t known Veronica all that long—just a few months as of now—but it already seemed like they’d been friends forever. Except friends never seemed like quite the right word. Because they had definitely started their friendship off a lot differently than most people, and anyway, Archie didn’t get nervous around his other friends the way he did with Veronica. Since the whole incident at Cheryl’s, he’d been really careful around her—not sitting by her at lunch any more than could be helped, trying to not laugh too hard whenever she said something funny, and never, never sitting down next to her in class.

And it wasn’t because he didn’t want to. Which really made a guy wonder.

“Um, yeah, sure,” he answered finally. Shoving aside his messy pile of crumpled up pieces of paper he’d been shredding while (not) listening, he tried to seem casual as she sat down beside him. “So, uh,” he said, keeping an eye on the front of the classroom.

She smiled. “So, uh…” she repeated, gathering up the little scraps and getting up to toss them in the wastebasket.

“So, do you know what we’re supposed to be doing?” he whispered. “I kind of zoned out, and Betty just said there was a quiz or something and that we were switching partners.”

“What? You zoned out at the end of Phylum’s fascinating lecture?” She tossed her hair back. “Gasp! You missed his digression on the mating habits of the emperor penguin and how we humans could learn a lesson or two from them.”

“What?” He clapped a hand over his mouth when the laugh that burst out of him sent a bunch of heads turning their way. “That’s what he was talking about?”

She nodded, rolling her eyes. “It was more droning than talking, but…yes. Seriously though, if it makes you feel any better, I think even Betty stopped taking notes around that point. Moose seemed to be the only interested party.”
Archie tried and failed to bite back a grin. “He would be.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought, too.” She lifted her brows teasingly. “No offense Archiekins, but your football-tossing, muscle-bound gaggle of Bulldog brethren aren’t the brightest bulbs in the lamp.”

“Hey,” he protested—but only mildly, because she did have a point.

A smirk turned up the right corner of her mouth. “Don’t worry. I’m excepting the present company, of course.”

“Well, thanks, but maybe you shouldn’t.” Leaning his head in toward hers, he lowered his voice. “There aren’t a whole lot of classes I do know what’s going on in, and this definitely isn’t one of them. Even if I had heard the instructions, this would still be like a fifty-fifty shot.”

“Oh. Well, that’s going to make this interesting, then,” Veronica commented dryly. “Because this is neither my favorite nor my best subject. Congrats, fellow doom-ee. We’re on the Titanic. Shall we attempt to construct a metaphorical life raft, or just give up and accept our fate?”

“Wait.” He frowned, surprised. “You hate this class, too?”

“With every one of the eight billion cells in my body,” she responded promptly. “Or is it million? And maybe it’s twelve, not eight. I don’t know. I never can remember, but then I don’t care enough to research it and set myself straight, either. The important takeaway is that I’m horrible at it.”

“Really? Wow.” He gave his head a shake, tapping his pencil against his notebook as he processed this new piece of information. Somehow, he’d been under the impression that she was just sort of good at everything. “I guess I kinda pinned my hopes on you too soon, then.”

She shuddered, the movement exaggerated. “Most assuredly. That frog dissection? Ugh. I think I threw up in my mouth a little. There’s a very small-minded part of me that hopes whatever monster came up with the idea of forcing high school students to dismember the corpses of innocent amphibians suffered the same fate. After all, it seems only fair.”

Archie grinned, but his reply was halted when Dr. Phylum appeared at Veronica’s elbow. Despite giving them a suspicious glance, the man barely broke stride; he just kept talking about time limits and biomes, and grades, and plunked an empty glass jar and a cardboard box full of different bits of green stuff down on the table in front of them along with a bag of little plastic animals. For a long moment, Archie stared at the random items. Then he glanced questioningly at Veronica only to see his confusion mirrored on her face.

At the same instant, they both doubled over in muffled laughter.

“Do you have any idea—?” Archie began, but she was already shaking her head.

“Not a clue,” she answered, eyes dancing with mirth. “Oh my God, Archie. This is ridiculous. Look.” She poked through the box with a finger, still chortling. “Moss, grass, clover—what are these, weeds? We’ll just have tell him we weren’t paying attention.”

“No need for that, Ms. Lodge.” Archie jumped along with Veronica and turned to see Dr. Phylum eyeing them sourly, along with the rest of the class who seemed to have already started on the quiz. “He knows.”

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“Not to be nosy or anything, but how many zeroes do you get on quizzes?” Archie asked several
hours (and one session of detention) later as they trudged slowly through the deserted halls toward the door. Dr. Phylum’s wrath over the fact that they’d been talking during a quiz as well as the fact that they obviously hadn’t listened to his lecture meant that Veronica had showed up late to cheer practice, he’d showed up late to football practice, and since he’d found her slumped on a bench and staring at the wall when he got out of the locker rooms, he got the feeling that she was as sick of being chewed out as he was. Neither of them was exactly eager to get home. “Typically, I mean.”

Veronica laughed, swinging her gigantic purse—or maybe it was a really fancy book bag?—as she walked. “That depends.”

“On?” Archie glanced down at her as he held the door open for her and tried not to smile. Because she hadn’t bothered to change out of her practice uniform, she still wore sneakers instead of her usual high heels, and thus stood several inches shorter than usual. She had such a big personality that it was easy, he thought, to forget how small she really was.

“Depends on which subject, and what I’m trying to accomplish,” she answered. “Back in New York, I had a rather questionable habit of using grades as bargaining chips with my parents, so I didn’t always bring home the best I was capable of.”

“Oh.” It was nearly dark now and they walked in silence for a minute or so before he cleared his throat. “Ronnie, are you—do you still miss New York?”

It was something he’d wondered a lot since he met her. She was always joking around, always so sarcastic and lighthearted, but he hadn’t forgotten the look in her eyes when she shoved past him in the locker room in search of Chuck. She’d been angry, sure, but he could’ve sworn that there was something else beneath the anger and he hadn’t really been able to put his finger on it until later when the news about Chuck and the book came out. Then he recognized it: hurt. As intense as Veronica was, there was a little chink in her armor that showed up every now and then and he didn’t much like seeing it happen because it made her clam up faster than anything. He himself sometimes had a hard time letting people know how he felt, Betty could be pretty private, and he knew for a fact that Jughead would, in most cases, rather die than let anyone know he was having problems, but Veronica seemed to hate admitting anything might be wrong, ever, and that kind of made him worry about her.

“But I don’t think I’m the one who needs to be doing some venting,” she added. 

“Why?” His forehead wrinkled as he tried to divine her meaning.

She smiled, gently for her. “I’m trying to delicately ask you how you’re doing since Grundy, Archie.”
“Oh. That.” A heavy, sick sort of feeling settled into his stomach and he almost shut his eyes out of reflex. “Yeah, I’m…trying to forget about it, to be honest.”

“I thought you might be.”

He didn’t look over, but he could tell that she’d moved closer. And maybe he was going crazy or something, but it was almost like just knowing she was there warmed him. A little. Kind of. Which yeah, sounded really dumb.

“And I get it.” Veronica’s voice softened. “I do. Believe me, I am the queen of pushing down things I don’t like to think about. But Archie, you’re a human being. Not a rock.” She nudged his arm lightly and he turned to find her watching him, that knowing little smirk that always messed with his head on her face. “I’m no licensed therapist, but I do have ears. And contrary to the behavior I exhibited in biology, I can listen, and I’m also willing to. I can even be discreet, and I promise I won’t make smart remarks.” She paused. “Or I’ll at least try to keep them to a minimum, because as both your friend and a person who occasionally has trouble keeping her mouth shut, it’s unlikely that I’ll be able to let everything go by without comment.”

“Thanks.” Archie laughed, his breath forming a small cloud around his face. “I appreciate the sacrifice.”

She leaned her head back, her laughter joining his. “As you should, Andrews. As you should.”

By the time they reached the dignified front steps of the Pembrooke, still chuckling over stuff that he knew on some level really wasn’t that funny, Archie was no closer to understanding what it was about Veronica Lodge that drew him to her like a stupid moth to a flame. He just knew that deep down, he was very, very glad that the awful scandal with her dad had happened, and even gladder that her mother had decided to move them to Riverdale.

“Thanks, Dr. Ronnie,” he said as Smithers, the doorman she’d introduced him to the first time he’d walked her home, stood back to let her in. “If I ever feel the need to talk out my problems, I’ll be sure to come to you.”

She laughed again. “Anytime, Patient Zero. Now,” she added, raising an eyebrow as she paused in the doorway, “you need to get home before it gets any darker or chillier. This whole gentleman thing is sweet, but it’s not worth a week of coughing, sore throats, and explaining to your coach why you have to duct tape a box of tissues to your arm. So.” Her fingers wiggled at him in a shooing gesture. “Amscray, Archiekins. At the risk of sounding like a ninety-year-old grandmother, go home before you catch your death of cold.”

“All right, all right.” Even while he rolled his eyes, he couldn’t quite hold back a grin. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Grandma,” he joked, lifting a hand a half-wave before bounding down the steps.

“Okay, wait,” she called, her voice arresting him as he reached the bottom.

“What?” He swung around to see both eyebrows near her hairline.

She pointed at him, one hand propped on her hip. “Never refer to me as ‘Grandma,’ Archie Andrews. Not as long as we both shall live, mm-kay?”

Yep, he thought, laughing again and shaking his head when she winked and then shut the door without waiting for an answer. We’re just friends. That’s all. Definitely.

But for some unknown reason, he kept having to remind himself of that all the way home.
Chapter End Notes

*It's been a while since I took biology (and I am very okay with that). Please forgive any glaring bio errors. Also, I don't know how the heck Riverdale High does detention, so I just picked what I remember about how that works and went with it.
*This is probably very rough, because Comic Con kind of derailed me last weekend and I only finished writing this late last night and haven't really edited it. I'll come back later to check for errors, so apologies now for any weird typos.
*TL2912, just so you know, your request is next in line. I haven't forgotten :) 
*To the anon if you're reading this: I don't know why, but this ended up less fluffy than I thought it would. I'm sorry. I don't know why it keeps happening with these two, but I seem to have trouble making everything totally light and happy.
By nature, Archie wasn’t much of a worrier. In his opinion, there wasn’t much point in fixating on things that were out of your control, and he made a conscious effort to never let himself dwell on events where his help was useless and the fear would only weigh him down.

But of course, every rule had its exception.

And unfortunately for the cool-guy persona he kind of desperately wanted to maintain at all times, it just so happened that Archie’s exception was a small, dark-haired cheerleader with a penchant for sarcasm and outspokenness. From the moment he’d met her, Veronica Lodge had always had a special hold on his thoughts, and whenever she looked like she might be in trouble, he found himself struggling to remain clearheaded.

Like today, for example. It had been about a month now since the shooting at Pop’s had come close to taking his dad away from him forever, and things had just begun to return to normal. He no longer had trouble sleeping at night—or at any rate, not as much trouble—and it didn’t take monumental effort to laugh and smile anymore, which was great. But when the creaky old door to the history classroom swung open about fifteen minutes into a super-boring lecture, a good portion of Archie’s worry came flooding right back. Veronica, who he’d never seen be late to a class ever, avoided any and all eye contact as she moved quietly over to an empty seat in the very back of the room and sat down, her face pale and expressionless.

Confused, Archie glanced across the aisle and exchanged a frown with first Betty, then Kevin, who shrugged and mouthed something Archie couldn’t understand. For the rest of the period, he tried not to stare at Veronica while racking his brains for any idea of what could be bothering her. Her dad wasn’t expected for at least another week, so maybe it was something with her mom? He didn’t know. The instant the bell rang he was on his feet, but she was quicker and before he could take two steps in her direction, she was already halfway out the door, slipping past everyone who’d been sitting in the front rows.

“Ronnie!” he called, dodging Betty’s gigantic book bag as she stood up and slung it over a shoulder.
“Ronnie, wait up!”

“Yeah, that won’t work,” Kevin informed him loudly. “She did the same thing to me in math, earlier. I thought it was just general bad moodiness, because you know…math, but now I’m not so sure.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Archie agreed. He frowned as they waited for the crowd to thin before moving toward the door. “But maybe she just didn’t hear me?”

“Oh, she heard you,” Kevin assured him as they made their way out into the hall. “No offense, but Weatherbee probably heard you. In his office. With the door shut. Personally, I think she’s shunning us all because she doesn’t want to talk.”

“Yeah.” Betty bobbed her head vehemently. “Now that you mention it, Kev, I texted her last night and never got a response. Which is weird, because it was semi-fashion-related, and you know how quick she is about stuff like that.”

“I texted her, too.” Archie’s eyes roved over the sea of bobbing heads that lay in front of them as the whole school streamed toward the cafeteria. “I figured she didn’t reply because she was asleep or something, and when she wasn’t in class at first I thought maybe she was sick, but…” He could feel his brows knitting together as he thought. “I don’t know. It’s not like her to just…not talk. Something’s bothering her.”

“Well, at any rate, she has to show up here and we can ask her then,” Kevin reminded them, raising his voice above the noisy clamor that always seemed to be attached to the cafeteria as they picked up trays and took them through the line. “Besides, the way she was beelining out of class, maybe she was just hungry. It’s been known to happen before.” He held his tray up for inspection. “And there are fries on the menu today. A few of those should loosen her tongue.”

“If you’re talking about Veronica, I wouldn’t count on it,” Jughead commented, appearing at Betty’s elbow with his own tray as they exited the line. “I get the feeling she’s not in a gabby mood just now.”

“Why? Did you see her?” Archie spun around, scanning the room for a familiar dark head with the same amount of luck he’d had before.

“Yeah. Almost mowed me down in the hall,” his friend answered, sneaking a fry off Betty’s tray and popping it into his mouth before she could stop him. “Given the fact that she neither apologized nor responded to my very mild insult, I gathered that she wanted to embrace the whole ‘Silence is golden’ thing today.”

Archie frowned again as he followed Kevin toward an empty table. Veronica without a comeback? “Wow. That’s got to be a first.”

“Right?” Jughead snorted. “I was almost offended.”

“Mild insult, huh?” Betty inquired in a semi-disapproving tone. “Exactly which mild insult did you deliver, Juggie?”

He laughed. “Relax. I just called her a speed demon and asked where the fire was. Nothing too dastardly.”

“Okay. Just checking.” Betty plopped down beside Jughead and leaned forward, motioning for Archie and Kevin to do the same. “Do you think it’s got anything to do with her mom?” she asked, lowering her voice. “The last time I was over there, things seemed really weird and tense between them. Like, when we were planning Polly’s shower and everything, her mom was really nice. But
this time, even though she was being friendly, I don’t think she and Veronica said but maybe six words to each other. And since then, we’ve only hung out at my house.”

“Yep.” Jughead dropped a fry from his plate onto Betty’s. “I call shenanigans. Hermione Lodge is far too sweet, smiling, and motherly for a former socialite with a ruthless businessman for a husband. She must be hatching some sort of sinister, Machiavellian scheme.”

Archie rolled his eyes while Betty sighed loudly.

“You know that’s not what I meant,” she grumbled, pointedly ignoring Jughead’s smirk. “I’m just saying…maybe she had a fight with her mom and we should all consider giving her some space?”

“Like half a cafeteria space, or did you have more of an outer-space kind of vibe in mind?” Kevin asked, whacking Archie on the shoulder and inclining his head toward something behind them.

“’Cause I’m beginning to suspect Veronica may have her own ideas about that.”

Turning, Archie followed the subtle point and straightened up sharply as he saw what Kevin was talking about. If he’d thought Veronica had chosen an out-of-the-way spot in class, it was nothing compared to her current whereabouts—if ever there were a location that screamed *I'M AVOIDING EVERYONE*, it was the edge seat of the back corner table in the cafeteria. Even the loner kids didn’t like sitting there because it was so removed from everything, and that was saying something. No one sat anywhere near her, and so far, she hadn’t looked up once from her plate. For a girl who liked to know exactly what was going on at all times, that wasn’t just unusual behavior—it was downright alarming.

His stomach tightened as all kinds of crazy, anxious theories on what might be upsetting her rushed through his brain. “I’ll be right back,” he said quickly, standing.

“Hey, man. I know she’s like your girlfriend and all now, but I wouldn’t.” Jughead stabbed a fry toward where Veronica sat. “Nobody sets up camp in Isolationville if they’re secretly wanting to chat.”

“Yeah.” Archie kept his gaze trained on the slight figure at the back tables. “But wanting to be alone and needing to be alone aren’t the same thing, Jug. And she can always tell me to buzz off if she wants to.”

“Oh, she will.” Kevin lifted a shoulder when Archie sent him an exasperated look. “What?” he said, holding out a hand. “I’m just saying.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Shaking his head, Archie took a deep breath as he wove his way toward the back table.

“Ronnie?” he said cautiously when he arrived, slinging a leg over the bench and sitting down so that he faced her. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she responded without missing a beat. “Just a little tired, and waiting for a phone call. You don’t need to worry.”

She still hadn’t moved, her rigid posture contradicting the lightness of her tone, and the fact that she wouldn’t even look at him only increased his concern. It reminded him of how she’d been at Jughead’s party last year, and he hated it. It meant she was upset and trying to bury it again, which just wasn’t good.

“You sure?” he asked. Tilting his head severely to the side, he tried to catch a glimpse of her face, but she kept it resolutely away from him, sending his suspicions that she might be crying
“Yes, I know,” she interrupted. Her laugh was so obviously forced that he had to stop himself from reaching for her right in the middle of the lunch crowd, knowing it would embarrass her to no end. “And I’m telling you, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it, okay? I’m just a little tired, and thus not my usual social self.” She rested a hand on his shoulder as she stood, giving it a light squeeze. “I have to go, okay? You can’t hear a thing in this place and I really need to take this call.”

“Veronica—” he started, but she cut him off quickly.

“I’m fine, Archie. Just do me a favor and drop it, okay?” she said quietly. Before he could argue any further she was gone, moving through the crowd with a speed that put her just shy of running as she headed toward the door.

Heaving a sigh, Archie stared gloomily at the spot she’d abandoned before getting up and heading back over to the rest of his friends.

“No luck?” Jughead asked, not unsympathetically when Archie returned.

“She says she’s fine,” he answered, sitting down next to Kevin again and starting reluctantly on his meal.

“But you don’t believe her?” Betty asked.

Archie shook his head. “You wouldn’t either. It’s her dad. I’m sure of it.”

“Well…” Betty scowled, tapping a fist against her chin. “We all have classes with her later. Let’s just all keep an eye on her, and if anything happens, we’ll do what we can to cover for her. Everyone in agreement?”

Jughead and Kevin muttered in assent, but Archie barely heard them. Absentmindedly downing the rest of his meal, he stared at an old mustard stain while he tried to sort things out.

Because **what** was messing with Veronica, and how could he possibly help if she wouldn’t even let him?

It was the kind of question he found himself asking a lot when it came to her, and it always bugged him that he had to do it in the first place. She was so quick to step in and lend a hand whenever he was drowning, but every time a similar situation rose up with her, she tried to laugh it off or make it out to be less of an issue than it was. And despite the number of times he’d pointed that out to her, he still wasn’t sure she even knew when she was doing it. Hiding the hurt was such a habit with her by now that it took a lot of deliberate effort on her part to let him see that side of her. And in all honesty, Archie was starting to question whether or not that would ever change. Whether or not she wanted it to.

For the rest of the lunch period, he sat in silence while the others kept up a stream of small-talk that was too-obviously a weak attempt at distraction. By the time they all had to head off to class, even Kevin had quieted down. And when Archie ran into him later in the hall on the way to English, he saw that the other boy had given up all pretense of casual concern and was wearing the same antsy frown-face that Archie had had since before lunch.

“Was she in class?” he asked.

Kevin nodded. “Yes, and acted like a leper again, too. Only showed up after all the seats were taken, went straight to the back, and gave me the slip after class when I tried to stalk her in the hall. You
“Great.” Archie sighed, running a frustrated hand through his hair. “What I don’t get is why is she even going to class if she doesn’t want to talk to us?”

“Search me.” Kevin rolled his eyes. “I gave up trying to understand the mysterious inner workings of the mind of Veronica Lodge a long time ago. All the same…” He leaned in, lowering his voice. “She is okay, isn’t she? I mean, not to sound like my dad or anything, but the fact that she’s gone so far out of her way to not speak to any of us seems really suspicious. And it’s kinda starting to scare the hell out of me.”

“Yeah, me too,” Archie muttered, scanning the area one last time for her before ducking into the English classroom. “You want to try sitting at the back? See if we can’t mess up her system?”

“Nice.” Kevin pointed at him. “I like it. But I wouldn’t put it past her to try ditching us by sitting up front, so you head back there. I’ll guard the usual spots.”

“Good idea.”

Hauling his books with him, Archie chose the seat nearest the one Veronica had been taking (in all classes, according to Kevin, who had checked with Betty and Jughead on his way over to confirm that she’d done the same thing). And sure enough, about thirty seconds before class officially started, Veronica burst through the doors and headed straight for the seat beside him. About halfway there though, her eyes met his and her steps faltered. He almost thought she was going to turn and leave, but after the split second of hesitation, she instead she gave him a quick (and very fake) smile, and dropped into the corner seat without a word. The only thing she would say in response to his whispered questions however, was a tense I’m fine, her chin thrust out defiantly in a way that did nothing to convince him she was telling the truth.

Sneaking glances over at her as the lecture began, a heavy sense of apprehension blanketed Archie. It was only a matter of time, he thought, catching a glimpse of a hard glitter in her eyes that told him she was closer to tears than she wanted anyone to know. Only a matter of time until some kind of huge explosion occurred.

And of course, he was right.

It started off ordinarily enough—a question from the teacher directed toward the back row in a needlessly sarcastic tone: I’m sorry. Did you have something to add, Ms. Lodge? Or are we simply boring you?—but next thing he knew, Veronica was replying in kind, coolly thanking Mr. What’s-his-face, their substitute, for his concern, and informing him that she considered him more than able to lead the discussion without her input.

It wasn’t anything worse than the things a lot of the kids said on a daily basis, but Veronica had never really been a talk-back-to-the-teacher-for-pointless-reasons kind of girl—she even joked about how only idiots did that stuff like that without a really good cause, since it inevitably resulted in punishment. So when it escalated until the teacher was practically shouting at Veronica as she rose calmly, snatched up her book bag, and strode toward the exit, Archie was so startled that for a long moment all he could do was sit there stunned along with the rest of the class. But the instant Veronica slammed the door he snapped back to his sense and leapt up, racing out into the hall and ignoring all orders to sit back down.

“Veronica!” he yelled, cursing under his breath when he discovered that she’d somehow already made it out of sight. The faint sound of heels clacking in the distance sent him running off in that direction, but long before he got there the sound faded away and he had to give up and admit defeat,
since another faraway slam of a door told him that she’d left the building (and besides, he could still hear the substitute bellowing at him to return).

"Come on, Ronnie," he muttered, running a frustrated hand through his hair. "What’s going on with you?"

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By the time he got out of detention for chasing after Veronica, Betty, Jughead, and Kevin were all texting him to let him know that no one had seen or heard from her (apparently Mrs. Lodge had called Betty thinking that Veronica was spending the night there). Betty, unsure what else to do, had played along with it and just said that Veronica didn’t want to talk at the moment. Thanks to that lie, Betty was now stuck at home in case any damage control involving unexpected phone calls occurred, and since Jughead was booked to visit his dad and Kevin had made the mistake of going home to drop his stuff off and check for Veronica where he’d gotten roped into babysitting by a pushy and desperate neighbor, Archie soon found himself a search party of one.

The next few hours blew by as he tried desperately to think where she might’ve gone, until finally, at one o’clock in the morning, he found himself making the trek to Pop’s, the only place he hadn’t checked since they’d all agreed that Veronica’s first choice wouldn’t be somewhere with a lot of people. But now, he thought, with everywhere else in Riverdale closed, she was almost forced to retreat here, same as Jughead had once been.

“Hey, Pop?” he said as he stepped inside, steeling himself the way he always had to ever since the day of the shooting. “Have you seen—?”

He didn’t even have to finish the sentence. Already, the man was tilting his head toward the back.

“Been here about an hour,” he said, his expression sympathetic. “But you didn’t hear that from me.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Archie moved cautiously toward the back corner booth. At first glance, it appeared to be empty. But as he drew closer, he caught sight of a shoe that definitely didn’t belong in a place like this dangling off the seat, and realized why he hadn’t been able to see her just yet: she was lying on her side in the booth, not quite curled into a ball, but pretty close. Misery practically radiated off her, and he sighed. This...well, this was exactly what he’d been afraid of.

“Ronnie?” he said, touching the shoe—the only reachable part of her—gently. “Look—I get that you don’t want to talk about it, but can you please, please, just tell me what’s wrong? I’m really worried about you.”

There was a long moment of silence that made him hold his breath. Then a loud sniffle sounded, and it was somehow the best thing Archie had heard all day, because it meant that she was finally ready to let him in, and the relief he felt at that defied description.

“It’s my dad,” she mumbled, her voice raspy. When she sat up, he saw immediately why Pop had looked so understanding—her eyes were swollen and red-rimmed, her face tear-streaked, and there were little bits of twigs and leaves caught in weird places in her hair. “He e-came home early. And it just...I don’t know, I think he might’ve...might’ve...”

She covered her face with both hands, shoulders shaking as she hunched forward, elbows propped on the table. Archie’s chest constricted at the sight and he sat quickly beside her, wrapping his arms around her best he could. He wanted to say something. He did. But since he didn’t have the faintest
idea what that something ought to be, he ended up just holding her and sort of awkwardly rocking back and forth until she finally quieted down, her scary, just-shy-of-hyperventilating sobs turning into less-sharp, sporadic inhales.

“You okay?” he asked, immediately biting his tongue. Of course she wasn’t okay; was he seriously that stupid? “Uh, I mean, can you breathe all right? Do you need me to get you anything?”

She nodded then shook her head, hiccupping. “I’m f-fine. But Archie, I think—” Her hand came up to cover her mouth as her eyes filled all over again, but she plowed on anyway. “I think my dad might’ve had something to do with your dad g-getting shot.”

Archie stared at her, a shiver running through him even as his arms tightened around her. Just thinking about what lay behind Dad’s shooting was enough to re-water the little seeds of panic that had been lying dormant in him for months now. But worse than the resurfacing of all those fears was the knowledge that the reason Veronica had been keeping things to herself was because of him and how he might feel.

“Veronica,” he said, moving back so that he could look her straight in the eye. “You can’t keep doing this, okay?”

Her brows drew together. “What?”

He sighed, plucking a leaf from her hair and tossing it onto the table. “If I’m not allowed to brood on my own, neither are you. Deal?”

“I’m not—”

“Deal?” he repeated, more insistently.

She huffed out an impatient breath that forced him to hide a huge grin.

“Deal. I guess.”

“No, no guessing.” He took her hand, scooting toward the edge of the booth and tugging her with him. “Come on, let’s get out of here. Your mom thinks you’re spending the night at Betty’s, so you can just stay with me. Just let me text the others that you’re all right.”

They walked home slowly together, the silence only occasionally broken by Veronica’s quiet explanations and apologies, and Archie’s insistence that she forget about it. He didn’t know whether or not she was right about her dad’s involvement—she hadn’t been before, yet it was always possible—but he knew it was just dumb for her to feel guilty about it, and he told her as much. She was still so shaken when they arrived though, that he decided to let it go and suggested they just watch a movie or something for a while. So for the next few hours, they sat together on his bed, his arms locked around her waist and her back against his chest as her shuddery breathing slowly returned to normal. It seemed to take half of forever but finally, finally, she smiled at something stupid in the movie and he felt the last of the tension draining out of her. Thoroughly relieved, he bumped her arm with his.

“You all right?” he murmured, kissing the side of her forehead.

She chuckled, the sound wry. “Yeah,” she answered, leaning back to look up at him, her eyes soft despite the jokiness of her tone. “Resilience is one of the few admirable traits I inherit from the Lodge side.” Stretching up, she pressed a light kiss to the underside of his jaw. “Thank you for not running away screaming.”
“From what?” he laughed, twisting his head to get see her better.

“Oh, you know.” She reached for one of the hands sitting on her stomach and linked their fingers, squeezing gently. “The emotional train wreck. The family baggage. The melodramatic, soap-opera-y developments in my life that could very well impact and potentially destroy yours. I’m not the best at admitting these kind of...I don’t know, touchy-feely things, but...it means a lot.”

“Hey, you didn’t run away from me and all my issues.” He squeezed back, smiling as he rested his chin on her head. “I even tried to warn you, remember?”

“I’m messed up, Veronica,” she mimicked, laughing softly at the end of the words. “Yeah, I remember.” She twisted in his arms until they were facing one another. “I also remember telling you that you’re far from being the only one with that problem.”

A laugh slipped out of him when she lifted her eyebrows significantly. “Yeah, I think that’s still debatable, Ronnie.”

“No...it’s really not.” Tilting her head, she smiled again as she put her arms around his neck and sent his already thundering pulse into overdrive. “Like always recognizes like, Archiekins. It’s one of nature’s universal laws.”

He grinned, tilting his head to match hers. “Oh, it is?”

“Yeah.” Her fingers flitted over his scalp, brushing some of the hair off his forehead. “It is. And to be perfectly honest, I still hold the patent on stupid behavior. You’ve got a long, long way to go before you equal me in that department.”

Reaching up, he cupped the back of her head gently, bringing her lips down to meet his. “That a challenge, Ronnie?” he murmured between kisses, eyes shutting as an almost unbearable lightheadedness swept over him the way it always did when he was with her.

“No even a little bit,” she whispered against his mouth. “So don’t you dare try and change on me, Andrews.”

Before he could tease her again or even respond, she leaned in, this time pressing her lips to his with a fierceness that drove everything but a complete and total awareness of her out of his mind. Without hesitation, he fell back against the pillows, hands gripping her waist like he was afraid he’d lose her if he let go for one second. He didn’t know how long he laid there with Veronica on top of him, her lips, hands, and breath tangling with his, and he didn’t care. All that mattered was that she was there with him. That she was safe. That she was kissing him, and letting him hold her, and somehow reassuring him without so much as a single word that she wasn’t going anywhere. By the time she sat up, both of them panting in near-unison, he felt like a cross between a person who could climb the world’s tallest mountain—whatever the hell that was; right now he was having trouble remembering his own name—and like a complete idiot.

Which, judging by the way she laughed at him while settling farther back on his stomach, she probably already knew.

“No changing,” he gasped out, resting a hand on her thigh and grinning up at her with what he was pretty sure was the grin of a dumb little kid. “Got it.”

“Good.” She tuck some hair behind her ears, and even in the dim light, he could see that her face was flushed in a way he didn’t think he’d ever get used to. Smiling widely, she leaned down and kissed him again. “Because being perfect’s overrated. And I can’t think of anyone I’d rather be a
mess with than you.”

“Good,” Archie repeated, knocking loose the hair she’d just pushed back and laughing when she backhanded him lightly in the chest. “Because I’d like that, too.”

Chapter End Notes

*This should've been up like a week ago, but I got swamped with company (I swear, all my out-of-state friends/relatives must've gotten together and decided to come down for a visit all at the same time) so it got super delayed. Fingers crossed, I should have another update this weekend, though.
*Also, I'm working really hard to make sure that the next update has at least SOME humor in it, because I've noticed that all the stories I've written so far are kind of along the same emotional lines, and I want to make sure that doesn't get too monotonous.
*The title is a song by The Rolling Stones, because I blanked on title ideas and that one seemed to fit.
*Thanks for reading/commenting! Hope you guys are all having a great week/summer :)
I’m not really sure how to summarize this one without (1) creating unrealistic expectations about what it involves, or (2) giving away the entire plot. So I’m just going to say that it includes both AU-ish and canon compliant points. Which is an unhelpful summary, so I apologize and recommend you ignore all this and just read it ;D

*** Also, this chapter formatted weird for some reason when I copied it over (it indented in random places and didn’t put spaces between paragraphs in others). I THINK I fixed it all, but there may be some errors I’ve overlooked, so apologies in advance.

The super-fun prompt for this one is from izzy--bella004 on tumblr (Thank you for sending this, because I had a BLAST writing it <3)

Veronica’s frustration mounts as she struggles to push the sweaty, flour-covered strands that have somehow escaped from her formerly military-tight ponytail out of her face so that she can peer into the blazing depths of Hades, otherwise known as the oven. She doesn’t know what she was thinking, deciding to try her hand at cooking for once; it’s the kind of mind-numbingly awful task she loathes with an intense passion. Which is precisely why Archie’s always handled it while she takes care of the far-less excruciating cleaning jobs (plus she’s a bit of a neat freak while he thinks dirty socks scattered all across the floor is a perfectly acceptable state of cleanliness). And yes, while her idiotic idea of making soup and biscuits for dinner to surprise Archie could presumably be blamed on pregnancy brain—seriously, the amount of times she’s stashed her keys and Archie’s wallet in the freezer is almost frightening—it can’t explain why she hasn’t just given up already. That’s what any smart, relatively sane person would do—admit they’d bitten off more than they could chew, and just stop.

But she’s not some smart, relatively sane person. She’s Veronica Big-As-A-House Lodge-Andrews, the woman who technically owns the Riverdale Country Club and who is also pregnant with her first child (a child who, at this rate, will probably be an eleven pound behemoth of a baby), and she is NOT going to be beaten by a bunch of stupid food. She’s too far in to back out at this point, and she doesn’t care that she has no clue whether or not these damn dough-lumps are done or not. She WILL figure it out. Even if it kills her.

And it almost does.

By the time Archie’s key rattles in the lock, the house is filled with smoke from one of the biscuits that fell off the tray and burned up when she was extracting it from the oven. But at least all her rather shapeless creations are fairly golden-brown, she thinks, acting like it’s no big deal when
Archie comes sprinting into the kitchen to find out whether or not the house is on fire. And she shows her work off proudly, insisting that he try everything.

Which is all well and good, until he takes a bite of biscuit. Then his chewing slows, his faces blotches reddish-purple, and he casts one agonized glance at her before racing to the sink and spitting out the food she worked so hard on, coughing and choking like he’s a plague victim or something.

And now, suddenly, she’s so furious with him that she can hardly see straight. This is his fault. She doesn’t know how, and she doesn’t know why. She just knows that it is, and she tells him as much, flinging her own biscuit down on the ground (where it lands with a disheartening crash like she threw a rock or something) and then she storms out of the house, apron flapping in the balmy midsummer breeze as she heads for her car. It’s a bit of a snug fit now, getting her enormous belly behind the wheel, but she squeezes in somehow and roars out of the driveway. There’s only one place to head in a crisis like this, and she knows it. Tears sliding down her face—she isn’t sure whether they’re sad or angry tears but decides it doesn’t much matter—she drives straight over to the Coopers’ prim little white board house.

Only it’s not the Coopers’ prim little white board house now. It’s the Jones’ perfect-on-the-outside, utter-chaos-on-the-inside blue house, and even stomping—no, waddling—up the walk, Veronica can already hear the boisterous shouts within and she knows exactly who will be first to answer the door when she hammers on it. (And yes, it’s totally rude of her to hammer like that, but who even cares anymore? Not she.)

Sure enough, when the door swings open, she has to look down. Not far down, because at age six Betty’s twins are already about three quarters Veronica’s size, but still.

“Auntie V!”

The in-tandem squeal from two eager throats is almost deafening, and Veronica wonders for what feels like the millionth time how people as calm as Betty and Jughead could possibly produce such strong-lunged offspring.

“Emily, Ethan, where’s your mom?” she demands, awkwardly patting their heads when they attempt to hug her at the same time only to bounce off her stomach (which does nothing to improve her mood, but makes both of them giggle hysterically). “I need to talk to her.”

“Veronica?”

Betty appears then, right on cue and as if from nowhere, a frown on her face. Her stomach is huge too, even bigger than Veronica’s which, ridiculous as it sounds, makes Veronica feel a tiny bit better, because she can at least still drive herself to work in the mornings. Betty has been too big to fit behind the wheel for almost a month now, and everything she does for the paper has to be done from home.

“V, what’s wrong?”

With a tragic air, Veronica holds up a biscuit. Although how she arrived at Betty’s with it when she had both hands on the wheel at all times is a mystery she has no inclination to solve. Then, despite the fact that she’s already damp enough to be wrung out, Veronica dissolves into noisy tears all over again, blubbering about stupid recipes, stupid Archie, stupid everything, and next thing she knows, she’s sitting at the kitchen table with Betty, alternating between crying and cursing (in whispers, because there are children present after all) while Betty makes tea, occasionally shouts *EMILY JULIET, STOP HITTING YOUR BROTHER!* toward the part of the house where the racket emanates from, and pats her back, insisting that "this is just temporary a temporary part of
motherhood; it’ll pass,” whatever the hell that’s supposed to mean.

By the time Jughead arrives, bringing with him a stack of articles from the paper for Betty to proofread (he maintains it’s a waste of her time since he’s already looked them over four times himself which leads to Betty reminding him that the last time he said that an article read “listened too” instead of “listened to” and she wanted to die of embarrassment), Veronica is a mess. She’s exhausted, emotionally distraught, not sure she even wants to be a mother anymore, and frankly, kind of hungry. After taking one long look at her and exchanging a glance with Betty, Jughead nods, delivers a loud EMILY JULIET, STOP HITTING YOUR BROTHER! of his own, and disappears into another room.

Veronica wonders why for a split second, but when an almost instantaneous shout of Uncle Archie! meets her ears, it all makes sense. She’s not wild over the prospect of talking to him, her red-headed Benedict Arnold of a husband, but she forgets all about it the second she sees how worried and apologetic he looks. And when he holds her close—or as close as he can, considering that her stomach makes it like a hug with a beach ball between them—she decides that maybe, just possibly, she might’ve overreacted about the whole thing. And when he tries to tell her he’s so sorry, that the soup really was good and that he just swallowed the biscuit wrong—he swears, she’s able to laugh, tell him thank you, and then call him a liar without any bitterness whatsoever.

Which all at once makes everything fine again.

In a moment it’s as if Betty, Jughead, the twins, and the whole entire house have faded away, leaving just the two of them. And it’s wonderful. So very wonderful. They’re standing there, both giggling over her pathetic attempts at cooking—he’s kissing her and telling her that he thinks it’s amazing that she even tried to do all that, and she’s warm, and happy, and she really thinks she could stay like this forever, except all at once, she feels some sort of impact against her arm, and she knows this is it. The baby’s coming. She’s having a baby, and this is going to hurt so badly because SHE IS HAVING A BABY, and then…

“Oh my God. Does she not hear me?”

Veronica sat up with a gasp, the warm and fuzzy dream vanishing in the blink of an eye. Right away, her hands flew to her stomach. Her small, flat, wonderfully un-beach-ball-like stomach that was most definitely not holding a baby, and wow, had she actually thought that a pain in her arm signaled contractions? Ugh.

Head a-swivel, she realized with a pang of muscle-weakening relief that she was still sitting on the couch in the breakroom. The noise surrounding her wasn’t coming from a couple of rambunctious twins; rather, it was the usual clamor of Riverdale High. She was still not-quite sixteen years old, she was not a baker of leaden biscuits, and most important of all, she was not about to go into labor.

“Oh, thank God,” she gasped, flopping back against the cushions. “I thought—oh, never mind.”

Covering her mouth, she let loose a hysterical giggle before turning to see Betty and Kevin eyeing her warily from their places on her left.

“Sorry,” she said in a bright voice, straightening up. “What were you trying to tell me?”

Betty snorted. “I said, are you trying to kill Ethan?”

For a second or two, Veronica was lost. But then her friend held up the creepy, life-sized baby doll they’d been forced to take home the other day and parent as part of what had to be the most archaic and idiotic health class assignment in the history of the free world, and suddenly a lot of things
became very clear.

"Oh, right. Ethan," she said, yawning. Little Ethan Allen, who Betty still believed Veronica had named after the American hero, not the furniture company. "That makes sense."

Utterly unburdened by the bizarreness of *Twilight Zone*-esque dream worlds, Betty gave her an accusing stare as she settled the blanket around the infantile monstrosity. "Little Ethan Allen almost rolled off your lap while you were sleeping. Can you please try to be more careful?"

Veronica stifled a groan as all the reasons for her current state of exhaustion (a doll that refused to shut up in the wee hours) came parading back. “Yes, Betty. I’ll try to be more careful with our assignment from here on out.”

“Come on, V. We’ve been over this.” Betty cuddled the obnoxious thing close, cooing exaggeratedly at it. “Don’t think of him as your assignment. Think of him as…preparation for one of many potential futures.”

“Yes, and for the love of God, don’t let him cry so much,” Kevin put in, jouncing his and Cheryl’s baby up and down. “He was screaming for a really long time before Betty showed up, and I just had to listen to it because I couldn't hold two at once. Good thing Emily here isn’t real, or she’d have joined in a long time ago.”

“Kevin, don’t shake her so much,” Betty instructed, reaching out to pat the fake baby’s hollow-sounding back. “These things are sensitive. They can tell if you’re not being gentle.”

“Hey.” Kevin made a face, but adjusted his speed anyway. “It’s hard being a single parent, okay? Especially when you’re forced to share custody with someone who only wants to hold Baby as long as she doesn’t need to be changed, fed, burped, or isn’t crying. I mean, seriously—I have the worst co-parent in the history of co-parents. Hands down.”

“I don’t know, Kevin. It could be worse.”

Veronica looked toward the door along with the others as Jughead marched in scowling, his doll attached to him by means of one of those repulsive baby pouches all people with small children seemed strangely fond of.

"Okay?" Kevin said, his expression skeptical. “I mean, Cheryl was going to carry Emily in her purse like a Chihuahua, so…do explain.”

"Granted, that's bad." Jughead cast a dark look behind him as Archie entered, red-faced with what looked suspiciously like suppressed laughter. “But at least your co-parent didn’t drop your plastic daughter in the toilet of the men’s room and then wash her off with handsoap in the sink and stick her under an automatic dryer.”

“Hey, I didn’t drop her, okay?” Archie protested, chuckling over the words even while he pinched his lips together in what was clearly an attempt to pull a straight face. “I set her on the toilet paper rack, and she just fell off. It could’ve been a lot worse.”

“Yeah, well. Next time, hold it like a big boy, will you?” Jughead grumbled, throwing himself down on the sofa and patting the baby’s bald head when it began to fuss. “At least until I get there and you can hand her off. Using antibacterial wipes made for cleaning the bathroom on your child just feels wrong.”

“Oh, my God.” Veronica laid a hand over her heart, unsuccessfully reining in her own laughter. “Did it land headfirst?”
Archie nodded, not even bothering to hide his grin anymore as he seated himself on the arm of the couch. “It was like a really bad dive.”

“Wow.” She cracked up again, Jughead’s huff of disgust only adding to her mirth. “But wait,” she added as a thought suddenly struck her. “Antibacterial wipes? Forgive my curiosity, but which of you Teen Dads brings antibacterial wipes to school? And where do you keep them—in your locker, or do they travel with you to every class, like in your pocket or something?”

Archie coughed out a laugh. “Uh, Jug, you want to take that one?”

Jughead sent her a narrow-eyed stare. “You realize that finding the image of an infant getting a life-threatening swirl in a high school bathroom is most likely an early indicator of psychopathic tendencies, don’t you?”

She smirked. “You realize wearing your synthetic baby in a front sling and speaking of it as though it’s your own flesh and blood is most likely an early indicator of dementia, don’t you? Plus, it kind of makes you look like a human kangaroo.”

“Okay,” Betty interrupted, holding out a hand before Jughead could retort. “Let’s not go there.”


"Fine." Betty made a face at him. “All right Veronica,” she added, wearing a stern look that Veronica considered highly unnecessary seeing as how she was about to hand over a class project, not an actual tiny human. “I took care of him this morning and held him for half your nap, now I’ve got to get to class. Can I trust that you won’t let EA die on your watch?”

“What, you mean there was another case of near-infanticide?” Jughead said, raising his eyebrows. “Someone alert the authorities, for mercy’s sake. Riverdale really has gone to the dogs.”

Veronica rolled her eyes. “I fell asleep while holding a doll. That’s a little weird for anyone beyond the age of seven or so, but hardly a crime.”

“Yes, well, it could’ve been.” Betty pushed the bothersome little bundle into her arms, stroking its head. “What were you dreaming about, by the way? You looked all freaked out when you woke up.”

Oh, right. The dream.

Veronica hesitated, suddenly acutely aware of the fact that Archie sat less than three feet away, eyes on her. Nothing—absolutely nothing—would induce her to explain the circumstances surrounding her panic so long as he was there.

“It wasn’t much,” she answered, shrugging carelessly. “Just…very full of noisy children, and lo and behold, that turned out to be a waking nightmare, not merely a sleeping one.”

“Oh, how sweet. Unhappy children are a waking nightmare. That’s a confidence booster.” Jughead stood up along with Betty and Kevin, snapping his fingers as he pointed between Archie and Veronica. “You two. Never have kids.”

“What?” Veronica yelped at the exact same time as Archie, a wave of heat creeping up her neck.

Jughead smiled smugly at them over his shoulder, following the other two out the door. “Oh, relax.
Nobody said anything about *together.*”

Then he was gone, leaving a heavy silence in his wake that made Veronica afraid to move so much as a muscle lest it somehow increase the awkwardness. Not that it particularly mattered—all she could think about, try as she would, was that stupid dream in combination with every bit of Freudian theory she’d ever learned. Which didn’t make anything any easier.

Finally, though, Archie cleared his throat.

“Um, so…” He blew out a breath. “Let’s uh…”

“Never speak of this again?” Veronica supplied, wishing devoutly that she’d been able to think fast enough to grab the nearest object and fling it at Jughead Jones’ head. God, it would give her such satisfaction to knock that ridiculous beanie off his skull. “Good plan. I like it.”

“Yeah.” He laughed uneasily and she glanced over to see him running a hand through his hair, eyes trained carefully away from her. But after a moment he looked up and grinned, his whole posture relaxing. “I’m not the only one who thinks they’re taking this a little too seriously, am I?”

She burst out laughing, shaking her head as she looked down at the object in her arms, the plastic features arranged in a state of what appeared to be perpetual surprise. “Not at all. I mean, I believe in taking good care of kids, but this…” she tilted her arms so Archie could see. “I fully expect it to come to life in the middle of the night and try to kill me.”

“Yeah, me too.” He snickered, wrinkling his nose at the swaddled project. “I also get the feeling today officially makes us the last names on their list of future babysitters.”

“Oh, for sure,” Veronica answered, passing Little Ethan Allen over to him so she could extract herself from the depths of the springless couch. “And yet, I’m strangely okay with that.”

“Same here,” he agreed, picking up her book bag after she took the stupid (and now fussing in electronic tones) doll back. “But Veronica,” he added as they parted ways outside her classroom. “For the record…I think you’d be a great mom. To a real baby,” he amended as she gave the squalling thing a frigid glare and a slightly-harder-than-recommended thump on the back that only increased its volume.

“Thanks.” Despite her annoyance, as well as the impossible-to-explain dream images that once again filled her mind, Veronica smiled back at him. “And, for the record, I think you’d be a great dad. Also...caveat real baby.”

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“Really?” he said, propping a shoulder against the doorway as he smiled down at her.

“Yes, really,” she responded. Then, because the moment was stretching too long between them and she could feel her face heating up again, she smirked. “But if I ever see you taking your child to the restroom, I’m calling child protective services, and don’t think I won’t.”

He laughed, eyes twinkling. “That’s fine,” he retorted, raising his eyebrows teasingly. “If I see you thinking about taking a nap with Veronica Junior, I’ll be sure to do the same.”

“Please.” She patted her doll’s hairless noggin gingerly as its complaints worsened. “Like any progeny of mine would ever possess the ability to keep still long enough for me to fall asleep. Even this one seems to have somehow inherited my less-than-endearing qualities.” When the hideous creation started to wail as if it had heard her, she groaned. “Oh, this is absurd. Honestly, do they think up this kind of project just to torture us?”
Archie chuckled. “Hang in there, Ronnie.”

“Yeah, you too.” She cocked her head to the side, eyebrows raised. “I don’t suppose Juliet needs a brother, does she?”

“No.” He held up both hands jokingly and took a step back. “One fake kid is already way more than I can handle.”

“Ah, well.” Veronica jerked her head to the side, trying to toss back the hair that had drifted into her face when she started bouncing the doll to silence it. “It was worth a shot, anyway.”

She almost jumped out of her skin when Archie suddenly reached out and tucked the pesky clump of locks back behind her ear.

“Sorry,” he apologized when she looked up sharply, yanking his hand back and stuffing it into his pocket. “I didn’t mean to—”

“No! No it’s fine,” she managed to say in a decently normal voice, grateful for the cleared vision but unsure what to do about the little fluttery feeling that had rushed through her when his fingers grazed her cheek. “Another few seconds, and you might’ve witnessed me dashing both my grade and Betty’s to pieces on the floor in a fit of rage. So really, thank you.”

He laughed, looking relieved. “All right, well…anytime.”

“Anytime?” she teased, refusing to let herself dwell on the possibilities contained in that one seemingly-innocuous word. “Don’t you have to get to class?”

“Oh! Right.” He grinned sheepishly, but there was the tiniest of evil gleams in his eye as he lifted a hand in a wave. “Well. Guess I’ll see you around, Mom.”

“Uh-huh.” She rolled her eyes, biting her lip to keep from laughing as he turned and started jogging down the nearly empty hall. “See you around, Dad,” she muttered, shaking her head.

Wow, that really had been a weird dream.

Chapter End Notes

*Chapter title taken from Katy Perry's "The One That Got Away"
*Credit to izzy--bella004 for suggesting the names Emily, Juliet, and Ethan when my mind couldn't come up with anything and Betty and Jughead's dream children were titled [Kid] and [Kid]
*So, I don't know if people still actually do this assignment in health class(?), but I do know that these creepetastic little robot babies still exist, because a lot of my friends have done pregnancy classes with them. If you've never seen one, just google "fake babies for health class." You may be unable to sleep at night, but you will not be disappointed.
*Good luck to everyone who's starting school this week/started last week/has 1-3 weeks of freedom left! My thoughts and prayers are with you in this trying time ;)
*Thanks for reading/commenting!
Ces Soirees-la

Chapter Summary

Okay guys, my apologies for how long it's been, but basically, Hurricane Harvey hit my state and I fell behind in all my writing, so I didn't work on anything Varchie-related for several weeks. When everything calmed down, I realized I didn't have anything written, so I dug this up and finished it. This is actually the second Veronica/Archie fic I attempted, but I wasn't happy with how it was going at the time, so I just stopped writing on it. Unfortunately, it's just a retelling of stuff from the show, nothing original, but I've gone so long without updating that I wanted to give you guys SOMETHING.

So, without further ado: this chapter takes place in Chapter 1 of the show, is from Archie's POV, and just basically covers his thoughts during the closet scene. (Have I mentioned how much I love the closet scene? Because I really love the closet scene. Yes, it's cliche. No, I don't care.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Go to the dance, they said. It'll be fun, they said.

Even though it’s not funny, not even a little bit, Archie has to struggle to keep from laughing his head off at the bizarreness of this whole situation. Without question, he needs to start listening to those little nagging feelings he gets sometimes in the pit of his stomach about good and bad ideas, because if he doesn’t, he’s going to have one miserable life. For crying out loud, he didn’t want to go to the dance in the first place. He hadn’t thought going in a group of three was the greatest suggestion of all time. In fact, when Betty asked if he wanted to tag along with her and Veronica, he told her no. As he should’ve. And that should’ve been an end to it, but of course not...he couldn’t just say no and stick to it. He had to let Veronica get inside his head and tease him into going, and then he had to let her walk off with Kevin and leave him with Betty when he should have known something was up and told them both to stick close just to prevent any potential awkwardness. He should definitely have his head examined for agreeing to go to the Blossoms’ for Cheryl’s after-party seeing as how he’s only succeeded in prolonging an evening he’d give just about anything to have be over and done with, but when the invitation was extended, he wasn’t thinking straight. Because Betty, his best friend since practically forever, apparently has feelings for him, and he was so desperate to stop the awfulness of that whole conversation that he jumped at the first chance of distraction.

Now, though, with Betty sitting bolt upright on Cheryl’s sofa looking like she’s enduring a special kind of torture, Cheryl circling the room at intervals like a panther and popping up beside people when they least expect it—seriously, he doesn’t know how she does it, but the girl is terrifying—and Veronica looking back and forth between him and Betty and frowning, he’s well-aware of what a poorly thought-out decision this was.

So when everyone else sits down, he doesn’t. He can’t bear to. He wants to hide in the background as much as he can right now, because he can tell that Veronica’s officially putting two and two together (the fact that he and she did the lion’s share of the talking on the way over while Betty
stayed quiet is definitely working against him now), and he gets the impression that she isn’t the only one who suspects that something’s maybe going on. Cheryl’s already spoken to him more times tonight than she ever has, and he can’t help but wonder why she’d make such a point of inviting him, Betty, and Veronica over when she’s all but ignored him and Betty for years and there have been rumors floating around the locker room that she and Veronica butted heads at cheer tryouts (no one seems to know exactly what was said, but Veronica supposedly told her off, and Cheryl isn’t the kind of person who takes a thing like that lying down). He’s hardly what you’d call the suspicious type, but boy does something smell fishy.

And the instant Cheryl sets the bottle on the table, he knows he’s correct.

Great, he thinks, a small wave of panic hitting him while most of the others laugh and make jokes. This is exactly the kind of thing he wants to avoid. Spin the Bottle—or, nope, apparently it’s Seven Minutes in Heaven—is a risky game on normal occasions. But on a night like tonight, it’s a disaster waiting to happen. Now he has to come up with a quick way to politely explain that he doesn’t want to have anything to do with this stupid game…but before he can form so much as a mental No thank you, his name is already being thrown into the mix, and despite his feeble attempt to protest, he’s named the first one up. Downplaying it seems to be the best available solution, so even though he can feel the cold sweat starting to break out all over him, he does his best to seem calm as Cheryl sets the bottle in motion.

Not Betty, he pleads silently, watching the object perform its terroristic revolutions. Not. Betty. PLEASE, don’t let it be Betty.

He’s almost holding his breath as the bottle begins to slow, every bit of him willing it to please, please, please, not stop in front of his best friend, because it’s only going to make things worse between them and he doesn’t know what he’ll do if that happens. For one terrible second, it looks an awful lot like it’s going to freeze with the nose pointed toward Betty and he wonders with a flash of mingled fear and exasperation if maybe the entire universe is against him. But then the bottle stills, and oh, God, it’s pointing toward Veronica, and now what is he supposed to do?

Without exactly meaning to do it, Archie glances over at the girl he’s known less than a week to find her looking at him, too. And in a split second, as they stare at each other from across the room, he realizes that he’s spent the last thirty seconds worrying about the wrong thing—realizes that deep down, he knows with almost embarrassing certainty that he doesn’t mind the bottle’s selection. At all. And when Cheryl says all that stuff about taking Veronica’s turn if she refuses, he’s even surer. If he has to go into that closet with anyone, he wants it to be Veronica, and not just because Cheryl scares the living daylights out of him.

So when she stands up (Veronica, not Cheryl), her chin jutting out defiantly as she places her cup down on the coffee table, relief and maybe a little bit of something else hits him like a ton of bricks.

Amid a sea of laughter and over-the-top jokes, he follows her over to the closet—though not fast enough for Cheryl’s taste apparently, since she comes up from behind and shoves him forward so hard that he bumps into Veronica and they end up jostling their way into the little room. It’s all really awkward, and the awkwardness only gets worse when he shuts the door and they’re plunged into mostly-darkness, silence roaring in his ears.

Unsure what’s going on with his nerves, he takes a quick breath. He’s never been this fidgety around someone before, and it’s not even like they’re standing that close together. Desperate for something to do, he pulls out his phone so they can see how long they’ve got to stand there before they can leave.

Across the way, Veronica sighs. “I know her brother…died and everything, but Cheryl Blossom
truly is the antichrist.”

Archie chuckles along with her, thinking that truer words have never been spoken. But complaining about Cheryl isn’t going to make time go by any faster. What they really need is a subject they can’t exhaust in five seconds.

“Uh, do you—do you miss New York?” he asks after a quick pause, deciding that it’s better to just say something—anything—than it is to stand around trying to come up with the best conversation topic in the world.

She seems a little surprised by the question, but smiles anyway. “It’s been less than a week, but… yes.”

They both get quiet at the same time, and Archie quickly looks down at his phone.

“Six minutes, twenty seconds,” he announces, because that’s literally the only thing he can think to say at the moment. Besides, they’ve got to do something. They can’t just stand here two feet away from each other and do that elevator thing where you pretend you’re alone even though you obviously aren’t. “Okay, your turn,” he says, doing his best to keep things light. “Ask me a deep… probing question to kill time.”

She joins him in another little laugh, her arms crossed.

“It looked like…you and Betty were having fun at the dance,” she says after a second or two, and he can tell from the speculation in her tone that she’s for sure noticed the tension even though all she did on their way over was make jokes.

“Definitely,” he responds, hoping to deflect attention away from that subject. “We’ve been friends forever. My turn—”

“I didn’t ask my question yet,” she interrupts smoothly. Her smile’s almost teasing, and despite the additional trouble it causes him, he can’t help being impressed at how easily she’s recognized his dodge attempt. “Is that…all it is? Just…friends?”

“We’re not just friends,” he explains, because if they have to have this discussion, he wants to make good and sure she understands the situation. “We’re best friends.”

Veronica laughs at that, and he’s surprised again at how much he’s starting to enjoy this. She has a way of making everything seem fun and playful, and he’s rapidly discovering that he likes how talking with her is almost a game in itself.

“My turn,” he says, taking a quick breath before blurting out a question that, for whatever reason, has been lurking at the back of his mind since he first saw her in Pop’s. “Did you have a boyfriend in New York?”

The bluntness of the words makes him cringe, and he immediately wants to yank them back. Because while he’s not exactly asking out of self-interest, he also kind of is. And he doesn’t really know why, which is more than a little scary. Especially since he knows what he hopes the answer will be.

Veronica pauses for a bit before she gives him a look that’s really not doing his already-jittery stomach any favors. “No,” she says, smirking a little. “My turn. Could it ever possibly become… something more?”

A frown starts to furrow his brow.
“Are you asking for Betty, or for yourself?” he says, jumping the gun on his turn and not even caring how unsubtle this question is. He’s never been the greatest at figuring out when someone’s trying to flirt with him and he’s usually too scared to ask, but with Veronica, it’s like he needs to know so much that he’s immune to all his usual fears. Whatever’s going on between them, he wants to understand it—he’s never experienced anything like this before, and right now, she’s the one who seems to have the best grasp of things.

She smiles again. “For Betty. And you didn’t answer my question.”

He doesn’t know why, but for some reason, it’s very important to him that she knows he’s not lying, so he makes sure to look her dead in the eye when he tells her, “I have never felt…whatever it is I’m supposed to feel. With Betty.”

“Have you felt it, though?” she asks, her voice going soft. “With anyone?”

“Yeah,” he says.

He knows he’s pretty much staring down at her now, but he can’t help it. She’s so close, and there’s something about her that seems to hypnotize him—to pull him in when he knows he should probably back away instead if he wants to keep his life even remotely simple.

So he tries, giving himself a little shake and ordering himself to focus.

“This summer,” he adds, like he meant it all along when the reality is the only thing he can think of is how he feels standing here with her. God, what is happening to him? “Have you?”

There’s something he can’t quite read in her face as her dark eyes travel slowly up to his.

“Maybe once,” she says. She glances down and then back up again, wearing a crooked little smile as she reaches out and taps a finger against his chest. Her nail grazes his shirtfront in a move that sets a new pace for his heart, and just like that, ninety percent of his inhibitions vanish into thin air. “You’re a little more dangerous than you look, aren’t you? All Boy-Next-Door-ish.”

He almost laughs, adrenaline pumping like he’s about to run onto the field before a game.

“You have no idea,” he responds.

Heart pounding, he takes a careful, not-quite shuffling step toward her. He’s not sure what he’s doing anymore; his good intentions keep fading into the background along with what little sense he has, and he can’t even bring himself to mind, because Veronica’s so close now that he’s practically getting high off her perfume.

His breath quickens and the rooms seems to warm around him as she does another of those looking up and down things.

“You turn,” she says as she moves nearer, eyes locked on his. “Ask me a question, Archie. Ask me anything you want.”

Oh, yeah, he’s in trouble. They’re so close now that there’s no point left in pretending that they don’t both know what they’re playing at, and when she winds his tie around her hand, it’s all he can do to keep from leaning in until there’s no space left between them.

“We shouldn’t do this,” she murmurs.

“We definitely shouldn’t do this,” he agrees, though he can’t for the life of him remember why with
her upturned face only inches away. Something about…something.

But the reasons don’t matter anymore, because almost as soon as he finishes speaking, Veronica closes the gap and all he can concentrate on is her—the way she reaches up to wrap her arms around him, the way her hand feels sliding against his neck and through his hair, and most importantly, how her lips never stop moving against his. Pulling her close is instinct and he inhales sharply when her body presses against his, back arching around the arm he’s got encircling her waist as she tugs his head down toward her. He hears a distinct thump and knows the phone’s slipped from his grasp, but other than the basic fact, nothing registers because he’s just too absorbed in Veronica. In a way, it’s like he’s addicted or something—the more times he kisses her the more times he wants to, and enough just isn’t enough; she’s as energetic in this as she appears to be in just about every other aspect of life, and he has to work fast just to keep up with her (not that he’s complaining). The kisses are so frantic now that they’re both gasping for breath every time their lips part, but it’s not until the shrill beeping of the timer fills the room and he snaps back to reality that he realizes exactly how carried away he got in the heat of the moment—realizes that he’s now leaning against the gameshelf holding Veronica, whom he’s apparently lifted off the ground. And while she doesn’t technically have her legs wrapped around him, she is sort of sitting on him and he can feel the sharp edges of her heels digging into the backs of his calves.

“Oh, my God,” she says, staring at him openmouthed for a split second before sliding down hastily and grabbing up the phone, which she then tosses to him. “That was seven minutes?”

“Yeah,” Archie manages to croak out, fighting a foggy, just-woke-up kind of haze. “Guess so.” He hesitates, about to ask what she thinks they should do, when someone outside pounds on the door.

“Hey! Time’s up, maniacs! Give the rest of us a chance, will you?”

“Yeah! Got it,” Veronica shouts back. “Okay. We need to get out of here,” she declares, grabbing the top of her dress and twisting it and herself until everything goes back into position. “Fast.” She tucks some hair behind her ears and takes a deep breath, glancing at him over her shoulder as she reaches for the doorknob. “You ready?”

He nods, speech failing him again as he gets a good look at how rumpled she is. How rumpled he’s made her. He doesn’t really remember touching her hair, but it’s so much wilder than it was not too long ago that he knows he must’ve, and if she looks like that, he can’t even imagine what he looks like.

“Great,” she mutters. “Here goes nothing.”

Light blasts his retinas as she opens the door, and Archie’s self-consciousness returns full force as he follows her out into the room. There’re so many eyes staring at them that he doesn’t know where to turn, especially since it’s a lot harder to look at Veronica now that he knows what it feels like to kiss her. So he ends up making eye contact with Reggie and immediately wishes he hadn’t, because his teammate seems way too smug about the whole thing and raises a congratulatory fist. Which isn’t great, considering Archie isn’t the only one seeing it. Everyone else in the room can…

Wait.

“Where’s Betty?” Veronica asks at the exact second that Archie realizes a familiar face is missing from the assembled crowd.

“She spiraled and fled,” Cheryl responds coolly, showing up in front of them without warning. “Between us, she’s a lot more high-strung than she looks.”
Archie’s stomach sinks, his embarrassment disappearing in worry for his friend.

“You shady bitch,” Veronica snaps.

Turning on her heel she strides away, and after an incredulous stare at Cheryl, Archie follows. But although he immediately pulls out his phone, it takes less than ten seconds for him to discover that phones are going to be useless in this situation.

“Crap, Betty’s cell is off,” he says, shoving the phone back in his pocket as they reach yet another stair-filled hallway.

“I’m getting an Uber,” Veronica announces without looking back.

“Can I come with you?” He jogs to catch up with her, mind spinning as he tries to think where Betty might’ve gone. “We should probably try to find her.”

“Believe me,” she says almost angrily, grabbing his arm as she talks, “the last thing Betty wants is us tracking her down together.”

For a moment that feels far too long, they stare silently at each other in the hall of the Blossoms’ house. Because she’s right. She’s right and they both know it, but the crazy thing is that she shouldn’t be. It shouldn’t matter who he goes looking for his next-door neighbor with. Yet, somehow…it does. And it feels a hell of a lot like this mess involves more than just tonight. If, say, he’d gone into that closet with Cheryl, or any other girl in that room besides Veronica, would Betty have run off? He doesn’t think so. Whatever just happened between him and Veronica is weirdly tied into that first meeting at Pop’s, and every single time they’ve interacted since then.

And to be honest—that knowledge kind of scares him.

“We messed up,” Veronica says, her voice softening.

She takes off again, disappearing down the shadowy hall in seconds, and this time Archie lets her go. Running a frustrated hand through his hair, he does his best to reorganize the shambles of his thoughts and wishes that for once, he could be smart enough to just trust his own instincts. To stick to his guns instead of trying to be the nice guy all the time. To have the guts to say No thanks, I'd really rather not even when he could see that his refusal was upsetting someone.

“‘Go the dance,’ they said,” he mutters. “‘It’ll be fun,’ they said.”

Chapter End Notes

*Title inspired by the song "Ces Soirees-la" from the Jersey Boys soundtrack, which I was listening to while editing this. It's basically a French version of the song "December 1963 (Oh, What a Night)," which repeats "Oh what a night!" over and over, so I just decided to go with it. (I think the French translation is different, but I'm not familiar enough with the language to know for sure.)

*I kind of got the idea for this immediately after watching Chapter 1. I feel a little bad for Betty, because it always sucks when you're not liked back, but I have more sympathy for Archie in this scenario...he's a bighearted kid who doesn't want to hurt his BFF, but he also doesn't feel the same way about her, and he won't tell her does when
he doesn't. Also...letting someone down gently is almost impossible when you're shocked to find out they like you. And when you don't enjoy hurting other people (especially those you're close to), one of the worst things that can happen to you is finding out that you're about to have to do just that, because you can't live a lie the rest of your life just to spare their feelings. That kind of lose-lose situation messes with your head, and since Archie's already clearly attracted to Veronica, the closet is just dropping a lighted match on a fuel-soaked fire.

*Hope everyone's surviving the last days of the hiatus! I discovered day before yesterday that Riverdale won the EW cover contest thing (cool), and saw all the 90s-era/Grease-looking pics and the new trailer (even cooler), so now I'm even more ready for the new season to start.

*Thanks for reading/commenting! Hope you're all having a good September so far, and if you're from or know anyone in Texas, Florida, or any other hurricane-smashed area, I'm sending virtual hugs your way!
Something About The Boy

Chapter Summary

Takes place after the wrist-wrapping scene in Riverdale Chapter 5, Heart of Darkness. Veronica thinks about her earlier conversation with Archie and evaluates why she might possibly be doing that.

***This one is shorter than most of the other chapters so far, because this is the fourth (I jest not) A/V story I started writing these past couple weeks and the only one that actually reached something resembling completion. I'll hopefully finish at least one of the other stories by Sunday, but if it looks like they still won't be done, I'll try to just write another inspired-by-scenes-from-the-show chapter so I can give you guys SOMETHING relatively new :)

Chapter Notes

Carla: this isn't your prompt (don't worry, I'm currently still working on that one; this isn't a completely off-topic response), but this story started as an attempt at your prompt and then morphed into what it is now, so I feel like I need to give you credit for this one <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Valerie, huh? No, I endorse this!

You jealous, Ronnie?

Please. I had my seven minutes in heaven with Archie Andrews.

Despite the fact that it’s been literal hours since her amateurish faux-pas, Veronica mentally kicks herself. She’s not the easily-embarrassed sort, but ugh, does she ever loathe looking desperate. All the way home, all through dinner, all through homework, even all the way through a thirty-minute facetime session with Betty who’s still having trouble remembering the moves for five of the six eightcounts Cheryl’s decreed the Vixens must all know by Friday, the only thing Veronica can think about is that funny little encounter she had on the bench with Archie. She may look like she’s lying in bed in her pajamas, relaxing and listening to music, but in reality she’s replaying everything that happened earlier in her head and wondering why that is. Wondering why, with all the millions of boys in the world, this particular one succeeds in slipping into her thoughts and utterly refusing to leave no matter how hard she tries to banish him.

She’d like to think it’s the hotness that ruins her—that her past, present, and most likely future preoccupation with him stems from nothing more than a natural appreciation for his clear dedication to physical fitness (because damn, the boy’s got some muscles, and, well…she has eyes). That would honestly make a lot of sense, and it would be a nice, neat, simple explanation.

The trouble is that it would also be completely untrue.
Because if Veronica Lodge has any sort of an Achilles-heel-slash-blind-spot where the male species is concerned, hotness isn’t it. She’s very, very well-acquainted with hot. Practically wrote the book on it, in fact. It was a base requirement for every guy she ever bothered to show interest in back in New York, and the only defining characteristic many of them had; even the Riverdale guys she’d zeroed in on when she’d first arrived and wanted a date fit that bill. But while Reggie and Chuck are, objectively speaking, every bit as good-looking as Archie, they simply don’t evoke the same response in her. Granted, Chuck’s a grade-A douchebag and Reggie’s spirit animal is probably a peacock, but in the grand scheme of things, that’s neither here nor there. The point is that deep down in an area of her heart she likes to pretend doesn’t exist, she’s horribly sure that if she let herself, she could really like Riverdale’s self-appointed knight in slightly-besmirched armor. And not in an HBO love story kind of way (or not just an HBO love story at any rate)...in a cheesy, sappy, “I feel like I’m in a Hallmark movie” kind of way.

The poser’s that she just doesn’t know why that is.

Quite frankly, she’s at a total loss as to what it is about him that consistently catches her attention—it’s a confusing thing, and she’s already spent way longer than she’ll ever admit to anyone trying to sort it out. Because Archie’s not the type of guy she usually goes for; not by a longshot. He’s too sweet, too honest, too unsure of himself, and so impulsive sometimes that the urge to just shake him is almost unbearable. He’s unquestionably the poster child for loved not wisely, but too well, leaping headlong into anything that engages his apparently boundless sympathies, and even after knowing him for several months now, she still can’t decide whether that’s his best or worst quality. It’s endearing, sure, but good grief does it land him in a lot of trouble and come close to driving her crazy when she has to witness his alarming lack of prudence.

No matter how much it frustrates her to see him blundering about however, she’s always oddly compelled to step in and offer what help she can. Maybe it’s his genuine kindness, or the vulnerability in him that no one but her seems to notice; maybe it’s just the way he smiles at her like she’s someone he’s actually happy to see. She’s not sure. What she does know is that she can’t just stand around and watch him struggle along by himself. It’s impossible. He elicits a sort of protective instinct in her that heretofore, she wasn’t entirely aware she possessed, and even when her head tells her to stay far away from his problems—since Lord knows she already has enough of her own that she can barely deal with—her idiotically-soft heart keeps intervening, and next thing she knows, she’s doing something like walking over to a clueless football-playing-songster and helping him wrap a possibly sprained wrist.

No, she thinks for what has to be the thousandth time tonight. It doesn’t make any sense. You already know that, and now you need to just forget it.

But for all the good advice she gives herself, when she cuts the lamp off and rolls over on her side, snuggling into the satiny depths of her coverlet, she still can’t quite shake the image of Archie’s smile. Of the way his face brightens and his eyes twinkle when he’s teasing like he’s about to burst out laughing at any second, and good God, does Valerie even like him, or is she just interested in him because he can sing and thus meets some mysterious creative-type dating criteria, like “Must Be Willing To Suffer For The Sake Of Art?”

Not that it’s any of her business.

Or that she cares.

Because she doesn’t. At all. Archie’s just a more-than-usually attractive football player, and Valerie is solid—a cool, talented chick she’d sign off on and want to be friends with any day of the week. Come to think of it, Archie and Val would probably make a wonderful couple. Certainly a very chill,
musical, model-esque one, and they’d probably cute each other to death way before they disagreed. Although since Valerie, unlike most people, doesn’t seem to have a petty bone in her body—it’s doubtful any disagreement they hypothetically had would last long, and okay, she really, really needs to stop thinking about this and just get the hell to sleep already. It's late. She has school tomorrow. Where she might run into the subjects of her thoughts.

Suddenly annoyed, she glares out into the darkness.

“I am not jealous,” she mutters to nothing in particular, yanking the covers up savagely to her chin. “I’m not.”

And in a weird, illogical kind of way, it’s true. Because she’s not jealous.

She’s just a pretty filthy liar.

Chapter End Notes

*This summer I discovered and became addicted to Little Mix, and since a lot of their songs remind me of Archie and Veronica, I automatically put them on when I start writing. This chapter's named after "About The Boy" because that was the soundtrack to this story.

*The italics at the beginning, as I'm sure all of us know, are taken from the show :-D

*Hope everybody has a great day and is somehow making it through the last few days before Season 2, wootwoot! (#RiverdaleStrong anyone?)
Chapter Summary

Veronica reflects on her new relationship with Archie and wonders if she's up to the task. (This is pretty S1 canon compliant, but as soon as Season 2 starts it'll probably miss the mark since it's based off out of context scenes and rumors of what's to come.)

Warning: there may be some HILARIOUSLY awful typos in here--my spell checker mysteriously quit on this story (not any of my other stories, just this one; I think it was a copy/paste problem but don't know for sure and couldn't figure it out), so although I wrote and edited as carefully as I could, "minutes" might be "minuets," and there could be missing words/multiple uses of the same word right in a row.

Chapter Notes

Carla, this began as attempt #3 on your prompt and spiraled out of control, so you get the inspiration credit for this one too! ;D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the one hundred and ninety-seventh time in a row, Veronica watches the numbers on the alarm clock change, this time from 2:43 to 2:44. In the pitch dark of her quiet bedroom, the bright green digits glare accusingly at her but she doesn’t bother to look away. The worries traipsing through her mind are far too numerous and distracting; she needs something boring and monotonous to focus her attention on if she has any hope of getting some rest, and sheep-counting’s already failed her—despite the fact that she’s mentally numbered off enough fluffy quadrupeds to furnish a dozen wool factories during the Industrial Revolution, sleep still manages to elude her.

And really, it’s no wonder. This whole week of drama began with Fred Andrews getting shot in broad daylight during a robbery attempt (at Pop’s of all places), featured the surprising plot twist of her own father turning up earlier than expected along with the news that Thornhill had mysteriously burned down, and also contained a very interesting interlude with the redheaded football-player-turned-musician who’s the cause of her current sleeplessness. Or if not the cause per se, one of the leading factors.

Exhaling deeply, she tries hard to not get caught up in thinking about that all over again. It’s been several days now since she tossed all pretense of delicacy aside and hopped into the shower with Archie, but her memories appear to share the Rolling Stones’ reluctance to retire and continue to resurface at every possible opportunity. All she has to do is close her eyes, and boom—she feels every single thing all over again, each sensation as clear as if it’s still ongoing.

Even now, she’s not quite sure why she did it—has no inkling whatsoever where the notion to just waltz into the steam-filled bathroom, strip down, and join him came from. She isn’t shy at all, yet that was a bold move even by her standards. They’d only just made things semi-official, she had no idea whether or not she possessed the ability to be there for him in the way he was certainly going to need
her to be in the coming days, yet there she was…kissing him under a cascade of warm water, holding onto him as if afraid he might melt away beneath her fingertips, acting as thoughtless as though she had no more than one day left to live. Frankly, she can’t believe he didn’t freak out at her advances and ask her to leave.

A small part of her, however, whispers that she knew all along he wouldn’t. That she knew beyond all shadow of a doubt that he’d reciprocate without hesitation, and enthusiastically enough to leave her gasping for breath. Because that’s the thing about Archie Andrews: he’s a walking contradiction, simultaneously shy and forward, innocent and experienced, and his genuine sweetness can never quite mask that reckless streak she spotted the night they were shut into the closet together. If she’s being perfectly honest, those confusing paradoxes are what she likes most about him—he’s both her opposite and her equal, and she thinks (only semi-sarcastically) that she never fully appreciated the genius of that extraordinarily overused quote in *Wuthering Heights* until she met him.

But there’s also a certain risk attached to her feelings toward him, and she’s not sure what to do about that—she’s noticed she doesn’t always make the smartest decisions where he’s concerned, and her ever-realistic brain won’t let her forget the messes she’s gotten into before when she allows impulse to take over. Besides, she’s also haunted by the lurid and lingering fear that she doesn’t know what the hell she’s doing. She’s been with plenty of guys in the past, sure, but never for long, and she was never that invested in them anyway—it was all very easy come, easy go, etcetera, etcetera.

With Archie though, it’s different. With Archie she actually cares, God help her, and she feels like such a novice around him sometimes that it’s more than a little terrifying. She’s unused to not knowing which end is up, and that’s exactly why she initially hesitated when he suggested they attend the homecoming dance together after they made out and she spent the night at his house—she’s got almost no prior experience in relationships, and she’s not one of those people who are naturally gifted in that area to begin with. It won’t surprise her at all if she wakes up one morning and discovers that she’s somehow sabotaged everything without even trying, and she really, really doesn’t want that to happen. Not with Archie.

The trouble is that she’s ignorant—she just doesn’t know what she’s supposed to do, or at least what normal people in normal relationships do, because it’s not like she’s surrounded by amazing real-life examples. Once upon a time, she would have held up her own parents as the ultimate model of relationship goals. But now that the surface has been scratched, she knows that’s not true, and it only concerns her more. If the best option available to her is trusting her own instincts, then *oh* is she ever in a pickle. And she doubts Archie knows anything more about it than she does. They’ve both watched their families splinter right in front of them and they’re both talented at isolating themselves from others; how can two people like that possibly figure out what’s the right thing to do when all they’re familiar with is the wrong thing?

Her phone suddenly vibrates, the unexpected noise cutting into her thoughts and making her jump. Rolling over onto her stomach, she slaps a hand around on the bedside table until she locates the little device and quickly opens her messages to find one from Archie.

*U up?*

Regardless of the fact that no sane person with school in the morning should be up at this hour, Veronica immediately texts back.

*Yes. You okay? What’s up?*

*Couldn’t sleep.*
She frowns, something about the vague response making her wonder.

“Where are you right now?” she mutters as she types, squinting in the bright light from the screen.

There’s a long enough pause between her question and his reply (Why?) to confirm her suspicions. Shaking her head, she rolls her eyes despite the fact that he’s not there to see her do it. Even in text, he’s too transparent for his own good.

So I know where to find you, George Washington.

Washington?

She rolls her eyes again. Washington because you cannot tell a lie. Now STOP STALLING. Where are you right now?

Another thirty seconds or so pass before she finally gets the answer.

Was at Pop’s. Just left.

Sighing, Veronica sits bolt upright. At Pop’s. By himself. In the middle of the night. See, this is why she worries about him. Maybe she’s the last person on earth who should ever extol the virtues of not dwelling on things, but at least she doesn’t torture herself to this extent.

Fingers flying, she taps out a response (Meet me outside. I’ll be down by the time you get here) and hops out of bed. It takes her a few minutes to track down a thick sweater, some socks, and her warmest boots, plus an agonizing few more to tiptoe to the front door, but even so, she still manages to slip out into the cold air right as he arrives. And though she intended to ask him as soon as she saw him why he thought wandering around at this hour was a good idea, the words die when she gets a look at him in the dim light from the street lamps…he seems so worn out and dejected that she doesn’t have the heart to do it. Instead, she sits down on the steps and pats the spot beside her in silent invitation.

“Did I wake you up?” he asks, dropping down on the frigid stoop with a grunt.

“No,” she answers, looping her arm through his and giving it a light squeeze. She can’t seem to form a helpful sentence for the life of her, but since he’s obviously not in a great headspace right now, she figures she can at least show him she cares. “I couldn’t sleep either, so no harm done.”

He stiffens almost instantly, his hand going to cover hers where it rests in the depths of his jacket sleeve. “Are you okay? Did something happen? Are you all right?”

“No, nothing happened, and yes, I’m fine,” she assures him. Leaning her head against his shoulder, she brings her free hand up to rub his now-tense arm. “What I want to know is how you’re doing. And don’t even bother with that ‘I’m good’ BS,” she adds, twisting her head to look up at him as he starts hemming and hawing. “I know you’re not, so just…tell me what’s going on, okay?”

For a long moment he stares back at her, his eyes so dull and faraway that it almost breaks her heart. Finally though, his face sort of crumples and he slumps into her, a half-smothered sniff escaping as he swipes the back of his hand over his eyes.

“I can’t get it out of my head, Ronnie,” he mumbles. “I keep seeing it over and over again, and I just think that if I’d only thought faster, or moved faster, I could’ve stopped it. I could’ve saved my dad. And I know I sound crazy, but it feels like if I just wait around long enough, maybe whoever did it’ll come back to Pop’s, and then I can catch him and fix everything.”
His voice breaks on the last word and Veronica sternly pushes back her own tears and shifts so that she can hug him around the waist.

“You listen to me, Archie Andrews,” she says tightening her arms around him. “This isn’t your fault. Stuff like this, this—evil? It’s out of your control.”

“Yeah, but if I’d been fast enough, maybe I could’ve—” he begins.

“Maybe you could’ve what?” she demands, cutting him off. “Maybe you could’ve have kept it from happening?” When he nods, she shakes her head adamantly. “No, Archie. You couldn’t have. Someone somewhere made a choice to do this, and your father made a choice to protect you and everyone else in that diner. You couldn’t have predicted or prevented any of that, and just think for a sec about what could’ve happened if you’d known what was going on in time to interfere—you might’ve gotten yourself shot too, and then who would’ve taken your dad to the hospital? What if—I don’t know, what if you’d just angered the gunman by interfering and he shot you, and Pop, and everyone else there just out of spite?”

He hesitates. “But Veronica, I let him get shot,” he whispers. “I did. Me. I was right there, and I just…he just…and he was hurt, and there was so much blood, and I couldn’t…”

“I know. I know, and I’m so, so sorry.” She reaches up to cradle his face in her hands, turning his head gently so he has to look at her. “But you can’t keep blaming yourself like this. It’s not your doing, it’s not good for you, and I promise you that it’s the last thing your dad wants.”

“Yeah.”

He nods in agreement, eyes still glinting with unshed tears, and she suddenly feels a jolt of intense hatred for the person who’s done this to him. But because she doesn’t want him to see her anger for fear that it’ll fuel his, she leans in quickly and kisses him. She only intends for it to be a swift peck, but when his arms engulf her and he deepens the kiss with an energy that’s almost desperate, she doesn’t hesitate—just joins in, hoping the pressure of her lips will convey everything she feels but can’t put into words, or at least distract him long enough to alleviate some of his pain. When they finally pull away, both of them panting, she strokes his cheek gently.

“You can’t save the world, you know,” she tells him. He starts to protest, but she pinches his lips shut, raising her eyebrows. “And that is okay. Got it?”

Archie sighs gustily, so she uses her fingernail to trace a little heart-shape around his mouth until he finally chuckles.

“Got it?” she repeats.

“All right,” he says, reaching down to lace their fingers together tightly. “I got it.”

“Good.”

She scoots in close then, smiling when he rests his head against hers. The night air nips bitterly, but their combined warmth wards off enough chill to keep it from becoming unbearable, and they fall silent as they stare out into the dark street. Neither of them says a word for hours; they just watch the deep shadows morph from black, to gray, to golden with the rising sun, and despite the cold hardness of the stone beneath her, it’s so peaceful that Veronica hates to see it end.

But of course, it has to.

Dawn arrives in a stunning red-gold blaze above the buildings and treetops, and she reluctantly
reminds herself that her father won’t appreciate finding his daughter on the steps with “that boy” at six in the morning. Especially since she’s still in her pajamas.

Seeming to come to the same conclusion, Archie gives her hand a quick squeeze.

“I’d better get home,” he says quietly, glancing over his shoulder at the towering edifice behind them. “Before…”

“Yeah.” She stands up, tugging him with her and wincing as her cold-stiffened joints complain. And though there’s a very real possibility that Hiram Lodge is scowling down at them from some upper window and trying to figure out how to open it so he can yell at them, she decides to go ahead and wrap her arms around Archie anyway. “I’ll see you at school?” she suggests, tilting her head back to get a better look at him.

“Yeah.” He smiles, and if it’s not quite the carefree grin she’s used to, at least it’s a huge step in the right direction. “If we can somehow both keep our eyes open.”

“Hey, I can’t speak for myself, but I definitely believe in you,” she jokes. “You’re a lot tougher than you seem, Andrews.”

He laughs softly, then shakes his head at her. “Thanks,” he says seriously.

There’s no elaboration beyond the single word, but Veronica understands his meaning just the same and stretches up on tiptoe to kiss him.

“Anytime,” she says, meaning it with all her heart.

And as he walks off and becomes a blue, yellow, and orange blur in the early morning mist, she takes a deep breath. Yeah, okay, she doesn’t have a clue about relationships—doesn’t know if anything she’s done over the past week is the “right” thing or not.

But she’s going to do her level best to figure it out.

Chapter End Notes

*The Wuthering Heights quote Veronica references is ”[H]e's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same...” It's a beautiful quote, but it's one of those ones that's overused by people who've never read the book/are unfamiliar with the story and thus don't know the context, so it gets ignored or cringed at by a lot of readers. (Kind of like when people who've never read Shakespeare go "I want a love like Romeo and Juliet's!" and everyone who knows the play just sits there like, "You want to die tragically and stupidly for love? Dude, WHY.") Veronica strikes me as the kind of reader who scoffs at a good but slightly-melodramatic quote until it becomes true for her, so I went with it.

*I think S2 isn't going to have Archie and Hiram Lodge meet until episode 2 or 3, but I didn't know that until this morning, and this was already written, so I decided to just leave it.

*GUYS, SEASON 2 IS SO CLOSE AND I'M SO EXCITED. I expect angst and darkness and possibly (probably) a breakup for my poor little babies, but I don't even
care because I'm just ready to have these characters back on my screen each week. (And anyway, I suspect they're the kind of couple that's horrible at staying Just Friends.)

*Thanks for reading/commenting, and make sure to give yourself a round of applause for surviving the hiatus!
Chapter Summary

Archie and Veronica spend their evening wandering around the Riverdale Halloween Carnival together.

*I wrote this on a whim so it's pretty all over the place (sorry!), but I'll hopefully have some better chapters coming in the next few days. Also, lots of apologies, because I finished this over a week ago, held onto it so I could upload it ON Halloween...and then completely forgot to do it because of the World Series. Its lateness is also why some stuff in the story doesn't make much sense in light of 2x04 (I didn't expect the town to actually be smart and start locking doors, etc. when I wrote it, or Archie and Veronica to be as "who cares?" about her parents wanting them to break up). It probably works best if you think of it as Halloween AUish fluff.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

7:57 pm

“Hello? Earth to Andrews. You still with me?”

Archie blinks, the manicured hand fluttering a few inches in front of his nose yanking him out of another of those worry sessions he’s been falling into a lot lately. Even now, with Veronica on one side, his old wooden bat on the other, and over half the town milling around the streets and having fun, he can’t relax or stop keeping a lookout for potential threats. Which is why he didn’t want to bother with Halloween in the first place; in his opinion, it’s both dangerous and a waste of time to dress up and wander around Riverdale’s annual carnival when just about anyone can be the killer in disguise. But since not even Jughead agreed with him when he brought it up (except on the waste of time part) and he’s been roped into going, Babe Ruth seemed like the best option—at least he has an excuse for bringing the bat along.

The trouble is that it’s hard to fool the black cat striding along the pavement beside him, her speed somehow not slowed in the least by the heels she insisted on wearing in defiance of all advice against it. Other than an initial compliment on his choice of costume—Veronica isn’t a baseball fan by any means, but she is New Yorker enough to know exactly who he’s supposed to be—she hasn’t said anything about it. But judging by the look she’s giving him now and the look she gave him when he first arrived to pick her up, he knows she’s about to.

“Sorry,” he says, glancing down at her. “I was just—uh, what were you saying?”

Veronica sighs, her small hand tightening on his arm in a squeeze that’s somehow reassuring and scolding at the same time. “First I was saying that Betty just texted and said we should go on in when we get there because they’re running a little late,” she explains. “Something about Jughead complaining about his costume. I don’t know; I didn’t ask for details. Then, I was saying that you weren’t listening to a word I’d just said and that you needed to stop worrying about protecting the town for one night, and just relax. Which, now that you’re listening, you really need to do. Okay?”
“I know.” He smiles, the gesture only half-forced because—well, it’s Veronica. Even with a fake pink nose, black whiskers, and the puffy black jacket chilly necessity made her throw over the fancy suit (complete with furry tail) she ordered from New York, her poise is impeccable. “I just—”

“No. No just,” she interrupts, waving both arms this time and nearly smacking him in the head with her purse. “Tonight is supposed to be about having fun, and if any of us could use the break, it’s you.”

“Yeah, but…” he begins, trailing off when he catches sight of her raised eyebrows.

“But what?” she inquires pointedly.

In spite of himself, he chuckles. He usually hates people telling him what to do, but it’s different with her. Maybe it’s because he inherently knows that the stuff she makes a point of bugging him about is the kind of stuff a guy should be bugged about, or maybe it’s just because she always gives him a special kind of smirk right after she’s been especially bossy, like she’s daring him to challenge her or something. Whatever the reason, he knows resistance is futile. She’s right, and him getting stubborn about it will only make her get stubborn about it, and then he’ll just be in the middle of an argument he’s on the wrong side of.

“All right, Ronnie,” he says, flicking one of her whiskers teasingly. “I’ll at least try to have fun. That meet with your approval?”

“Well.” Her smile mischievous, she tilts her head. “It’s not ideal, but it is a start. Please note though, that I expect at least one shockingly large stuffed animal won for me in an antiquated display of masculine prowess. I’m thinking…ring toss, perhaps? Or, if you’re in an especially testosterone-y mood tonight, whatever that thing’s called where you swing the hammer and try to make the bell ring? Bonus points if you feel like doing it sans baggy baseball jersey.”

“Yeah, well.” Archie shakes his head, the laugh he’s unable to contain ringing out clearly in the cool air. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“That’s all I ask, George,” she responds cheerfully, plucking at his jacket sleeve. “No sense in becoming an old man before your time.”

8:13 pm

A block or so before they reach the park, the carnival’s glow becomes visible and the number of oddly-clad people scurrying to and fro with jack o’ lantern shaped buckets triples. By the time they pass through the arched entrance that’s dripping with cotton cobwebs, skeletons, and an assortment of what he thinks are meant to be Grim Reapers and ghosts (they bear a stronger resemblance to a bunch of laundry drying on a line), the sensory overload is huge. Wave upon wave of noise and weird scents surround them, and Archie wrinkles his nose.

“Which way first?” he asks, pausing at the nearest intersection as he struggles between accepting the fact that he can’t focus on everything at once and trying to do it anyway.

“Not Worrywart Lane, if that’s what you’re thinking,” she answers, leaning in so her voice carries better in the happy din. “No Guardian Angel Archie, remember?”

“I wasn’t,” he protests—but feebly, because it’s not true and they both know it.

“Uh-huh.” She surveys him skeptically, hand on hips. “Promise me one thing, okay?”

“What?” He hides a smile when she reaches up to straighten his ball cap, her fussing once again
taking the edge off his tension. “I thought trying to have fun was all you asked.”

“Mmm.” She gives him a brisk pat on the cheek, clearly unimpressed. “Let’s minimize the sarcasm, shall we? Otherwise one of us—not moi, of course—might find themselves trekking through the Tunnel of Love all alone, and wouldn’t that be a tragic turn of events?”

He grins, relinquishing his hold on the bat for a minute so he can wrap his arms around her. “You’ve never been here before,” he teases, bumping his linked hands lightly against the small of her back. “What makes you think there even is a Tunnel of Love?”

“Oh, please.” She smirks, leaning back to see him as her hands slide up his chest to rest on his shoulders. “Could they even call it a carnival if there weren’t one? Somewhere, there has to be an actual law forbidding the exclusion of shoddy caves d’amour. Like—a book of weird carnival bylaws hidden in a vault somewhere, probably covered in greasy fingerprints and mustard stains.”

“That’s probably true,” he agrees, leaning down to kiss her. “And speaking of mustard stains, do you want to get a corndog?”

“Before we get in line for the Tilt-a-Whirl et al?” Veronica’s eyebrows rise. “You’re ambitious.”

“Oh, right. Funnel cake should probably wait too, then.” Gazing around the colorfully-lit area, he searches for a decent alternative. “Cotton candy, maybe?” he suggests, spotting a booth crammed with pastel bags of fluff.

“Ooh, much better. Except—hold still one second.” She swipes her thumb gently over his mouth, laughing. “You’ve got a little Joker thing going on right now, and no offense Archiekins, but this is my shade of lipstick, not yours.”

Archie laughs as best he can with her fingers mashing his lips all out of place. “All good now?” he asks when she finishes, pulling her out of the way of Yoda and a couple of waist-high Power Rangers who are being chased by a shrieking can of Dr. Pepper in one of the stranger games of tag he’s witnessed.

“Sort of.” Squinting critically, she harrumphs. “It’s more vampirish now. If anyone questions it, just…say you’re going for the Undead Babe Ruth look.”

He smiles, allowing her to tug him toward the sugary snacks. “You’re wearing the same color, Ronnie. I doubt an explanation will be needed.”

“Yeah, probably not,” she agrees, making a face as they step into the bright circle of light emanating from the booth. “You know, one of these days, I’m going to have to hunt down a lipstick that’s actually kiss-proof. This is getting ridiculous.”

“Yeah, and if you ever need a test subject…” he jokes, lifting his eyebrows suggestively.

Veronica smirks, batting her eyelashes at him. “You’ll be the first to know. Now.” Tossing her hair back over her shoulder, she gives his hand an excited little squeeze. “Let’s get this show on the road, shall we? I want to see what Riverdale’s got on Coney Island.”

9:48 pm

“For heaven’s sake, Archie, breathe.”
Exhaling obediently but shallowly, Archie casts a dark glare toward the booth they’ve just left. Once he and Veronica got their cotton candy and paid the obligatory visits to the Tilt-A-Whirl and Ferris Wheel—the Tunnel of Love was skipped since Mr. and Mrs. Lodge were nearby—they meandered through the grounds for a while, greeting friends and stopping every now and then for food and games. Veronica hadn’t been kidding about the ring toss and cheered him on with a level of enthusiasm that would have been horribly embarrassing coming from anyone else (even though he knew she was mostly trying to keep his mind off all the patrolling he wasn’t doing, he enjoyed it all the same). But after they ran into Reggie and some of the guys and Reggie spent way longer than necessary checking out Veronica’s cat tail and finding excuses to bump into her, it kind of ruined the fun aspect of the games and landed him in a slightly-too-heated throwing competition that Veronica had to practically drag him away from. They’re heading over to meet Betty and Jughead at the haunted hayride now, but even the prospect of what’s usually one of his favorite carnival rides can’t make him forget his irritation.

“Hey,” Veronica says, poking him in the arm as they near the end of the line. “Deep breaths. In and out. You turning purple isn’t going to accomplish anything, neither is mentally beating someone with a bat.”

“Yeah, I know,” he mutters. God, that burned him up, though, watching his teammate come close to hitting on his girlfriend right in front of him. If Veronica hadn’t intervened, he’d probably be having it out with the guy right now.


“What?” he grumbles, trying to wipe the scowl off his face before she can see it.

She smiles up at him, her chin half-hidden behind the fuzzy head of the stupid stuffed bear she insisted on hauling around with them. “Let it go, Archie.”

“But he just—” he argues vaguely, waving a hand toward the direction they’ve come from.

“I know,” she breaks in, catching his wrist and pushing his arm back to his side. “Doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me.”

“Oh, please.” Tucking the bear under her arm, Veronica pulls his head down and plants an emphatic kiss on his cheek. “Feel that?” she says, tracing around the lip print. “That’s the Veronica Lodge seal of approval, and do you see Reggie or anyone else in this place wearing that same design? No. So don’t get your circa-1920s jock panties in a bunch just because someone notices that I have a very cute tail, okay?”

Despite the fact that he’s still bristling, Archie has to laugh. “Okay,” he says grudgingly, dropping an arm around her shoulders and drawing her into his side. “I’ll try not to, but it doesn’t mean I have to like it when it happens.”

“Fine by me.” Her smile impish, she tickles her fingers against his chin. “Jealous you is both irritating and surprisingly adorable.”

“Well, what have we got here?”

The question seemingly comes out of nowhere, and Archie whirls around in time to see a dark, misshapen figure emerge from the shadowy woodland path to their left. On reflex, he swings a startled Veronica around behind him and raises the bat, heart pounding.

“Whoa! Easy there, Jump Street,” a familiar voice drawls from the depths of what he can now see is
a pointy-eared hood. “No need to break any kneecaps just yet.”

“Jughead?” Archie stares uncomprehendingly for a minute, trying to wrap his head around the fact that his friend is standing before him in an enormous cape and a bodysuit that’s only a little less-tight than Veronica’s. “You’re…Batman?”

“Oh. My. God.” Veronica covers her mouth, a loud snort escaping. “I thought she was kidding.”

Archie frowns, still struggling to accept the evidence before him. “Where’s your hat?”

Silently, Jughead removes the cowl, revealing his beanie stuffed underneath.

“Oh.” Biting back a grin, Archie coughs. “So…this is your costume, huh?”

His friend sighs heavily. “It was either this, Danny Zuko, or the Man of Steel. Under the circumstances, I think I made the right call.”

“Oh my God,” Veronica gasps out again, slumping against Archie as she laughs. “Oh, my God! Please tell me someone has pictures of the trial outfits?”

“Hey,” Betty puts in, making everyone jump as she, too, emerges from the shadows, wearing what looks an awful lot like a Wonder Woman costume thrown on over fleece leggings. “I think he looks great.” She pats him on the shoulder as she passes, beaming. “My little dark knight.”

Jughead looks grim. “Betty, please. I wore the costume. Let’s leave it at that.”

Before Betty can protest, a bright flash lights up the area, searing the ridiculous image of a skinny, disgruntled Batman onto Archie’s unprepared and now half-blinded eyeballs.

“Sorry,” Veronica says while the rest of them yelp, her voice mirthful. “But someone had to.”

Even in the dark, Jughead’s glower is visible. “You know, Veronica, the day you desperately need me to keep something secret is going to be the precise day I remind you of this moment and refuse to help.”

Veronica chuckles, holding her phone up so Archie can see the photo of beanie-wearing-Batman. “Well, as long as Robin is still answering the Batphone, I think I’ll manage.”

“Whatver.” Jamming the mask back on his head with great dignity, Jughead marches forward. “Are we going on a hayride, or what?”

2:23 am

By the time the night’s done, Archie’s consumed enough sugar and fried food to make every one of his coaches tear out their hair, laughed more than he has in what feels like forever, and is very, very glad he was talked out of skipping Halloween. It’s late enough now that he knows he’ll probably get some serious glares from Mr. and Mrs. Lodge, especially if they see him carrying their daughter piggyback through the streets of Riverdale, but he can’t bring himself to care. All the same though, he doesn’t want to make trouble for Veronica, so he halts about twenty feet or so from her house.

“Should I let you off here?” he asks, glancing up at her.

She groans, resting her chin on his shoulder for a moment. “Probably. Smithers’ replacement, AKA Daddy’s spy of a doorman has most likely already let him know we’re close, and there’s no sense in two of us getting a lecture.”
Slithering down off his back, she comes around to stand in front of him, her smile bright as she hands over the bat she’s been balancing so he can carry her.

“Yours.” She roots around in her purse for a second, holding up the little bag of caramel corn that he hasn’t gotten around to eating yet before tucking it into his jacket pocket. “Yours.” Removing the Yankees cap she’s been wearing since they left Pop’s, she holds it out. “Yours.”

Archie catches her arm midair. “Keep it,” he says, setting it back on her head and turning it around so he can see her face without a shadow. She’s still got pieces of straw in her hair from the hayride, and he laughs as he plucks out a piece. “Maybe it’ll hide some of this.”

“Aww.” Her tone is sarcastic, but the softness in her smile as she puts her arms around his neck negates it. “Thank you. But I’ll only accept it on one condition.”

“Yeah?” Giving up on the bat, he props it against the wall of the nearest building so his hands are free to rest on her waist. “What’s that?”

“You text me the second you get home,” she answers, her expression sobering as her fingers toy with the hair at the nape of his neck. “Do not pass ‘Go,’ do not collect two hundred dollars, just…let me know you made it back and are actually going to get some sleep instead of standing guard, ‘kay?”

“Yeah.” He’s not good at putting into words how much her concern means to him, but the amazing thing about Veronica is that she always seems to understand anyway. “I will,” he says, drawing her in as close as her oversized purse packed with all kinds of carnival junk will let him. “Don’t worry.”

“Sorry,” she sing-songs. “Long as you refuse to take care of yourself, I’m going to keep right on worrying and nagging.”

“Veronica.” Tightening his arms around her, he bends down until their foreheads touch. “You are not nagging me.”

She smiles. “Oh, would you look at that?” she murmurs playfully, pressing her lips to his in a series of long, slow kisses that short out his brain in no time flat. “There is something else I forgot to give you.”

“Wait. Your parents…” he mumbles, saying what he knows he ought to even while his hands slide down automatically to settle on her hips. “We probably shouldn’t—”

“I know.” She goes up on tiptoe to give him one last spine-tingling kiss before pulling away with a sigh. “It’s late, we’re in the middle of the sidewalk, etcetera etcetera. And if I don’t say goodnight now…”

“Yep.” He takes a deep breath, running a hand through his hair as he tries to act less dimwitted. It goes without saying that he’s reluctant to leave, but they both know this isn’t the time or place to do what they’d like. “Sweet dreams, Ronnie.”

“You too. And remember. You’re texting me as soon as you get in, right?” she says, patting him on the chest, her voice all business again.

Archie nods, energy levels buzzing like crazy. “Yeah. For sure.”

And he does.

Then he explains to his confused dad who’s waited up for him why he’s tiptoeing into the house at
three a.m. wearing a really dumb grin and the rest of Veronica’s lipstick.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, I am SO sorry it's been half of forever since my last update! I do event work, so I sometimes have basically nothing one week, and then everything + the kitchen sink another week, and since the Astros went to (and WON! :D) the World Series this year, my evenings were pretty much derailed. Riverdale's one of only 2 shows I'm currently up-to-date on, and I'm about to die because I can't get on tumblr to freak out about it yet without getting my other shows spoiled. So let me just say here that I'm about to explode because (1): Shower Scene/"I'm not going anywhere" scene (2): Veronica calming Archie down during dinner with her parents (that jittery leg! Ugh. So cute.) and (3): VERONICA LODGE STUCK HER HAND INTO FILTHY DISGUSTING TOILET WATER FOR ARCHIE ANDREWS, AND IF THAT AIN'T LOVE, I DON'T KNOW WHAT IS. I swear to goodness, I'm going to have to write an annoyingly-long essay on why I love these two so much. And go on a gif-collecting spree.

*Chapter title taken from Macbeth, because why not?  
*Archie/Veronica/Reggie are the other love triangle I remember from the comics, so I included that here. (Random fact: I adore Charles Melton's Reggie. Ross Butler was good, but CM's Reggie is SPOT. FREAKING. ON. I simultaneously want to be bros with him and punch him in the face because he reminds me of Gaston. It's great.)  
*Carla, your prompt is actually almost done (4th/5th time is apparently the charm, lol), so it should hopefully be one of the next updates! Sorry it's taken me so darn long. :'(  
*Aviva, I've started on your prompt, so that one's also on its way, hopefully within the next week. It's also made me want to write an Archie-gets-upset-about-Nick one as well, so there's that.  
*Also, I really want to do a few more episode-related fics, so some of those will probably be coming soon.

**Thanks for reading/commenting! Hope y'all had a great October and are having a great November so far!
Chapter Summary

After everyone leaves the hotel, Archie finds out from Veronica that there's a little more to the Nick St. Clair story.

***This is something I started writing last Friday during lunch (because I loved the episode and was still thinking about it; my girls were AWESOME!), so it's kind of not super-well thought out...just an idea I had, because even though it's very in character for Veronica to keep something like this to herself, I really want to see Archie find out. I'm going to have (hopefully, knock-on-wood) a couple more updates this weekend, I just worked a lot last week and haven't finished editing/ending + editing the chapters I had almost finished last week. This story was shorter, so I decided to go ahead and upload. Hopefully the typos aren't terrible; I'm in a rush, so if they're bad, I'm sorry! <3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time the car Josie practically ordered her mother to send arrives and they’ve bundled Cheryl into it (along with a quilt and Josie, who point blank refuses to leave her friend for anything), Archie’s both exhausted and more than a little inclined to mount a one-person manhunt for Nick St. Clair in spite of the girls’ assurances that he’s been pummeled enough for one night. But each time he starts to seriously consider slipping out and seeing if he can’t locate a certain scumbag, Veronica gives him a warning look and he decides it’s probably better if he doesn’t go near the guy just now—the desire to lay him out is too strong. So he waits around with her at the hotel after Betty, Valerie, and Melody leave while she contacts her parents to let them know why exactly the St. Clairs might see their son looking a little disheveled, wishing he had just punched Nick’s smarmy face back at Veronica’s house the other night, or at least at the party like he’d really, really wanted to.

“Ready to go?”

He starts when he feels the hand on his shoulder, swinging his legs off the arm of the chair they’re draped over. “Yeah,” he says, scanning her face quickly. She sounds chipper enough, but she’s got that closed-off poker face expression again, and there’s a look in her eyes that goes straight to his heart. “You okay?”

She isn’t. He knows she isn’t, but he’s unsurprised when she nods. Veronica doesn’t like seeming vulnerable, something he was reminded of in this very room a day or so ago when Betty said all that nasty stuff straight to her face and Veronica shook off all offers of sympathy, and it’s just like her to act as though she’s fine. So when she grabs his hand and takes a step in the direction of the door, he holds his ground and tugs her back toward him, wrapping his arms around her as tightly as he dares. For a second or two she just stands there, unmoving and stiff, but then she sort of collapses against him, shoulders shaking, her arms encircling his waist as her head falls to his chest. She doesn’t make any noise, but he can feel the hot tears soaking into his shirt and desperately wants to say something—anything—to make her feel better, but as usual, the only words that come to mind are stupid, clumsy-sounding things that even he can tell will ring hollow, so he’s forced to content himself with hugging her close and swearing to hate Nick St. Clair for all of eternity.
Finally, when she shows no signs of stopping anytime soon, he backs them slowly toward the chair he just vacated and sits down again, pulling her onto his lap.

“Sorry,” she mumbles thickly after a minute or two, rubbing the back of her hand across her eyes.

“For what?” Scraping some of her tear-dampened hair off her face, Archie drops a light kiss on the shoulder nearest him. “You did good, Ronnie, okay?”

“No.” To his surprise, she shakes her head vehemently, tears spilling down her cheeks again. “No, I didn’t. This was my fault.”

“What do you mean?” he asks, frowning as he tries to brush away some of the droplets and succeeds only in smearing the moisture all over her already-shiny cheeks. “You couldn’t have stopped something like this any more than you did, so—”

“Yes, I could’ve,” she interrupts, her voice loud and strained. There’s a note of anger in there too, and when she laughs, it’s completely devoid of humor. “That’s what kills me, Archie. I could’ve prevented this. Me. The only reason this happened to Cheryl is because I let myself believe that stupid line about being drunk, and second chances, and changing when I should’ve seen through it from the beginning.”

“What?” Archie repeats, more confused than ever as she starts sniffling. “Ronnie, what are you talking about? What stupid line?”

She shudders against him again, making the arm looped around her tighten instinctively. “The other night,” she says quietly, “after Reggie took you guys home, I was waiting here for my ride. Nick and I were talking, and…”

She hesitates, alarming him immediately. “And what?” he asks, twisting his head to the side so he can peer into her face. “What happened?”

Veronica shakes her head again. “Nothing. Just…he said some things I wasn’t expecting, but he was a little worse for the wear, and I figured—”

“What kind of things?” he demands, gripping the arm of the chair. The idea of Nick talking to Veronica without anyone around to play witness is enough to make his skin crawl, and so help him, if that bastard tried anything on her…

As if she knows exactly what he’s thinking, she burrows deeper into the crook of his arm. “I’m fine, Archie,” she says, her lips curving into a small smile as she glances up at him. “It wasn’t like what he did or tried to do to Cheryl, and anyway, it’s over and done with so there’s no need to freak out about it.”

Even though he recognizes and appreciates her attempt to reassure him, it’s not working in the slightest. Clenching his teeth together, he tamps down a steadily-rising fury. The important part of this is his girlfriend and how she’s feeling, not imagining how amazing it would feel to put his fist—okay, no. He needs to stop thinking like that right now.

“What did he do to you?” he asks with as much calmness as he can muster. “And don’t say nothing, because I know it’s not nothing, Ronnie.”

Her eyes flick away for a moment, something in her face hardening. “He…assumed a little too much about the lengths to which I was willing to go to help my parents get his parents to invest,” she says carefully after a pause that nearly makes him explode. “He wanted to kiss me and called me a tease when I made it clear that I wasn’t interested, so—”
“He what?” Calmness evaporating, Archie moves so suddenly that he nearly tumbles Veronica out of his lap and has to scramble to catch her. “That’s it; where the hell is he?”

“No, Archie.” Bearing down firmly on his shoulders, she forces him to sit back down. “I told you. I’m fine. And if it helps, I slapped him right after it happened, plus I got in some pretty good licks tonight. He knows exactly how I feel about that-slash-him and Cheryl intends to press charges, so there’s no need to avenge me.”

She’s technically got a point about that first part, because even Cheryl says that Nick got his. But knowing that he should leave things well enough alone and accepting it are two different concepts, and Archie privately thinks that he won’t be able to accept it until he’s paid his own visit to the former occupant of this room. Veronica may have expressed her feelings on the subject, but he hasn’t gotten that chance yet, and he’s dying to.

Taking a deep breath, he orders himself to get it under control and focus on Veronica rather than kicking her assailant’s ass. “You’re sure he didn’t hurt you?” he can’t help asking, reaching up to touch her face.

“No, he didn’t.” She leans her cheek into his open palm, her smile genuine despite the wetness of her eyes. “It was uncomfortable and not an event I’d like repeated, but I’m pretty tough. Takes more than a little unwanted touching to get the better of me.”

Archie nearly chokes. “He touched you, too?”

Veronica sighs at his yell, shaking her head when he struggles to sit up again. “Forget I said that. It’s not what it sounds like.”

“No!” He stares at her, blood boiling. “Are you kidding me? I swear to God, Ronnie, if he put his hands on you, I’m going to—”

“—not do anything,” she interposes, winding both arms around his neck. “If you go after Nick now you’ll look like the bad guy, and I’m not about to let that happen. The important thing is to make him pay for what he did to Cheryl, not what he may or may not have tried to do to me, so there’s no need to go running off half-cocked to punch his lights out, okay?”

“But—” he begins.

She puts a finger to his lips, silencing him. “Please,” she says softly. “The battle’s already been fought, Archie. I don’t need or want an avenger. Just…someone who’ll stay and help me pick up the pieces.” Smiling again, she gives him a gentle tap on the nose. “Know anyone who might fit that bill?”

Archie holds her gaze for a moment, trying not to sigh. A part of him still wants to argue the merits of chasing Nick down, but the puffiness of her eyes and the uncertainty he can hear in her voice despite the obvious effort she’s making to keep things light decides him, and he nods instead.

“Just tell me what to do,” he answers, catching and moving her hand out of the way so he can kiss her. His grip is light, so it surprises him when she flinches, and he looks down quickly to see a weird discoloration on the back of her hand. “What’s this?” he asks, leaning down to inspect the red, almost raw-looking skin circling her knuckles. “Wait, Veronica, did you…”?

She groans in response. “I did mention I got in some pretty good licks, didn’t I?” she says, gingerly tracing around the already-bruised area. “One of them was a punch, and although I’d do it again in a minute, I’m really regretting the fact that I never took my self-defense instructor seriously when she
said this kind of thing can hurt.”

Archie doesn’t even bother to restrain his grin. “Good.” Lifting her hand to his lips, he places a very careful kiss atop the worst portion of her knuckles. “God, I hope you hit him hard.”

“Wish granted. I did.” She raises her eyebrows. “But don’t sound so delighted, you abettor. One of us has to be the sensible one when the other goes off the rails. You should probably…I don’t know, scold me for displaying a violent streak, not sit there congratulating me on it.”

“I’ll scold. Later,” he answers, landing a couple more kisses on the inner part of her wrist, his grin widening into a smirk when she sucks in a breath and shoots him a scowl that even he knows she doesn’t mean. “Maybe.”

She rolls her eyes. “Meaning never. Oh, Archiekins.” Her hands land on either side of his face and she smiles almost blindingly at him for a second or two before leaning in again. The kiss this time is slow and deep enough to leave him in a state of mini-shock when she pulls away, so he barely even notices that she’s chuckling as she lays her head on his shoulder. “Thank you,” she murmurs, her lips tickling against his neck.

“What for?” he asks, not at all surprised to hear how breathless he sounds. He keeps thinking that eventually he’ll get used to kissing her, but so far—no dice. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Yes, you did.”

He frowns, trying to angle his head to where he can see her. “Huh?”

“Never mind, babe,” she says, nestling closer while he tries to figure out what she means. “One of your biggest charms is that you’ll literally never understand what it is about you that makes you so special.”

“Okay…” Unsure whether he’s just been complimented or insulted—but also unsure whether or not it even matters—Archie bends down to kiss the little spot between her eyebrows. “Well, just so you know, whenever you’re ready to go, we can,” he says. “And you can stay at my house if you need to.”

She nods, her arms tightening around him. “I may take you up on that. Not sure I really want to be alone tonight.”

“Yeah.”

They sit in silence for a few more minutes before Veronica finally sighs and mentions the lateness of the hour. She’s looking more like her usual in-charge self and even teases him about achieving ‘extreme boyfriend points,’ but as he goes to shut the door behind them, Archie’s laughter fades and he casts one last glare around the room. He might have pseudo-agreed to not track Nick down in a dark alley with a bat, but let it go?

Ha.

Not likely.

Chapter End Notes
*I just saw the new sneak peek, and I'm excited to see where this goes. Kevin is seriously mah boy, and I love how he's the friend V tells the messy stuff to.
*Carla and Aviva, again, y'all's prompts are coming! I know I sound like a scam-artist now ("Your profits should arrive any day now") lol, but they really, truly are. It's just harder for me to edit when I'm tired, so sometimes it takes longer for me to finish something that's nearly done than it is to write something in one sitting.
*I had more notes to add, but as aforementioned, I'm in a hurry because I have to work again tonight (which means I'll spend most of the evening wistfully wondering what's happening on Riverdale *sobs*), so I'll come back and add stuff/answer comments later!
*Thanks for reading/commenting, and I hope everyone is having a great week and enjoys the ep tonight!

Also: I don't think you guys understand how much I love Veronica, Cheryl, and Josie. I like most all the Riverdale ladies, but those are MY GIRLS! <3
Two's Company

Chapter Summary

Veronica has a bit of a nasty scare when a certain time of the month passes without incident.

(For best results, assume that the story begins on Friday with H&H Lodge having just left town for the weekend, and that the window in Veronica's room faces out on the street. Also bear with me; I discovered whilst writing this that it's been too long since high school...I no longer remember what I did and didn't know about birth control back then, so it was really hard to decide how much knowledge to give B&V here, and I very well may have made them more ignorant than necessary on the subject.)

Chapter Notes

From a prompt by Carla, who has been very nice about the fact that this fic has been in progress for half of forever. It's unfortunately not much, Carla, but I definitely tried. (And learned that pregnancy scare fics are not my forte, lol.) Hope you enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Come on. Where are you, where are you, where are you?”

Hands on hips, Veronica glared down at the wreckage she’d just made of her once only slightly messy junk drawer. Random notes written to herself, cute earrings that had lost their mates, the occasional birthday card intended for her eyes only, and photographs she’d saved for some reason or other littered the carpet and bed around her, and she still hadn’t found what she was searching for: a tiny, leather bound planner. She’d received it a couple of years ago at some New York boutique, in one of those atrociously transparent Thank-You-Valued-Customer moves stores with high-end clientele liked to engage in, but she’d never cared much for it. Planners were dull enough on their own, and this one didn’t even have an interesting color or pattern to recommend it. As of now, it served one purpose only, and that solely because its small size made it easy to conceal.

“Eureka,” she muttered, suddenly recalling that she’d moved it from her dresser to her purse. Grabbing the bag off the handle of her doorknob, she dug through the contents until she located the little book, then sat down on the edge of her bed and flipped through the pages at a speed that bordered on desperate.

Her breath left her lungs in a whoosh as her eyes landed on a date a little over a week ago. A date circled in red with little devil’s horns and an angry face on it that she’d doodled when she was in a dark (but much better) humor.

“Oh, my God.”

Slapping a hand over her eyes, she flopped backward onto the mattress, ignoring the pile of trinkets that rattled and clinked protestingly beneath her. What did it matter if she crushed every piece of
jewelry she owned? She, the girl with the regular-as-a-clock period, was officially eight days late, and the image of poor Polly Cooper rose up before her mind’s eye like some ghostly, terrifying specter. Pregnancy—babies…that was supposed to be something she worried about in the future, not now. She wasn’t aware of ever giving the idea any thought at all; if she had, it was only as one of those calamitous occurrences she’d always viewed as a remote, improbable peril. A thing that happened to stupid, careless people.

People who weren’t her.

“This cannot be happening,” she moaned, forcing a laugh to combat her growing unease. “It can’t be.”

“What can’t be?”

Startled, Veronica jerked upright. *Great,* she thought, her mind going immediately to the bedlam that was her room. When she’d pretended to feel sick earlier so she wouldn’t have to show her pale, freaked-out face in school, she hadn’t thought to guard against the eternal meddling-motherliness of her best friend. Most people, upon hearing that someone was under the weather, would stay sensibly away to avoid disease-catching. It was, Veronica reproached herself, monumentally stupid of her to forget that Betty Cooper was not the type to stay sensibly away. No. Of course not. Betty Cooper was the type to drop by with an armload of the day’s homework and an enormous bowl of chicken soup from Pop’s, and now there was no time to hide any of the evidence that announced to anyone with half a brain that all was not well and that lies had most assuredly been told.

Sure enough, Betty’s eyes widened the instant she stepped in, her ponytail whipping back and forth as she looked all around the room. “Oh my God, V. What happened in here?”

“Recently, a one-woman search party,” Veronica answered in a moody voice, wondering if she could possibly convince Archie to leave his self-appointed post as amateur protector of Riverdale and go into hiding before her father took out after him—probably with a revolver, since a shotgun was far too plebian for a Lodge. “Before that…many assorted things, most of which cannot be discussed without breaking my strict Don’t Kiss And Tell policy.”

“What?” Stepping carefully over a heap of clothes—Veronica had also gone through everything with pockets that she’d worn in the last month—Betty stared at the clutter as though she’d never seen anything like it before and set the soup down on the dressing table. “Don’t kiss and tell? What are you even talking about; what does that have to do with anything? I thought you were sick?”

“I am.” Though not in the way the other girl meant. “Potentially.”

Her friend set the food down on the nearest table. “Well, clearly not with the flu, and from the looks of this I’m betting it’s not stomach-related either like you told me earlier, so…what?”

She snorted. “Define stomach-related.”

The other girl cocked an eyebrow, channeling Alice Cooper with frightening success. “As in or pertaining to the organ that digests your food? I don’t know. You tell me, Veronica. What’s got you holed up and faking illnesses? And for the record, if you try to lie to me again, I will drag it out of you.”

“Ugh, fine.” Sighing, Veronica pinched the bridge of her nose for a second or two. “I just…feel a certain unwilling kinship with Rizzo right now, and really wish I didn’t.”

“Okay.” Betty came around to stand in front of her, arms crossed. “Should I go to the bathroom for a
minute so you can put on a wig and poke fun at me in song, or…?"

“No, nothing like that.” Holding the book up, she pointed to the date circled. “It’s this. I feel like a
defective typewriter, Marty.”

“You’re late?” Betty seized the planner, frowning at the indicated date. “What? By how many—”

“Eight days.”

“Okay, well…” Betty sat down on the edge of the bed, tapping a fingernail against her teeth
thoughtfully. “A little over a week’s not unheard of, and everybody has those days they don’t know
whether or not to count. There isn’t a reason you need to worry about it though, is there?”

Despite the gravity of the situation, Veronica nearly laughed. A reason?

“Without going into excessive detail, B…” She chewed her lip, trying to brainstorm a better, non-
scarring, non-TMI way of conveying the answer. (Which was yes. Emphatically.) “Let’s just say that
this last month alone has provided ample opportunity for me to be concerned about human error and
the failure rate of preventative measures.”

“Oh.” Her friend’s eyes morphed into startled blue orbs. “Oh, so you guys…?”

“Did not observe Coach Carr’s number one rule regarding the practice of safe sex?” Veronica
supplied curtly. “No. We did not. And though I’m not exactly a pill-taking novice, I can’t remember
to save my life how thorough I was—I might’ve missed none, or I might’ve missed tons.”

“Oh, God.” Betty hesitated, glancing over her shoulder at the door before leaning forward, her voice
dropping to the softest, most conspiratorial of whispers. “I know I’m horrible for asking this, but…
are you sure it was enough times to worry?”

“Yes, and not just about me,” Veronica answered. A numb, faraway sort of sensation sapped her
energy, and she hated how much she wanted to just curl up in a ball and ignore everything. “If this
turns out to be the real deal, my father is going to…” She shook her head, refusing to even speak that
fear aloud. “I don’t know. But he won’t be over the moon, and he certainly won’t blame me or that
stupid little failure rate. He’ll blame Archie. Guaranteed.”

“You really think your dad would do that?” Betty hissed, round eyes growing rounder. “I mean, I
know you’re not crazy about his track record, but he does love you. Surely, he wouldn’t—”

Surely he would, Veronica thought grimly. And in a heartbeat.

“What would your father do?” she said instead, sitting up enough to look her friend in the eye.
“Supposing you came to him with news like this, how do you think he’d react? He loves you, too.
Do you think he’d be willing to listen to reason?”

“That’s—okay,” Betty faltered, “he’d definitely be furious, but he’s also had news like this delivered
to him before, so it’s not the same thing. Our dads are different people, and I’m sure yours wouldn’t
react like mine.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

Veronica leaned back, closing her eyes again. Without a doubt, Hiram Lodge wouldn’t react at all
like Hal Cooper, and the worst of it was that she could never make her friend understand the
enormity of that fact. Betty’s family had their issues, sure, but they also had rules. Certain lines that
even her drama-mongering mother refused to cross. They might be, as Betty often pessimistically
opined, “crazy,” but they weren’t built of the same coldblooded stock as the Lodges, and Betty could rest assured that any borderline criminal act either of her parents committed was born strictly out of love or concern for their family.

Veronica couldn’t.

She would have liked—loved, even—to believe that her father’s particular brand of doing business stemmed from a dedication to her well-being, but she was too much his daughter to allow herself that comfort. Their individual brains functioned on the exact same wavelength; if she could spot a chance to exploit a situation for personal gain, she knew he could, too. At times, she feared the only difference between the two of them was that she now (mostly) chose to not take advantage of chaotic circumstances while he continued to step in and arrange things to his liking. With Archie, for example, he left the bad-cop routine to Mom and found subtle ways to suggest that Veronica could do better, that Archie might get dragged into who-knew-what kind of trouble because of him. He’d never once said that he disliked her boyfriend, yet all the signs were there, and Veronica strongly suspected that he’d welcome the opportunity to bring his dislike out into the open. And with Archie already on-edge about practically everything these days…no, there was no possible way any of this could end well.

Out of the blue, her vision fogged.

“Betty, I really hope I’m freaking out for nothing,” she whispered, swallowing hard as she sat all the way up in an effort to prevent tears. “But since I don’t know, swear to me you won’t say anything to anyone, all right? Not even to—no, especially not to Archie.”

“No, of course I won’t!” Scooting over hastily, Betty gave her a sturdy hug. “And listen to me V, you may never even get to that bridge, so don’t try to cross it just yet, okay?”

“Right.” Gulp ing down a sob, Veronica forced away the scads of worst-case-scenarios playing through her mind. “Just...keep reminding me that there’s plenty of time to panic later, huh?”

“What are friends for?” Betty laughed, patting her back gently. “Now eat your soup.”

***

Exactly two days, seven hours, and fifty-seven texts from a certain worried someone who apparently no longer bought the stomach-flu story later, Veronica laid resentfully in bed. Right as she’d been on the verge of going full Juno, arming herself with pregnancy tests and oceans of orange juice, her worst fears had been suddenly (and gorily) alleviated.

Now, she wished she hadn’t been so quick to jump to conclusions.

In hindsight her anxiety seemed ludicrous, and though she believed Betty had kept her promise to not say anything, she couldn’t help observing that Archie’s are-you-okay texts had grown a lot more insistent a few hours after Betty had left the Pembrooke. Given Betty’s concern and utter lack of a poker-face, it wasn’t hard to figure out that Archie had asked her if she’d heard from Veronica and then gotten suspicious when she offered up some flimsy excuse, but no matter how many times he asked, Veronica refused to change her original story. He didn’t need to know about the life-changing event her frightened brain had thought might happen; not when he already came to school with shadows under his eyes that she knew for a fact were due to Black Hood-related nightmares. She’d been beside him a few times when he awoke in silent, chest-heaving terror, and she was not going to dump this on him.

Not if she could help it.
No, as far as she was concerned, the matter was over and done with. The danger had ended, the mild-but-still-obnoxious cramping had begun, and frankly, she just needed a good nap (and maybe some chocolate).

Shutting off her lights, she rolled over onto her side and concentrated on relaxing. Just as she began to drift off, however, a soft plink! from somewhere near her window made her eyes fly open, and she frowned into the dark for a second or two while she tried to place the sound. Insects? The heater? Ancient plumbing that really ought to be repaired? But then the tinkling report came again and she suddenly identified it: rocks.

And there was only one person crazy enough to be throwing rocks at her window at this hour of the night.

“You have got to be kidding me,” she muttered, shaking her head.

Clunk!

Another stone—larger, this time— pinged off the glass, making her jaw clench. Sometimes that boy could be the biggest idiot in the entire world. What was he thinking? Her parents weren’t home, true, but he had no way of knowing that! And what, had he just forgotten about the killer who could be roaming the streets at this very moment?

Irritation mounting in tandem with concern, Veronica threw back the covers and marched over to the window, stopping herself just shy of slamming the sash up.

“Are you out of your mind?” she hissed down at the figure below. “It’s past midnight! You could get yourself killed!”

“I know,” came the response, floating up to her louder than she preferred considering how many smallminded gossips apparently lurked in this town just waiting for an opportunity like this. “But you wouldn’t answer any of my texts, and I wanted to see you.”

“Oh, my God. Do you have any idea how you sound right now?” she demanded, beaming a hot glare down at him. “Hint: it’s not sane.”

“Well.” Archie shrugged. “If I sound desperate, then good. ‘Cause that’s kind of what I am. Look, Ronnie, can I please just talk to you for a minute?”

Veronica folded her arms, rolling her eyes so hard she lost sight of him for a few seconds. “Yes. Fine. Hold on; I’ll be down in a jiff.”

There was no time to fool with trying to locate one of her cuter dressing gowns; snatching the thick wool blanket off the end of her bed, Veronica cocooned herself in it and stuffed her feet haphazardly into her slippers. Under normal circumstances, she’d be a least a little horrified at the thought of Archie seeing her like this, but now—well, now she was experiencing far too many other emotions for embarrassment to get a foothold.

“All right,” she announced the second she arrived on the stoop, throwing the door open unceremoniously. “I’m here. Now what the hell is so important that you have to risk life and limb running around on foot after dark all by your lonesome?”

Despite the aggressiveness of her tone, he seemed unfazed. “You said you were sick.”

“Yes. I did.” Pulling the bulky fabric tighter around her shoulders, Veronica scowled up at him for a second before grabbing him by the arm and yanking him inside. “And what, if I may be so bold as to
inquire, does me being sick have to do with you parading around this town at Dracula-esque hours? Honestly Archie, it’s like you’re asking the Black Hood to make you his primary target. Again, I might add! I swear, I’m out of commission for two days, and it’s like you just—what?” she demanded, instantly annoyed by the fleeting grin she saw cross his face. “What about this is funny to you?”

“Nothing! I promise,” he answered, wiping the smile off like lightning. “I was just really worried about you. And…now I know you’re okay.”

She narrowed her eyes. That sounded suspiciously like an insult, but she was still too exasperated by his recklessness to bother addressing it. “Of course I’m fine, Archie! I’ve been at home, not languishing away in some musty Edwardian hospital with tuberculosis! You, on the other hand, put yourself in actual danger to come here. Couldn’t you have at least driven over?”

He grimaced apologetically. “Uh, my dad has the truck, actually.”

(Of course he does.” Propping her hands on her hips, Veronica took a deep breath. “Okay. For the sake of my peace of mind,” she said through gritted teeth, “please don’t ever do something like this again.”

“Ronnie, nothing happened,” he insisted, reaching for her hand and tugging her gently toward him. “I was perfectly safe.”

“By some miracle, yes,” she snapped, wrapping her arms around his waist with a fierceness that surprised even her. “You were. This time, anyway.” On some level she knew she was overreacting, but the thought of him getting injured or worse on the way to visit her was detestable, and it was a relief to hear and feel his heart thumping steadily in her ear. “For the love of God, Archie,” she muttered, her fingers digging into the soft cotton of his shirt, “just text me next time, will you?”

“I did,” he said into her hair, kissing the top of her head firmly. “Like five hundred times, and all I got back was one text yesterday saying you weren’t feeling great.”

“I wasn’t,” she mumbled into his chest, her indignation already melting away despite her best efforts to maintain it. “What’s so hard to understand about that?”

“Oh.” His arms tightened around her. “Except then I ran into Betty, and she told me that she’d been to see you. She said you were sick too, but she made it sound like it was a cold or something, and you told me it was a stomach bug. Plus she kept acting sketchy about the whole thing, so I decided I’d come see you myself.”

“Really, Betty?” Veronica grumbled, scowling in what she hoped was the direction of the Coopers’ house. She needed to start locking her bedroom door, if only so she wouldn’t get surprised by visiting best friends who couldn’t come up with a convincing cover story to save their lives. “You had one job.”

“So?” Archie said pointedly after a minute or two of silence. “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?”

She pursed her lips, earlier resolution fading now that he actually stood here asking about it in person. “If I say no, are you going to accept it or keep right on badgering me?”

He gave her a look.

“Yeah, I figured as much. Well…” Taking his hand, she turned to scan the abandoned lobby. “My parents are gone for the weekend, but I’m sure this visit is being documented as we speak, so it’s
probably best if we stay down here. ‘They talked on the sofas’ sounds a lot less damning than ‘They went upstairs together.’”

“Okay,” he answered, following her over to the nearest couch. “And why do we need to worry about what your dad hears about us from what’s-his-name?”

“Because.” Veronica tucked her feet up beneath her, leaning into his side when he put an arm around her shoulders. “I had a little bit of a scare recently and just discovered how much I like you being alive and in one piece. I don’t want to jeopardize any of that.”

“Okay,” he said again, sounding confused. “How’s this related to you pretending to be sick?”

She groaned, shaking her head. “I wasn’t exactly pretending. I just thought…well, there isn’t an especially delicate way to put this, so let’s just say I had a Sixteen And Pregnant scare and leave it at that, all right?”

“What?” Beside her, Archie sat bolt upright. “You thought you were…? Ronnie, are you serious? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because! I didn’t know, and I didn’t want to say anything to anyone until I was sure,” she explained, slapping a hand over his mouth to hush him. “Betty only found out because she showed up when I wasn’t expecting her and caught me being not-sick. And…besides.” Biting her lip, she traced over the back of the hand that now rested on her blanket-covered knee. “I didn’t think you needed any more worries. Especially not those of the pregnant-girlfriend variety, and anyway, it turned out to be a false alarm, so no harm, no foul.”

“Hey.”

She glanced up to find his eyes on her, the unabashed warmth in them sending a pleasant shiver through her.

“What?” she answered, her smile an involuntary response to his. “Am I about to experience another one of your optimistic little ‘it’s going to be all right’ pep talks?”

“Maybe.” The smile developed into a full-blown grin as he twisted around on the cushions to face her. “That a problem?”

“No, no.” Before he could dodge, she reached up and gave his nose a gentle poke. “I live for those moments when you go all Pollyanna on me, actually. It’s extremely cute.”

He snorted. “Thank you?”

“Oh, don’t get huffy. That’s a compliment,” she assured him airily, joining in his laughter. “Not all of us can pull off the ridiculously charming, in-dead-earnest look the way you do. It’s an ability you have to be born with, I believe. A true gifting that only the kindest of kind hearts can ever achieve.”

He rolled his eyes, but the tips of his ears betrayed him by reddening and she bit back a smile. At some point, teasing Archie and watching him get flustered while trying to play it cool had become one of her favorite activities in the entire world, and she regretted it not one whit. Leaning over, she planted a quick kiss on his cheek, chuckling when his blush deepened.

“Well?” she said, laughing as she motioned for him to elaborate. “Go on, then. Where’s my unrealistically hopeful encouragement?”

Making a ha-ha face at her, he scooted in closer, taking a deep breath as he picked up her hand and
sandwiched it between both of his. “Okay,” he blurted finally, his grip alternately tightening and relaxing when he turned to look at her. “The thing is…you’re my girlfriend, Veronica.”

She smiled, his blundering sincerity once again getting the best of her. How he managed to be so naive and so wise all at the same time, she couldn’t even begin to fathom.

“I’m aware of that, yes,” she agreed solemnly, giggling when he heaved a longsuffering sort of sigh. “Sorry! Sorry. Please continue. I’m your girlfriend and…?”

“And…” He hesitated for a second or two before giving her another of those toothy, almost-bashful smiles that made even her stone-cold self melt into a puddle of sappy affection. “And it’s not fair for you to be the only one who worries. To be all alone and everything. I know I’m bad at this, that I make all kinds of mistakes and hey, I’ll probably get even worse, but—”

“Archie,” she interrupted, pulling her hand out from between his so she could cup his face. “You don’t have to feel guilty about anything, all right? I promise you, I didn’t feel abandoned or alone at any time; I chose to keep this in because honestly, I’m not a big fan of talking over my worries.”

“I know. And I get that. I do. But Ronnie…” Hands sliding up to cover hers, he held her gaze steadily. “I want to be someone you feel like you can talk to. About anything, not just the good stuff. That’s what you do for me all the time, and I—I want to help you like that. If you need it, I mean.”

Veronica’s throat constricted despite her best attempts to keep it from doing so.

“Okay, not fair,” she declared, fanning her rapidly-welling eyes with one hand and pointing sternly at him with the other. “New rule, Archiekins: no being sweet to me while I’m hormonal and prone to excessive mushiness. It’s positively mortifying.”

“Yeah?” He grinned, tugging on a semi-tangled piece of hair that hung near her face. “Why’s that?”

“Well, I do have a whole frigid shrew reputation I need to uphold,” she joked, batting his hand away playfully. “If word ever got around that I cried right out in the open over adorable things said to me by this super-cute, way overprotective football player turned musician…my life’s work could be compromised. People might start thinking I actually have a heart.”

He chuckled, the soft vibrations tickling against her lips as he leaned down to kiss her. “Too late for that, Ronnie.”

“Humph.” Wrinkling her nose at him, she returned the kiss heartily anyway. “Your fault, I’m sure. I was really good at not-caring before you came along and sort of ruined my spotless record.”

“Oh, crap,” he murmured back teasingly, resting his chin on her shoulder as his arms curled around her waist. “Should I apologize?”

Heaving a dramatic sigh, she rolled her eyes. “Honestly? Yes. You’ve made me go soft, Andrews.” Her hand moved up almost automatically to stroke the side of his face, his contented hum making her smile again. “Not sure how I feel about that.”

He laughed, kissing her cheek. “Any way I can make it up to you?” he inquired.

“Puh-lease,” she answered haughtily. “Nothing short of a giant chocolate milkshake from Pop’s would appease me, and since—”

“All right,” he interrupted, his arms tightening around her in the briefest of hugs. “Done. Give me ten—no, fifteen minutes, and I’ll be right back with a celebratory Not-A-Mom chocolate milkshake.”
“What?” She laughed, catching at his sleeve as he stood. “I was kidding!”

“I know.” His grin huge, he bent down and gave her a quick peck on the forehead. “But I’m not. Wait for me?”

“No! Archie—okay, seriously?”

Crossing her arms over her chest, Veronica shook her head as she watched the sweetest idiot in the world sprint toward and disappear through the doors, on a dangerous and completely unnecessary mission to get a stupid drink.

“One a.m. with a psycho on the loose, and he thinks it’s a good idea to run all over Riverdale,” she muttered, scowling as she slumped back into the couch cushions. “Archie Andrews, if you make it back alive, I am so going to kill you.”

Chapter End Notes

*This was an interesting chapter for me. I feel very old and responsible after writing it, so everyone do me a favor and note here and now that whenever I include hints/make it obvious that Archie and Ronnie are Doing The Deed, I'm operating under the assumption that they're doing it SAFELY, because that's what you should do. So anyways. That's my version of the Coach Carr speech from Mean Girls ;D

*At the risk of sending an extremely mixed message considering everything I just said...THAT TRAILER FOR 2x08, THOUGH. WHEW! *Fans self* *Dances with joy* If Veronica is the one who's reluctant to say "I love you," I'm going to be so excited. She's my girl on so many levels, and I've been dying to see more of that careful-about-showing-feelings side from her because I relate so hard. Maybe they'll break up, maybe they won't...I don't know. I'm just excited to find out. I love watching these two no matter what, so they could be pretending to ignore each other and I'd still be interested.

*Ok. Random note: I adored last Wednesday's ep (2x07); it's in my top 3 Riverdale eps because I loveloveLOVE when shows play around with format, and it reminded me of some of my favorite X-Files/Buffy/Doctor Who eps. BUT...in addition to the creepy janitor, it also kind of made me suspect both Sheriff Keller (because they made his name-clearing so obvious and the show really seems to like having Betty be right) and Hal Cooper. So if Hal winds up being the Black Hood, just know that I wrote this back when I didn't suspect Hal at all.

*Random note #2: The goal is to have a Varchie Christmas fic up before 2x09 airs, but if that doesn't happen, there will at least be one before December 25, because I am GOING to make that happen. I don't trust this show to give us a totally happy, fun Christmas ep, lol.

*Thanks for reading/commenting! I hope you're all having an awesome week :D (Which you definitely should be, because "I LOVE YOU, RONNIE" + lots of angst is about to happen soon. AAAHHH!)
TALKING IN A WINTER WONDERLAND

Chapter Summary

Archie and Veronica go to pick out a Christmas tree for the Andrews family.

**Short, random, plot-less sort of fic because I came up with the idea for it while working on a different Christmas-themed A/V fic, and it was the easiest to finish of the fics I've been working on. AU unless you pretend they didn't break up/got back together before the end of 2x09**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For as long as he could remember, the annual search through the woods just outside of Riverdale for the perfect tree had been one of Archie’s favorite things. Year after snowy year, he and his dad had made the cold, lengthy trek across the empty fields together while his mom, who preferred to avoid the unrelenting chill of the great outdoors, remained at home. This year, however, with Mom unable to come down for a visit and Dad stuck at home on doctor’s orders, everything just felt…off. He guessed change was inevitable and it wasn’t like he had no idea what to do without Dad there to direct every step, but it was a little weird to not have the man who had taught him how to select, chop down, and haul home a tree tromping along beside him.

Although now that he thought about it, the lack of Fred Andrews was far from the only weird thing about this trip.

Behind him, the steady *crunch-crunch-crunch* of rubber-soled boots on snow ended abruptly in a smothered yelp, and he turned to find Veronica floundering around in a thigh-deep (to her) snowbank. Face flushed, hat cocked at a haphazard angle over one eye, she struggled vainly for several seconds to extract herself. Thanks to the wind screaming across the field he couldn’t make out every word she was saying, but the vigor with which they rolled out expressed her sentiments as clearly as if she were holding up cue cards, and he had to bite back a grin he suspected she wouldn’t appreciate.

Shifting the ax to his left shoulder, he moved over toward her and extended a hand. “Need some help, Ronnie?”

“Understatement of the *century,*” she grunted, grabbing hold of his arm without hesitation. “Not to be a killjoy or provide you with the ideal opportunity to drop an I-told-you-so on me, but how much longer is it going to take to reach our arctic destination?”

Archie chuckled, pulling her up onto surer footing.

“It’s not much farther,” he told her, brushing some of the powdery stuff off her shoulders where it laid as plentifully as though someone had dumped a bucket full of it on her. “You gonna be able to make it?”

“Of course,” she answered like it should have been obvious, scraping messy clumps of hair back and stuffing them under her thick red stocking cap as she staggered upright beside him. “Veronica Lodge
is many things, but a quitter is not one of them. That being said…” She cupped gloved hands around her eyes, breath forming a thick cloud around her face as she squinted off into the blinding distance. “There’s an ever-so-slight possibility that I may collapse en route to this mysterious and wintry location. If that happens, please drag me back along with the Christmas tree, because freezing to death on Farmer So-And-So’s land is not how I want to go.”

“Got it.”

A grin spread over his face as she re-situated the tarp they’d brought to wrap the tree in under her arm with a determined air. A week or so ago, he’d mentioned to Veronica at school how strange things were going to seem since he’d lost his tree-hunting partner, and she had adamantly refused to let him make the trip alone. None of his warnings about the cold deterred her, and he’d been kind of worried about it because New York’s cold wasn’t the same as Riverdale’s cold…there weren’t nearly as many tall structures to prevent icy winds from whipping straight through heavy coats, and it wasn’t like she’d ever had to slog two-and-three-quarters of a mile over uneven ground and through several feet of snow. But as usual, she’d amazed him—though the walk from the road where they’d parked the truck to the tree area was no easy jaunt, she hadn’t complained once (not counting the muffled swearing she did every time she slipped and fell into a deep patch of snow). It was pretty obvious that she wasn’t in her element at all, just as it was also obvious that she was way too stubborn to admit defeat.

Which, if he were being honest, was one of his favorite things about her. For all her flippant sarcasm and dedication to appearing calm and self-possessed, Veronica cared a lot and wasn’t one to let herself be intimidated by a little difficulty. He’d once heard his dad say something about how when the going got tough, the tough got tougher, and in Archie’s opinion, that description fit Veronica to a T. Even now, puffing along in the winter boots, leggings, and thick coat he’d had to almost insist she wear, she acted as though there were nothing at all remarkable about the fact that she was practically wading through loose snow in the middle of nowhere just to help him bring back a tree that could be bought with a hell of a lot less trouble somewhere else. And since he really didn’t need the help, the gesture was doubly meaningful. Being alone was something he’d gotten used to over the course of his life—it didn’t mean he had to like it, but he was always forgetting that fact until Veronica reminded him.

On a whim, he reached out and snagged the small red mitten swinging nearest him. “Hey.”

“What?” she said, turning clumsily around, forehead wrinkled. “Is something wrong? Are we here?”

“No.” He smiled, setting the ax down so he could pull her close. “And no, not quite. Just…thanks for coming with me.”

“O-kay…” Her eyebrows arched delicately up, disappearing beneath the edge of her hat as she cocked her head to the side. “You’re welcome of course, but to what do I owe this oddly-timed burst of gratitude? Cold fever?”

“I don’t know.”

Maybe it was the cold, maybe it was the just being with her, but he felt suddenly giddy. Throwing his arms around her waist, he picked her up and spun them in a circle, ignoring her only half-serious scoldings as he sped up. For about five seconds the world was a bright, dizzying white blur; then he was stumbling over the fallen ax handle, landing back-first in a snowdrift with Veronica on top of him, and laughing harder than he’d laughed in a while, even though she continued to loudly inform him of how close he’d come to landing on the ax and killing himself.

“It’s fine, Ronnie,” he gasped out finally, her fierceness just making him laugh harder. “I didn’t hit it,
so we’re good.”

She eyed him sourly as she sat up, folding her arms. “Uh-huh. And what if you had, O Whirling Dervish? What then?”

He tried to be serious and failed. Her hat had flown off, either during the spinning or during the fall, and it was impossible to keep a straight face when the wind kept blowing her hair into static-y, Thing One and Thing Two styles.

“You’d take care of me?” he suggested, sliding his hands up under the edge of her coat to get a grip on her waist rather than the bulky fabric protecting it.

“In the middle of nowhere?” she responded sarcastically. “And with what…my wits alone? The medical supplies I don’t have? News flash, Archiekins: Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman I’m not. Can we please, please keep the potential for life-and-limb-threatening injuries to a minimum? At least until we get back to something resembling civilization?”

He nodded, biting the insides of his cheeks to hold back a smile. “Okay.”

“Good.” She brought her fist down lightly on his chest. “Now, let’s go find this tree before I collect any more snow and turn into an ice sculpture. I’m beginning to fantasize about hot chocolate, and the sooner we turn that dream into a reality, the better. For everyone, because right now, what good humor I have left is hanging on by a thread.”

Another uncontrollable wave of laughter rippled through him, and he reached up to tug on one of the pieces of hair swirling around her head when she started looking in all directions, presumably for the hat.

“Merry Christmas, Ronnie,” he said, grinning up at her as he moved his elbow to reveal the cap.

She sighed loudly, exasperation written all over her shiny face. But eventually a reluctant smile twitched free, and she giggled as she leaned down to press cold, slightly-chapped lips to his.

“Merry Christmas, Archiekins,” she told him softly, dusting off some extra snowflakes that had fallen from her loose hair to his face. “May all your days be as merry and bright as this one.”

His grin widened to Cheshire Cat dimensions as he sat up, kissing her again. “Thank you. And same to you.”

“Just so long as they’re not this cold,” she grumbled, leaning her head against his shoulder. “I’ve never thought about it before, but I believe I may be more of a spring-summer-autumn person.”

He laughed again, hugging her tightly to him. “I asked Dad to have the hot chocolate ready for when we get back, and there’s an extra blanket in the truck you can use.”

“Oh, my God.” Grabbing his face in her hands, Veronica gave him a quick peck on the lips. “Sexiest words you’ve ever said. Let’s go.”

Chuckling, Archie clambered to his feet along with her. “Wait, that’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever said?”

“Well.” She lifted her eyebrows once, teasingly, as she brushed herself off. “Maybe not. But I won’t even consider naming the true first-place contenders until we’ve at least scored a tree, so if you want to know, you’ll just have to hurry, won’t you?”
“Okay, then.” He grinned, bending down to kiss her one more time before retrieving the ax from its spot in the snow. “Let’s go pick a Christmas tree.”

Chapter End Notes

*OKAY, this was supposed to be up before 2x09 because I expected that episode to make me terribly sad, but...it snowed where I live, which happens like once every 4-7 years, and I just didn't get any editing done. Then the episode aired, and somehow, of all the shows I watch, Riverdale gave me the happiest midseason finale and I got so many ideas that I had to get them down before I forgot them. (I also kind of downloaded the piano music to Mad World because I've somehow never heard it before and wanted to learn to play it because THAT MUSIC IS JUST SO PRETTY.) So that's basically why this is late.

*I should have another (Christmas) chapter posted by either Wednesday or Thursday. I got a few first drafts of new chapters written this last week, so good news, I'll be able to post some prompts I've been working on for a bit now. (Aviva, your prompt is one of the ones in the works, I just got some ideas while editing and had to reorganize.)

*I have a lot of feelings about these last two episodes of Riverdale, but I'm saving most of them for Tumblr because my feelings could fill pages. The I-Love-You fiasco! The striptease/pole-"dancing" scene (oh, I got LOTS of feelings on that one)! The Super Awkward Secret Santa! The capture of the Black Hood (they totally didn't catch the Black Hood. This is Riverdale. Five bucks says he has an Evil Twin or it was Hal Cooper/Sheriff Keller.) Nana Rose Blossom IS ALIVE!!!!! She didn't die in the flames of Thornhill! (That one's been haunting me since the end of S1.) SHE KNOWS THINGS. Veronica's in the know now about the dark side of Lodge industries! The watch! The necklace! Ugg. I'll stop now.

*I'm updating in a hurry again because my sister is waiting on me to continue our holiday-TV-episodes marathon (Doctor Who's on the docket tonight) and I still have to update one of my other fics. So once again, I'll be checking comments from last chapter probably tomorrow :) *As always, thanks for reading/commenting! Hope you guys are all having a great break and that you survived the roller coaster ride of 2x08 and 2x09 as well as can be expected! <3
Chapter Summary

With some prodding from Kevin, Josie, and Cheryl, Archie and Veronica realize the pitfalls of being “just friends” during the annual Teen Holiday Party at the Five Seasons.

[Pirates, ye be warned. This was actually the first Varchie Christmas fic I started, but it kept getting longer and longer, so I went ahead and finished/posted the Christmas tree one. This should’ve been up in December, but I got sick over the holidays, so that’s why it’s late, kind of messy/all over the map, and now extremely AU. I’m not thrilled with how this turned out, but on the bright side, it did spark an idea for an AU Varchie fic I’ve been toying with writing for a while now, so there’s that.]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_I’ll have a blue Christmas without you_

_I’ll be so blue just thinking about you_

Sighing, Archie took a resentful gulp of eggnog from the fanciest plastic cup he’d ever seen. He wasn’t sure who’d organized the playlist for this thing, but he had a feeling that he’d better not ask. This was maybe the ninth vaguely mournful holiday song in the last hour, and at this point, he was kind of ready to start taking swings at people. Why did so many Christmas songs involve love and heartbreak, for crying out loud? Even the fricking Beach Boys had depressed him so much that he’d had to leave the main room and head into the hall. Why he’d even agreed to come here, he couldn’t understand.

Except…okay, yeah, that was a lie. He knew very well why he’d ‘let’ himself be talked into attending, and it wasn’t because he was in a holly jolly mood. Or because that buffet was loaded with all kinds of good food. Nope. His reason was about five feet tall and wearing a black dress that had put his jaw—and a sickening number of other jaws—on the floor.

“Some party, huh?”

Archie blinked, the question catching him off guard.

“What?” he said stupidly, turning away from the picture he’d been pretending to inspect for the last ten—twenty? Thirty, tops—minutes to find Kevin standing at his elbow. “Sorry, man. I uh, didn’t hear you.”

Kevin coughed politely. “Yeah. That’s…pretty much exactly what I thought you’d say. Tell me, Mr. Last-Two-Times-I-Was-At-A-Party-I-Was-Tearing-Up-The-Dancefloor.” Setting his glass of (probably spiked because Reggie had been lurking pretty suspiciously near the bowl earlier) punch down on a nearby end table, he nodded at the painting. “Is this lame-ass landscape _really_ that interesting to you, or could it be that the main attraction is what’s reflected in that shiny thing next to it?”
“What?” Archie repeated, guiltily yanking his eyes off the full-length mirror they’d automatically drifted to—the same full-length mirror he’d been watching for an insane amount of time now, because if you stood at the exact angle he was currently standing at, you could see a certain overstuffed armchair where a certain small, dark-haired, incredibly amazing person sat talking to a certain overly-attentive captain of a certain football team. “I wasn’t—I mean, I’m not…”

“Oh, save your breath.” His friend tsked sympathetically. “There’s no need for lies.”

Wonderful.

“Is it that obvious?” Archie muttered, gritting his teeth when Reggie leaned over and said something to Veronica that made her pinch her lips together the way she always did when she wanted to laugh but was refusing to give someone the satisfaction.

“Well, yes,” Kevin answered casually. “But then, I’m a cop’s kid. We’re sort of forced to learn lie-spotting at an early age. Safety first, and all that. Also, I don’t know if anyone’s ever told you this, but you basically suck at lying.”

“Thanks.” Great, now Reggie had on that smirk he wore whenever he thought he was getting somewhere. Was Veronica actually going for this, or was it just the Mantle Ego being blind as a bat and mistaking annoyance for interest?

“No problem.” Kevin let a few moments of silence pass before clearing his throat. “Okay, this is going to make me sound creepily like Betty when she’s poking her nose into stuff that is so none of her business, but it has to be said. Archie, you and Veronica splitting up—what the hell? That is so totally, totally stupid.”

Archie groaned, squeezing a hand against the back of his neck in an effort to relax the taut muscles. “Yeah, well…not really.”

“Yes, really!”

“No, Kev. It makes sense,” he insisted, the heavy feeling in his stomach that had been present ever since he’d stood alone in the Whyte Wyrm parking lot watching that stupid car pull away intensifying. “She doesn’t lo—uh, doesn’t feel the way about me that I feel about her.”

“What, are you kidding me?” Mouth open, Kevin stared at him. “Dude. Have you seen you two making out at school? Wait, never mind.” He made a face, waving off Archie’s attempt to answer. “That’s a dumb question. The point is—yes, she does. Veronica’s as crazy about you as you are about her. How can you not see that?”

Archie’s eyes slid automatically toward the mirror. Reggie was gone now, so that was a relief, but the sight of Veronica laughing and whispering with Josie sent a sharp pang through him and he quickly looked away.

“I don’t know,” he said, turning toward his friend again, “but…but if that’s true, then why can’t she tell me? If she really does care about me the way I care about her, why is it so freaking hard for her to say?”

“Because it’s Veronica!” Kevin answered, throwing his hands up as though it were obvious. “She’s not you, or me, or Betty, or heck, even Jughead. She doesn’t just say stuff. She’s a—a doer, not a talker. And not to be that guy, but you’ve met her parents, right?”

“Yeah, but—”
“My God, you people are exhausting,” Kevin grumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers. “Okay, look at it this way, Archie: Veronica Lodge could get pretty much any guy in school if she wanted him. She’s smart, hot, funny, rich, really nice once you get to know her, and she’s a cheerleader. You are not her only option, and she’s savvy enough to know that. So, think about it…why would she waste one millisecond of her time on you if she didn’t care?”

Now there was a question he’d been asking himself since Day One. Why Veronica had ever shown any interest in him was a mystery he’d been too afraid to try solving since the moment he first laid eyes on her. She was so completely and totally out of his league that it had kind of scared him to think about all the millions of ways he could screw things up and make her so tired of dealing with him that she walked away and left him with a giant hole in the heart that hadn’t even existed until he met her, and then hey! He had.

Surprise, surprise.

“It isn’t because of—all right look, I know she cares,” Archie explained, his mind darting back to countless conversations he’d had with her on things he hadn’t even realized he was worrying about until she asked. “At least…I think she does. That’s not what this is about.”

“Okay, so…” Kevin folded his arms. “What is it about, then? The degree to which you think she cares?”

“No—yes…I don’t know.” He rubbed the heel of his hand restlessly against his forehead, trying to come up with the best way to describe something he wasn’t sure he himself fully understood. “I just…I don’t want to go back to the we’re-just-friends thing, Kev, but if she’s never going to feel the same way about me as I feel about her, what’s the point? She’ll just leave later on, and yeah, sure, it’s bad now, but it’ll be a thousand times worse then. I don’t like losing people I care about, and…”

He shook his head, a weird, dull ache filling his chest as Veronica’s light laugh pealed out. “I really, really don’t think I can stand losing her. If being just friends is what it takes to keep her in my life, then what else am I supposed to do?”

“Archie.” Heaving a sigh, Kevin clapped him on the shoulder. “This is…so far out of my area of expertise that it’s not even funny. I mean, I’m one thousand percent eliminating therapist-slash-grief counselor from my list of future career options as we speak. But here’s something I do know: you and Veronica? You like each other. A lot. You care about each other. Also a lot. And so far, you’ve both been terrible at trying to do the whole ‘just friends’ thing. It was kind of funny to watch it all go down last year, but now it’s just ridiculous.”

Archie frowned. Terrible? Ridiculous? “But we were just friends last year,” he pointed out. “I mean, we kissed right off the bat, and yeah, I thought she was pretty amazing, but we were definitely—”

“No, you weren’t,” Kevin interrupted calmly. “I was there. I saw things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, for starters, I witnessed you guys keeping tabs on the other’s dating life.” He gave his head a shake. “FYI, no one does the beating-around-the-bush thing you guys did if they actually are ‘just friends.’ Not to that extent, anyway. Secondly, you two flirted. In front of me, around me, sometimes right over the top of me, which is both rude and hard to miss.”

Archie snorted. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, you should be,” Kevin grimaced. “Watching your friends do that is a special kind of weird. But anyhow, the way I see it, it all boils down to two choices: you can either A, risk getting hurt by
the person you really want, or B, spend the rest of your life trying to find a substitute so you can pretend said substitute is her.” Picking up his glass, he gave a shrug. “It’s your call, but if you ask me, categorizing girls as Veronica and Not Veronica doesn’t seem very fair. To anyone.”

“I don’t categorize—” Archie began, but the other boy shot him a disgusted look and he thought better of it. “Okay, maybe I do a little bit, but it’s…”

Kevin raised an eyebrow. “It’s…?” he pressed.

Archie sighed, slumping against the wall as the truth slammed into him with the force of a two hundred and eighty pound DE busting through the line. “It’s Veronica,” he muttered, humiliatingly conscious of how pathetic he sounded.

“As I suspected.” Checking over his shoulder as a group of partygoers wandered into the hall carrying a tower of the little cups, Kevin lowered his voice to a loud whisper. “Now. I’m still aware that this is none of my business, but are you going to hang around here brooding, or go and talk to her?”

In spite of himself, Archie had to chuckle. “Okay, Kev. She’s busy talking to Josie right now, but as soon as she looks like she’s done, I promise I’ll go talk to her. I don’t know what the hell I’ll say,” he added, feeling his palms grow sweaty at the thought, “but…I’ll go. So you can chill on the relationship advice.”

“Thank God.” Kevin made a face before chugging the rest of his drink. “’Cause this life and love stuff is beyond me. How has Oprah managed all these years? It’s very draining.”

***

“So, what then? Are you going to go talk to him?”

“Who now?” Taking a casual sip of punch, Veronica wrinkled her nose as a bitter, heavily smoke-infused aftertaste flooded her tongue. “Ugh. Do you know if anyone, and by anyone I mean Reggie, put something in this? It smacks strongly of what my chardonnay-worshipping tastebuds believe is whiskey, and that’s just wrong on so many different levels.”

“Oh, I’m sure he did,” her friend answered, rolling her eyes at the noisiest corner of the room where the person in question sat telling loud, low-quality jokes to anyone willing to lend half an ear. Smoothing her hands over the skirt of her flame-colored dress, Josie sat carefully down on the arm of Veronica’s chair. “But let’s forget about Mr. Egomaniac for a sec. Lord knows we’ve listened to him enough for one night.”

“Hear, hear.” Veronica tapped the decidedly tacky plastic receptacle the Five Seasons’ catering staff had the nerve to call a ‘glass’ against Josie’s, faking a yawn before she took another sip. “Although, before we abandon the subject completely, I feel I should warn you…Captain Subtlety has been eyeing you and that mistletoe all night.”

“Humph,” Josie snorted, sounding unimpressed. “Was that before or after he was hitting on you?”

“Both. And during,” Veronica added, chuckling as she recalled the way that would-be Narcissus’ gaze kept straying to her friend. “I think our illustrious Bulldog just might have a not-so-secret crush on you.”

“Ugh.” Flicking her hand in a graceful but dismissive wave, Josie took a dainty slurp of tainted punch. “I was afraid of this. We make out one time, and now he’s slinking around acting like he actually thinks we might be a thing? I thought I made it crystal clear to him the last time we talked
that he is so not my type, but...I guess it’s harder to get ideas through that thick skull than I expected. Maybe all that hair product has finally soaked through to his brain.”

Veronica laughed, slouching back comfortably against the cool leather. “Well,” she commented, drumming out a little rhythm on the Josie-less arm of her seat, “if you decide to do a little carpe diem-ing, I certainly won’t judge. He’s no academic scholarship waiting to happen, but he can be a lot of fun, and fun’s a bit tricky to come by in Riverdale these days.”

“Girl, uh-uh.” Wagging a perfectly-manicured finger, Josie shuddered dramatically. “That is not a place we’re going anytime soon. And oh, just so you know…” She leaned over, sending a nonchalant glance toward the hall. “This pussycat can’t be distracted with a whole lot of razzle-dazzle. You’re going to have to put a little more effort into the red herrings if you want me to lose the scent.”

“Pardon?” Veronica said, cocking an eyebrow even though she knew exactly what her friend meant. “Scent? Is Chanel suddenly and mysteriously objectionable to you? Because if so, I’m afraid this could very well be the grounds on which our friendship is destroyed.”

Josie sighed. “Your boy, V. Your boy. Are you going to go talk to him, or just hang around here watching him mope in corners all night?”

“He’s not my boy, Josie,” Veronica reminded her, sternly repressing the sharp little pang she experienced every time she saw or thought about Archie now. “Not anymore.”

“Oh, blah, blah, blah. Spare me the feeble excuses, Helena Heartbreaker.”

Veronica’s teeth clenched as a heavily made-up, flashily-dressed, perfume-drenched redhead appeared (seemingly from nowhere, as was her wont, so maybe materialized was the better description) on the other side of the chair.

“Hello, Cheryl,” she said with exaggerated brightness, smiling blandly up at the newcomer. “Fancy meeting you here. I trust you’re enjoying the evening?”

“Sheathe the sarcasm and save the clumsy subject-changes for amateur hour, Mata Hari. I can spot someone swimming in denial from lightyears away; you need my input.” Tossing back her long hair, Cheryl hip-nudged Veronica’s hand out of the way and perched herself atop the other arm of the chair. “First, nobody here is dumb enough to actually believe you two are over. Rumor has it you were seen conversing with your supposedly ex-Romeo outside the boys’ locker room just two days ago, after which highly-indicative event, neither of you was accounted for. For about...an hour. Suspicious? I agree.”

“We moved to a classroom because I wanted to give him his gift—not a double entendre, by the by—and people kept staring,” Veronica informed her, annoyance rising. “Sorry to disappoint, but that’s literally all there is to that story.”

Cheryl shrugged. “Whatever. General opinion currently says that you two did it on top of the lockers, after which you broke up. Again. And since he apparently can’t stop looking at you like a little wounded puppy shivering in the rain it was ruthlessly kicked out into, about half the student body thinks it’s your fault and expects you both to rendezvous at some point this evening. I believe Doiley’s taking bets on it at this very moment.”

Of course.

Veronica’s fake smile tightened. “Thank you, Cheryl. Always nice to hear what idle gossip the
“Come on, V.” Josie gave her a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. “It’s Riverdale. Somebody’s always going to be running their big, fat mouth when they only have like half the story.”

“Exactly!” Cheryl put in vehemently. “Besides, the entirety of Riverdale High has been watching you two maniacs suck face for the last few months. Did you honestly think there wouldn’t be gossip when you returned from a weekend shrouded in Serpent-tainted mystery and all anyone heard was that suddenly A and V were no more? Puh-leeze. That’s like dropping raw meat in front of a pack of starving wolves and expecting them to leave it alone.”

Crossing her arms, Veronica heaved a noisy sigh. “Not to imply that I’m finding this delightful exchange in any way tiresome, but do you have a point to make, Cheryl?”

“But of course.” Draping herself artistically over the greater part of the chair’s back, Cheryl affected a sympathetic smile. “Veronica, seeing as how I played a small but crucial role in getting you and Troy Bolton together in the first place, I feel a certain sense of… responsibility where you two lovebirds are concerned.”

Veronica rolled her eyes, choosing to ignore rather than acknowledge the pesky curtain of hair that now dangled obnoxiously—and, she felt sure, deliberately—in her face. “How touching. I’m holding back tears as we speak.”

“Glad to hear it.” A four-inch red and gold heel bobbed up and down in time with yet another version of *Sleigh Ride*, and Cheryl gave a delicate cough. “Now. As both your semi-accidental matchmaker and fellow Vixen, I feel duty-bound to offer my humble services in helping you fix this irksome mess with Archie so that you can both go back to being the adorable couple we all know and love-slash-gag-at. How may I be of assistance?”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Veronica answered, restraining herself just before she made a desperate, involuntary clutch at Josie’s arm. The idea of the head River Vixen wading into a matter like this was enough to give anyone nightmares for a week. “Archie and I are still friends, so there’s really nothing to be fixed.”

“Little awkward?” Cheryl interrupted, her astonishment positively hyperbolic. “Please. You two have almost singlehandedly contrived to ruin this already ill-timed festive gathering, and the only reason I say almost is because Johnny and Kathie over there look like a couple of community-theater rejects trying to emote.”

Following Cheryl’s point, Veronica caught sight of Betty over by the refreshments table wiping up splotches of spilled salad dressing, straightening stacks of paper napkins, and throwing mournful glances toward the corner where Jughead lounged whenever he wasn’t doing the exact same thing (minus the cleaning up, of course) toward her.

“For heaven’s sake, Cheryl, they’re just looking at each other,” she said, although she privately agreed with the other girl’s description. All Betty lacked to complete the picture of theatrical woe
was the lace handkerchief, Jughead a fist to the brow. “If their pain nauseates you, look away.”

“I will not,” came the uncompromising answer. “This pining-lovers routine you four have going on is annoying, stomach-turning, and must be stopped before the rest of us get dragged into your depressing little web of teenage sadness. Just look at that revolting display of cow-eyes. Have you ever seen anything so disgusting?”

Veronica didn’t bother to track the direction of this head-tilt. She had no desire to take another gander at how her friends were struggling to cope. The demise of their relationship was like a painful echo, or maybe a mirror image of the one she hated even thinking about, and she doubted she could play witness to any more of their melancholic brand of mourning without obliterating what little holiday spirit she’d been able to muster.

“Well, I can’t vouch for Betty and Jughead,” she deadpanned, tapping a foot impatiently, “but Archie and I have an understanding. What went down between us…it’s in the past now, and we want to still be friends.”

Cheryl inspected her nails. “Everyone says that. But never in the history of ever has anyone actually meant it.” Perfectly-curled, mascara-caked falsies drew together as she narrowed her eyes. “Do you?”

Veronica frowned. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Oh. Well.” Instead of answering, Cheryl launched herself upright, fluffed her hair, and straightened her figure-hugging skirt with an unnecessarily pronounced wiggle. “I believe I’m going to go locate Archie and pull him under the mistletoe. The poor thing looks like he could use some cheering up and since you’re no longer into him, it seems a shame to let all that emotional vulnerability go to waste. You don’t mind, do you, Veronica?”

Even though she knew she was being baited in the most overt manner possible, Veronica stiffened. “Whether or not I mind is immaterial,” she answered a little more sharply than she’d intended. “Archie’s the one whose permission you should be asking.”

“Huh. You know what? You’re absolutely right. I think I’ll go ask him right now.” Cocking a hip, Cheryl turned away with her usual flourish. “Feel free to stop me if you object,” she called back over her shoulder. “Going once. Going twice…”

Veronica rolled her eyes. “What?” she asked when she intercepted a raised-eyebrow stare from Josie.

“You’re not going to make a flying leap out of this chair to stop her?”

“And why would I do that?” Swirling the burgundy liquid around in her cup as Cheryl vanished into the hallway, Veronica plastered on her very best Butter-Won’t-Melt-In-My-Mouth smile. “Cheryl’s allowed to go under the mistletoe with whomever she chooses. As is Archie. Didn’t we just establish that?”

“Yeah,” Josie snorted, “we did. In a way. But how about you?”

“What about me?” she responded, silently scolding herself when she realized she was straining to hear voices in the hall.

“V.” Uncrossing her legs, Josie leaned forward, voice dropping. “What I mean is, you say it’s good and you say you guys are just friends, but are you seriously gonna expect me to buy that you’re ready to sit here and watch Cheryl stick her tongue down your boy’s throat?”
“For the last time, Archie is not ‘my boy.’ And anyway, she wouldn’t—”

Veronica broke off as common sense sailed in and gave her a swift kick in the teeth. Cheryl would go that far, and all three of them knew it. That was exactly what Cheryl was counting on. Even if, as Veronica sensed, the other girl’s actions stemmed from a genuine desire to help mend a broken relationship—and God only knew what slimy pit that noble motivation had escaped from—the means by which the ends were supposedly going to be justified were appalling.

Still, she balked at the thought of intervening. It really wasn’t her place to do or say anything seeing as how she was the one who’d kindamaybesorta pulled the plug on their relationship. And really, how would Archie feel about his ex-girlfriend interrupting a tryst beneath the kissing bough after she’d made such a point of them staying friendly?

As if on cue, Cheryl reappeared, talking ninety miles an hour and all but dragging a confused and semi-frightened-looking Archie behind her as she made a beeline for the little sprig of green dangling near the center of the room.

“Hello?” Josie demanded. “Do you not see this? She’ll do it. If you snooze, V, you will lose.”

“Damn it,” Veronica muttered, standing hastily and passing her drink into her friend’s waiting hand. “Well, here goes nothing.”


“Yep. Thanks. It’s a medical fact that embarrassment can’t kill you, right?”

Without waiting for reply, Veronica set off across the floor. The desire to turn tail and run increased with every stride, but she refused to acknowledge its useless existence. Now wasn’t the time for cowardice. The objective here was to keep Archie from becoming the casualty of a bluffing war between herself and Cheryl, and she intended to accomplish that objective if she died in the process.

“Excuse me,” she said loudly when she caught up to both abductor and unwitting abductee. “Sorry to interrupt, but—”

“Oh, Veronica! Fancy meeting you here.” Radiating waves of pure triumph, Cheryl’s blood-red lips turned up in a slow, impossibly smug smirk. “What a pleasant surprise. Was the view from the chair getting a little too thrilling for your taste?”

“All right, Cheryl,” Veronica snapped, folding her arms as she tried hard to not let the person standing less than a foot away with his eyes on her rattle her composure. “You win.”

“Aww.” The redhead fanned her eyes, somehow managing to simultaneously flip a long strand of hair back over her shoulder. “Music to my bejeweled ears. Double A?”

“Me?” Archie said rather blankly, a visible shudder passing through him when Cheryl ran a hand up his arm and over his shoulder. “I mean, yes?”

“Change of plans. I won’t be needing your help after all.” Blowing a kiss in his direction, Cheryl turned away, her smirk now nothing short of sinister. “But, never fear. Veronica will fill you in. Isn’t that right, Veronica?” she murmured as she departed in a veritable cloud of perfume and victory.

“Yes,” Veronica muttered, mentally cursing Cheryl Blossom and her penchant for orchestrating over-the-top spectacles. “Apparently, it is.”

“Um…okay.” Scratching the back of his neck awkwardly, Archie coughed out a laugh. “What was
Veronica shook her head. “Nothing. Or everything, depending on how you look at it.” Seeing his bewildermment, she sighed. “Archie…” Oh, God. How was she supposed to do this? “Can I talk to you for a minute?” she blurted out finally, risking a glance upward only to immediately drop her gaze when she found him already watching her with that look in his eyes that sent hordes of energetic butterflies fluttering through her stomach. “Not here, I mean?”

“Yeah. Sure,” he answered quickly. “Uh, where do you want to go?”

“Ideally? Through the floor, never to return. Realistically?”

“Maybe the hall?” she suggested in what she hoped was a passably-casual voice.

He nodded, motioning for her to lead on in the direction he’d come from. But when they left the bustling party behind, it became apparent that the carpeted corridor was out of the question. It was already playing host to several drunkenly-making out couples and a noisy game of improvised bowling (evidently the plastic cups had not gone entirely unappreciated), so they agreed to head for the terrace instead.

Which, Veronica realized upon pushing open the imposing French doors, presented an entirely new set of difficulties.

“Oh, right,” she remarked wryly. “Christmas. Winter.” Good heavens, was she really so distracted that she’d actually forgotten the need to grab a coat? “Isn’t that just…perfect?”

“Holy crap,” Archie muttered as they stepped out onto the stone pavilion and a huge blast of icy wind buffeted them. “Here, Veronica…”

Before she could wonder, let alone ask what he meant, something warm flopped over her shoulders and she looked down to discover his suit jacket draped crookedly over her, the musky scent of that awful cologne he wore washing over her—along with the unheralded realization that she’d missed that dreadfully woodsy fragrance.

“Archie,” she protested, his kindness impacting her as much as an actual, physical blow, “you don’t have to—"

“Nah, it’s fine.” Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he gave her a small, slightly-chilled smile. “Pretty sure you need it more than I do right now.”

Considering the inadequate protection a black velvet mini-dress afforded against the elements she had to agree, but it made her frown just the same. What if he got sick or something because she’d been too foolish to remember her coat?

“Hey.” His arm nudged hers, and she looked up in time to catch another mini-grin. “I’m fine, Ronnie.”

“Okay.” She smiled back cautiously. “If you say so.”

Tucking her hand into the crook of his arm—because old habits died hard—she led him over to the far corner of the terrace where a mold-green, snow-sprinkled statue of what she assumed was meant to be Poseidon presided over a lot of lifeless plants in enormous terracotta pots. A huge, ancient-looking tree sheltered this portion of the space, the thick, twisting branches overhead forming a sort of roof that prevented all but the most determined of flurries from sneaking through and landing on the rickety little bench below.
“Here.” Brushing a mixture of dried leaves and snow off the wooden surface, Veronica seated herself carefully and gestured for Archie to do the same. “If you insist on being all gentlemanly, you can at least do it where it’s marginally warmer,” she joked, crossing her legs as extra protection against the cold. “Just…keep a weather eye out for spiders. My luck, there’ll be a nest nearby and they’ll want to pay a call en masse.”

He chuckled, lowering himself down beside her. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Silence blanketed the two of them as they sat surveying the frosty landscape, and despite the deep, pervasive chill of the outdoors, Veronica felt oddly content. Thick, furry snowflakes drifted lazily through the air as if dancing to the faint strains of music spilling from the slightly-open doors. Off in the distance gleamed Christmas lights, their fairy twinkles lighting up the shadowy-est of shadows like a bunch of multicolored stars embedded in the night sky. Her cheeks stung. Her nose ached. She was positive that she’d wake up tomorrow afternoon with no voice and a wicked head-cold, but none of that seemed to matter. Archie was here with her, and if things between them weren’t what they had been, at least it felt that way for a moment. God, what if it was a mistake to mess with this? What if she tried to say what it was she’d crossed that room to say in the first place and ended up ruining everything even more?

There was no chance to dwell on the potential for mishaps, though. Before she could decide on the best course of action, Archie had shifted toward her and she realized with a flash of nervous energy that it might already be too late.

“So.”

“Hmm?” she said, feigning ignorance in the hopes of stalling him long enough to regain at least some semblance of normality. “So what?”

“So, I…” He cleared his throat. Shifting around, the look of the monumentally uncomfortable on his face, he ran a hand through his hair. “Uh, what did you need to talk to me about? Because I kind of needed to tell you something, too, but if…”

“Oh?” Stomach churning, she twisted around so that her body was angled toward him. Now that they were here she could feel her courage deserting again, but though it infuriated her, there wasn’t much she could do about it. “Do you want to go first?” she heard herself asking as if from a great distance. “I can wait.”

“No! No, it’s fine,” he answered right away, his laugh still uneasy. “You can go first. I mean, if, if…”

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“She nodded, relief flooding through her. “Go ahead.”

“Right.” He stayed quiet for a long, awkward moment, then sighed. “So. I was with Kevin a little while ago, and we were talking. About the party and, and…some other things.”

“Yes. No.” Releasing a groan, he squeezed his eyes shut for a second or two. “Okay. You know what, if you don’t mind, can I…?”

She nodded, relief flooding through her. “Go ahead.”

“Right.” He stayed quiet for a long, awkward moment, then sighed. “So. I was with Kevin a little while ago, and we were talking. About the party and, and…some other things.”

“Okay.” The connection between those points escaped her, but maybe he intended to clarify everything in a minute? “That’s...good, I guess. I’m glad you guys had fun.”

“Yeah, we did, and it—well, it got me thinking.”
She nodded again, watching in mild fascination as he squirmed around on their minuscule seat. He was obviously feeling weird about introducing his main point, but as much as she wanted to make him hurry up and spit out whatever it was he had to say, she couldn’t bring herself to do it. His adorable bumbling was one of the little idiosyncrasies she’d found herself missing most during their time apart, except, oh God, what if he danced around said point for so long that she failed to get the words out yet again?

Suddenly tense, she laid a hand on his forearm. “Archie—”

“What?” he asked immediately, confusion galloping across his face. “Are you okay? Are you warm enough? Did I say something wrong?”

“Archie.” Her fingers tightened gently around his arm and she shook her head, a smile sneaking out. “You haven’t said anything yet. Which to be honest, I’m going to need you to either do soon or let me have the floor, because this weather is majorly sapping my willpower.”

“Right, um…okay. I’ll hurry.” Taking what might possibly have been the deepest breath she’d ever heard another person take, Archie turned his arm so that his hand now gripped her forearm, too. “Veronica, what I’ve been wanting to tell you is that I really do get why you couldn’t…couldn’t say it, you know?”

“Mhmm,” she said quietly. The night in front of the fireplace and the night in that filthy parking lot were all but burned into her mind, but when she opened her mouth to tell him that, all that emerged was a feeble I…remember.

“Yeah.” He took another breath, this one shakier than the one preceding. “The thing is, I understood it then, too. I was just scared, and stupid, and so sure I was going to lose you that I—I don’t know. I panicked, I guess.”

Boy, did she ever know that feeling.

“Archie,” she put in quickly as he began rambling on about how idiotic he’d been and how sorry he was for all of it, “Archie listen to me, you don’t have to apologize any more than you’ve already done.”

“But—” he started.

“No.” She gave his arm a light shake, pulse accelerating when his gaze slid down to their joined arms and then back up to meet hers. “I get it, too.”

A puzzled frown cut into his forehead. “You do?”

“Yeah.” Nerves conquering mettle, she moved her hand away in order to reach up and tuck a wavy section of hair behind her ear. “You and I—we are totally different people, Archie. We don’t look at things the same way. You have this, this incredibly amazing capacity to…Love. The only word she really needed to say, and there it went eluding her all over again. “...to care,” she finished hastily, hoping he hadn’t noticed her little stumble. “And that’s what you do. Full throttle, no holds barred, one hundred and ten percent, you care. It’s who you are, and it’s beautiful.”

“Thanks,” he said, both looking and sounding uncertain. “But…?”

A sigh billowed out of her, forming a tiny puff of white in the frigid air. “But it’s not me. I’m just not like that. In my experience, people don’t do nice things out of the goodness of their hearts. That’s not how the world works.”
The confused frown deepened. “What do you mean?” he asked.

Unbidden, her hand crept up to the perfectly-shaped teardrop pearl that dangled at her throat on a delicate gold chain—an early Christmas present from her parents the year she hadn’t wanted to attend Daddy’s annual work-party and they needed her there, smiling and pleasant, to complete the perfect family image—and she winced.

“I mean that no matter what fabulous gift you’ve been given or who it’s from, there’s always a string or two attached,” she answered, trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice as she ran a fingertip around the little pendant’s smooth circumference. “It’s just a question of how long it’ll take you to discover what those strings are, and knowing that…it doesn’t exactly make it easy to let other people in.” Seeing him flinch, her fingers tightened on the pearl. “Not even when you really, really want to.”

“Veronica, I—” he started, then broke off abruptly. “Uh, no, never mind.”

“What?” she questioned, something in his face awakening a ripple of hopeful anxiety within her. “Why never mind? What did you want to say?”

“Nothing! Nothing,” he assured her, although his follow-up smile only heightened her suspicions since no part of it touched his eyes. “I just…I thought I should say that I’m sorry if it seemed like I was avoiding you at the party. I didn’t mean to. I’m actually really glad we decided to just be friends.”

Oh.

Disappoint landing on her like one of those cartoon boulders that were forever flattening Wile E. Coyote, Veronica donned a wide, fake smile of her own. So, apparently, she was the only one here nursing regrets deep enough to make her want to try again. God, why on earth had she listened to Cheryl and Josie? She and Archie hadn’t broken up because of some stupid little He never texts me back! tiff—she’d hurt him, and deeply, because she was too damn terrified to admit what she was even more terrified of feeling. She really, really should have known better than to let herself hope she could repair that kind of damage and get things back to how they were before with a simple Whoops, my bad. Yet, here she was. She could always give it a try, right?

No, her brain whispered back. You do that, you might end the friendship and make it so that you two never speak to each other again. Is that what you want?

She swallowed hard. “Me, too,” she said brightly. “I enjoy our being friends. Isn’t that a coincidence?”

“Yeah.”

For what felt like an interminable amount of time, they sat quietly, each of them looking everywhere but at the other. The silence, now oppressive rather than comforting, taunted Veronica until she could stand it no longer. Folding her arms, she gave a shiver that even the boy who sat next to her with his eyes on the ground couldn’t fail to catch.

“You know I loathe being the party pooper, but I think we’d better head back in,” she told him, standing abruptly. “This cold isn’t doing either of us any favors, and if we stay out here much longer, we’ll be able to clothe entire kingdoms in the lies the Riverdale rumor mill will spin.”

He nodded, a funny sort of smile on his face as he stood, too. “Haters gonna hate, Ronnie.”

“True.” She tried to laugh, but the reaction got tangled up with an inexplicably powerful wave of emotion, and the whole thing ended up emerging as an odd, laugh-cough hybrid that grated on her
ears. “Still, I don’t want to give them the pleasure of providing fuel for any more of their smallminded fires.”

“Yeah, same here.” He paused suddenly, head tilted back as he stared up into the maze of branches above them. “Course, they’ll probably just go ah—oh.”

Veronica frowned. “Go a-hoe?” she inquired. “Is that some possibly offensive, possibly garden-related Riverdale slang I know nothing about, or is something wrong?”

He hesitated, then shook his head. “It’s nothing.”

“Really?” Brows lifted, she pulled the blazer closer by the lapels and re-crossed her arms for extra warmth. “That’s your second ‘nothing’ of the night. Now, is it nothing nothing, or just nothing you want to say in front of me? Because if it’s the first, all right, cool, let’s go inside. But if it’s the second, you don’t have to feel weird about it. You know you can tell me anything.”

“Right, yeah. I know, I just…” He shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, eyes fixed on her in a way that told her he was having an inner wrestling match with himself as he tried to decide whether or not he should say whatever it was he had to say. Finally, he sighed.

“Well?” she prompted gently. “What is it?”

“It’s….” He trailed off, rubbing both hands over his face. Then, without warning, he leaned forward and kissed her softly on the cheek. “Merry Christmas, Ronnie.”

What?

Stunned, she stood as if rooted to the spot, staring at him like an idiot while the little oval area his lips had contacted tingled like crazy. “Archie? What was—”

“Mistletoe.” The word was delivered at just above a whisper, and he pointed up toward a shriveled clump of faded greeny-brown caught in the crook of a lower branch twelve feet or so above them. “I—I’m sorry. I saw it, and I just…you know? Oh, God.” He huffed out a humorless laugh, the tips of his ears reddening fiercely. “I’m so sorry. It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

“Yeah, I know.” Head spinning, Veronica gulped in a breath of icy air. “Neither does this.”

Before he could continue the frantic apologies, she reached down and caught hold of his hand, lifting it up between them. Heart thumping, she pressed her lips to the base of his fingers, hoping—even—that she could somehow find the words to make him understand.

“But it does,” she said quietly when she finally pulled away, feeling like she’d just run a mile in record-breaking time. “Doesn’t it?”

“Ronnie…”

“No, Archie,” she interrupted, squeezing his hand. “Please. I have to say this now, or I don’t think I’ll be able to. I’m scared, okay? Hugely. That’s my problem.”

“Okay. So, why?” he asked steadily, bending to peer into her face as his fingers twined around hers. “Why are you scared, hugely? What is that’s scaring you?”

“You,” she mumbled.

“Me?” he repeated incredulously.
“Yes.”

“Okay, why?”

Gathering up every scrap of courage she possessed, she stole a glance at him and caught her breath. She’d never known anyone who wore their heart on their sleeve quite so obviously as he did, and here he was again, looking at her with that warm, hopeful, downright adoring spark in his eyes even while she was blathering on senselessly about being scared.

(And, unsurprisingly, here she was again with her stomach performing a series of fantastic, cirque du soleil-worthy contortions.)

“I’m not used to feeling like this about someone,” she whispered, silently pleading with him to understand. “I don’t know how to act, I don’t know what to do, and that—that scares me. Horribly. And when I’m scared, I try extra-hard to protect myself, and if I can’t out-and-out fight whatever’s scaring me, I…tend to run away.” Taking another breath, she let go of his hand and reached up to trace the edge of his jaw. “I’m not very good at putting what I feel into words, Archie. Not for things like this. But it doesn’t mean I don’t feel.”

Silence descended on them once more, and with a sudden stab of fear, Veronica wondered whether or not she’d explained herself clearly. But then a tiny little smile spread over Archie’s face and he leaned down again, his lips achingly warm as they brushed against hers. The first kiss was slow, tentative, questioning, and wonderful; the second merely slow and wonderful. By the third kiss, her fingers were burrowing themselves into the thick hair near the nape of his neck, he had both arms hooked around her waist, and the coldness barely registered as she stood on tiptoe, clinging to him as if her life depended on it.

And in a way, she thought dizzily, his every touch sending shockwaves through her, maybe it did. Not in some melodramatic, can’t-eat, can’t-sleep, can’t-breathe-without-you kind of way of course, just a my-world-is-missing-something-good-without-you-in-it kind of way. Because when she and Archie were together, life somehow felt a little less hopeless than the bleak portrait common sense and bitter experience tended to paint. She didn’t understand why—couldn’t even begin to—but something in his sweet-yet-roguish, thoughtless-but-considerate nature struck a chord in hers, and she found herself drawn to him like a magnet. He was just so…so Archie, and she loved that.

No, not that. She loved him. And she was going to tell him. Right after this kiss.

Or maybe the next one.

Or possibly the one after that?

When they finally broke apart, Veronica opened her eyes to find him staring down at her with that look again, and she couldn’t help it. She giggled, pressing her forehead against the smooth, stiff cotton of his shirtfront for a moment before leaning back to look up at him.

“So, wait. I’m confused,” she teased. “Are we still just friends?”

Archie burst out laughing, the happy sound reverberating off the host of stonework that surrounded them as he wrapped both arms around her.

“Well, according to Kevin, we’ve never been just friends,” he answered, swaying them back and forth in time to the distant tune of Silver Bells. “I’m kinda starting to think he may be right.”

“Yeah, me too.” Tipping her head up to meet his kiss, she chuckled. “Of course, I wouldn’t mention that to him. The praise might go to his head.”
“Maybe. Still.” Grinning widely, he moved a hand up and twirled a snow-speckled piece of her hair around his finger. “I think I kind of have to thank him for this one. I was definitely going to spend the night feeling sorry for myself and wanting to talk to you, but not ever actually talking to you.”

She sighed. “And I should probably thank Cheryl and Josie.” Seeing his bewildered expression, she rolled her eyes. “Long story. Josie kept telling me I should go talk to you, and Cheryl was going to take you under the mistletoe for an intense makeout sesh if I didn’t woman up and admit that I…”

“Come on, you idiot, just say it already!” “That I love you.”

His face wrinkled. “Oh, wow. Then I guess I should really thank you for—wait, what?” There was dead silence for a second or two, then his arms tightened around her. “Ronnie, did you…?”

“Yes,” she blurted, giddy with relief now that the confession was finally out in the open. “Archie, I—I’m the actual worst at this; it makes me feel stupid and vulnerable which I completely and totally hate, but…” Cupping her hands around his face, she beamed up at him until her cheeks ached with the width of her smile. “I love you.”

If she’d thought his grin huge before, it was nothing compared to the one he wore now as he bent down until they were eye to eye, their foreheads and noses squashed comfortably together.

“I love you, too,” he murmured, bringing his lips down on hers with a gentleness both invigorating and knee-weakening. “So much. And I’m sorry I acted like that. I thought I was going to lose you, and it was like I just couldn’t shut my stupid mouth, and then—”

“Hey.” A little breathlessly, she stretched up and planted a firm kiss on him. “Forget it. Water under the bridge and all that jazz. Plus, I think I gave as good as I got, so why don’t we leave our rookie mistakes out here in the polar regions where they belong, and go inside where it’s warm and a whole pack of gossipers await?”

“Oh.” He smiled, repositioning the jacket that had half-slipped off her shoulders before reaching for her hand and tugging her toward the doors. “You’re sure?”

The question was light—playful, even—but Veronica caught the insecurity buried beneath the tone and understood the real inquiry at once. Leaning her cheek against his shoulder, she reached over with her free hand and gave his arm a quick squeeze.


“Uh…” His hearty laugh rang out, broadening her smile. “Honestly, I have no earthly idea.”

“Ooh. Considering that we had a test on Hamlet a week and a half ago, that’s not very encouraging,” she joked as they neared the doors. “Care to try again?”

“Okay, um…” He frowned in thought, hand resting on the door handle. “To be or not to be? Something about…Horatio?”

“Close.” Smiling up at him, she poked him very gently in the chest. “Doubt thou the stars are fire, Archiekins. Doubt that the sun doth move.” A laugh slipped out of her as he let go of the door and pulled her against him, his grin sappily blissful, and she traced a finger over and around his lips. “Doubt truth to be a liar…but never, ever doubt I love.”
*Title taken from “Holly Jolly Christmas” by Burl Ives, because it was Christmastime when I wrote this, and that was the first song that involved mistletoe that came to mind.
*Veronica’s taking some liberties with the Hamlet quote from Act 2: “Doubt thou the stars are fire/Doubt that the sun doth move/Doubt truth to be a liar/But never doubt I love” is the correct quote. In the grand scheme of life, it probably doesn’t matter whether or not I point this out, but the Shakespeare fan in me won’t let me rest easy unless I do :P
*Cheryl calling Jughead and Betty “Johnny and Kathie” is a reference to the Marlon Brando movie “The Wild One” because it was the first greaser-ish Romeo-Juliet type romance I could think of that wasn’t Danny and Sandy from Grease.
*Random notes on 2x10: As a rule, I don’t condone violence on already-injured persons. That being said, how satisfying was it to hear Archie’s “I am going to MURDER him” and then see him put that beatdown on Nick??? I may or may not have cheered and rewound both of those parts several times. I have never been so proud of my little fiercely protective baby! (Until he told Veronica about the kiss, that is. At that point, I was busting buttons.) And the ILYs were just the cherry on top <3
*Random notes on 2x11: Oh, man. I never realized how much I needed to see Archie and Hiram square off until it happened. I giggled my way through this ep; it reminded me so much of the comics, and watching Archie decide to poke the bear was both delightful and nerve-wracking. Also, “Thanks, babe,” “I took care of her while you were in prison” and that grin while he watched her sing??? *Hugs self*
*As aforementioned, I was sick over the holidays, so I didn’t get much editing done. I promise the prompts I’ve been working on for a while now are on their way, though! I’m SO sorry for the delay :(
*I’ve been bad about saying this and then not doing it, but I really am going to check and reply to comments later today (at the very least, I will try to), so feel free to tell/ask me whatever! Hope you’re all doing amazing, and that you all enjoyed the holidays! :D
The Magic 8-Ball Says 'Yes'

Chapter Summary

Fred Andrews thinks about Archie's relationship with Veronica.

**This one is a little disjointed/formatted differently because it's comprised of a lot of random thoughts I had after watching different episodes. I could never quite work them into one long, complete story, but this is the most complete A/V fic I have ready at the moment, so I decided to go ahead and upload. Also, it's the first non Archie/Veronica POV I've attempted, so apologies, because the tone doesn't sound much like Fred.

Chapter Notes

Based on a prompt I got a while back from Killthemalldaenerys :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Is Fred Andrews surprised to learn that his son is dating the only daughter of Hiram and Hermione Lodge?

No. Not at all. To say he is—even a little bit—would be a lie of the biggest and baldest-faced variety. Because while he doesn’t consider himself the best or most observant parent in the whole world, he isn’t blind. He isn’t deaf. Neither is he clueless or born yesterday. Archie is a good kid and Fred loves his son more than anything, but the basic fact of the matter is that the boy is no pro at the art of subtlety. (Actually, he’s not even an amateur. Novice is probably the most accurate description.) All the signs have been there since the very beginning, and as the year has worn on, Fred’s picked up quite a few clues with little to no effort.

Clue No. 1: Perceiving Patterns

Throughout the years, Archie’s had his fair share of crushes and mentioned his fair share of girls. But not really in the kind of way a parent would take seriously, and rarely more than two or three times. Within a week of Hermione and her daughter moving into the Pembrooke, however, the name Veronica is floating around the Andrews’ house enough to make even a slow-on-the-uptake dad like Fred take notice.

(Really, a complete and utter fool could decipher this kind of code. He can’t pat himself on the back for it at all.)

It starts simply, on the last day of summer vacation.

Archie (and Betty) met this girl at Pop’s. She just moved to Riverdale from New York, and she’s dreading the first day of school. They started talking when she asked him about onion rings and he told her they’re good, so she ordered some. She seems really nice. He invited her to join him (and
Betty), but her mom was waiting for her so she said no. Her name is Veronica Lodge.

As time progresses, it escalates.

Archie is going to go to the homecoming dance with Veronica (and Betty). Veronica called him over at practice and Betty asked if he wanted to go with them. He wasn’t too crazy about the idea at first, but Veronica kind of talked him into it. She’s the sort of person it’s hard to say no to. In a good way. Like—she’s joking, but she’s also dead serious, and you know you don’t have a chance of weaseling out of anything because she’s already onto you, so you just end up laughing and admitting defeat.

Very soon, it becomes like a matter of course.

Archie arrived late with the burgers and fries because he ran into Veronica at Pop’s and walked her home. It’s weird, because he hasn’t known her all that long but he ended up telling her kind of a lot of stuff about himself (and Betty). She’s just…easy to talk to. He’ll introduce her after the game on Friday, if he gets the chance. She’s cheering, so she’ll be there.

This last story is followed by a postscript: *You’ll like her, Dad. She’s really fun.*

And she is.

She’s also smart, pretty, and more than talkative enough to pull and keep Archie out of the shyness shell he sometimes retreats into.

Which gives Fred his second major clue.

**Clue No. 2: What’s In A Nickname?**

He notices it quickly—maybe five minutes after his son makes the official introductions at the field. It’s a cold, damp, somewhat miserable kind of night, but Archie’s mood seems unaffected by the lousy weather as he ushers a petite, dark-haired cheerleader through the noisy jumble of players, fans, and family members that are all milling around on the soggy turf now that the game’s over.

“Dad, this is Veronica Lodge.”

“Oh, Mr. Andrews! How do you do? I’ve heard so much about you!”

Fred narrowly escapes committing one of the worst Dad-crimes of all time, biting his tongue just before the word *Likewise* pops out of his mouth. Instead, he goes with *Nothing too terrible, I hope,* and chases that with a quick *Nice to meet you, Veronica.* Then he just sits back and takes in the show, marveling, as the two kids fall to discussing the evening, at how foreign the conversation and priorities of fifteen-year-olds seem from this side of thirty. They’re laughing and teasing each other about their appearances (Archie’s a happy, sweaty, stinky, mud-splattered and grass-stained mess that makes Fred seriously toy with the idea of throwing his son in the back of the truck bed for the ride home if only so he’s not smelling stale football player for the next week, and Veronica’s got mud-flecks on her face and a great big stripe of brown across her knee and calf that she says came from her ending pose in the fourth quarter routine). Fred’s already suspecting that there’s more going on here than meets the eye—maybe those rumors he overhead in the grocery store and at Pop’s about a certain party at the Blossoms aren’t as groundless as he originally thought—and then Veronica says something in a low tone that makes Archie throw back his head and howl with laughter.

That’s when it happens. The first nickname.
Archie’s still chortling over whatever joke has just been made—holding his stomach, wiping his eyes, insisting there’s no way such a thing ever happened, that Veronica has to be making it up, and Veronica, laughing right along with him, gives him a businesslike (and maybe even unconscious) pat on the arm.

“Not at all,” she says in an airy voice, head tilting back as she smiles blindingly up at him. “That’s the gospel truth, Archiekins.”

Fred doesn’t catch the reply, or the rest of the conversation for that matter, because he’s too busy trying to keep his eyebrows from soaring straight to the top of his head.

Because Archiekins?

Well. That’s a new one.

The urge to laugh is strong, but he holds himself in check and resolves to ask—casually, of course—on the way home how that crazy moniker got its start.

So he does, and five blocks from the Andrews’ house is when the second nickname happens.

“I don’t actually know,” Archie says in response to the question. “She called me that this one time as kind of a joke, and it just sort of stuck, I guess.”

“Oh.” Fred glances away from the road for a second to sneak a peek over at his son. “So I guess I should be prepared to hear Reggie and Moose calling you that, huh? Sheesh. Not sure I’m ready for that experience.”

Archie bursts out laughing. “No, Dad. I don’t think you have to worry about anything like that. Ronnie’s like the one person on the planet who could ever manage to call me that with a straight face. I think it’s a little much for the guys or anyone else.”

Fred allows the subject to drop there, because now he’s got a new development to add to his growing list of suspicions: Ronnie. So that’s how it is, huh? Archiekins and Ronnie. He shakes his head, once again trying not to smile, and makes a mental note to keep an ear out for any repeat performances.

That’s what leads him to the third clue.

Clue No. 3: Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Less than twenty-four hours after introducing Fred to Valerie—a nice girl who apparently shares his son’s interest in music—Archie comes home from school with an injury he didn’t have in the morning and a goofy, absentminded grin plastered all over his face. It piques Fred’s curiosity since he’s come to recognize it as the Veronica Smile, so, naturally, he does what any good parent would do: he pretends he doesn’t already know who at least one part of this story will involve, and points to the bandaged hand.

“Hey, sport. What’s with the war wound?”

“Huh?” Archie says, looking mystified for a moment. Then he glances down and laughs. “Oh, yeah. I…pretty much blanked on a play during practice and kinda got drilled. It’s fine though, Dad. Ronnie wrapped it for me.”
Whoomp, there it is, Fred thinks, nodding and refraining from comment as the kid grins stupidly at his wrist. He’s no fortune teller, but then, he doesn’t have to be one to know where this business between Archie and Veronica is heading. Maybe it’ll be days, maybe it’ll be months. But at this point, it’s just a matter of time.

When he sees them talking in the shadowy wings at the talent show, he’s surer of this than ever. Archie’s been a nervous wreck all week, alternating between excitement and fear that kept him silent and jittery the whole ride over. But now, with Veronica standing a few feet away in that ridiculous feline-themed getup, he’s looking calmer than he has in days. Whatever it is the newest member of the Pussycats is saying as she adjusts his tie seems to be helping, and though the distance is too great for Fred to figure out exactly what they’re discussing, he doesn’t miss the way his son’s eyes stay glued to her face. Or the softness of the smile she gives him as he grips his guitar and steps out onto the stage, almost rigid with stage fright.

Fred also notices the look Archie casts to the side of the stage just before he begins to sing. At the time, it doesn’t make sense.

But later, when he’s standing next to his soon-to-be ex-wife on a slightly under-waxed gym floor, the two of them watching their son get ready to sing, he sees Archie repeat the move—to his right this time—and puts two and two together. The boy is scared, sure, but he isn’t looking to run; not by a longshot. He’s looking instead to the dark-haired girl in the sparkly black dress who stands beside him, seeking and (judging by the performance that follows) finding reassurance in the little nod and smile she gives him. Together, the two teens light up the stage, and Fred is unsurprised when Mary asks him about it afterward. He gives her his unvarnished opinion (The magic eight-ball says YES), and they laugh together as he follows that relay of information by filling her in on the past few months, and she tells him about how Archie came barreling down the stairs, grinning from ear to ear, when Veronica came by to rehearse the other day.

Everything gets crazy after that—FP, the Blossoms, Jughead going into foster care—and suddenly, there isn’t time to keep an eye on his son’s love life, because now Fred’s fighting for his actual life.

But the thing is, it gives him a lot of perspective. As a dad, one of his biggest fears is the thought of being unable to protect or be there for his son. Archie’s a great kid, a wonderful kid, but he gets a little lost in his own head sometimes and needs someone who’s tough enough to cut through the bull and drag him back from whatever dangerous ledge he’s approaching, clearheaded enough to understand that all the stupid comes from a place of caring, and charitable enough to not hold his every stupid mistake against him.

Someone, Fred thinks, smiling to himself as he listens to a calm voice forbidding any more trips to the vending machines over trips to actual restaurants or the hospital cafeteria (Man shall not live by processed cheese snacks and candy bars alone, Archiekins), like Veronica.

Case Summary: Love, A Verb

Surprisingly, there’s never really a moment when Archie announces that he’s dating Veronica—but, then again, he doesn’t have to. While Fred’s in the hospital and soon after he gets out, he has ample opportunity to observe the new dynamic between the kids because Veronica is around so much that Mary, right before she leaves to head back to Chicago, jokes about how she believes they’ve unofficially gained a daughter. And though Fred laughs about it with her, he’s starting to agree. Sometimes Veronica brings gifts—milkshakes from Pop’s are a pretty regular occurrence—and sometimes she brings movies or homework, or a new song she’s just heard that Archie and Fred have to listen to if they want to claim they have taste in music ever again, but what she unfailingly
brings a smile to Archie’s face, and Fred can’t help noticing the way his son is starting to lean on her. The kid’s wound tighter than a drum these days, and though half the time Fred has no idea how get him to take a break from worrying about everything under the sun, Veronica seems to know instinctively how to reach him. Often, all it takes is a hand on the arm or a well-timed joke, but on occasion, the chaotic rise and fall of Archie’s voice as he rants about something will fill the house, and only the steadiness of Veronica’s voice as she calmly goes toe-to-toe with him and makes him see reason quells the noise.

There’s also that time Fred walks into the living room to find Veronica on the couch watching one of those reality dating shows with Archie sacked out across her lap. She’s absentmindedly stroking his hair, apparently oblivious to the loud snoring as she chuckles and rolls her eyes over the tearful complaints of one of the contestants, but the instant Fred clears his throat, her head jerks up. Her blush is deep and immediate like she’s been caught, but she recovers quickly and smiles, putting a finger to her lips.

“I don’t think he slept much last night,” she whispers, and Fred’s reminded of the long argument he had with Archie earlier about the body’s need for sleep, and Archie’s insistence that he would be fine. “Thought this might put him out like a light, and voila.”

Fred nods, and offers to bring her a drink since she can’t move without waking up Rip Van Winkle. He doesn’t say anything further and neither does she, but from there on out, the two of them are co-conspirators when it comes to Archie—it’s understood without the exchange of so much as a single word that they’ll each do their best to look after him when the other isn’t around.

That’s why when Fred trudges up the stairs after a whale of a town hall meeting and discovers the kids sitting close together on Archie’s bed and talking in low voices about something that makes no sense to him, he makes the conscious decision to turn around and go right back down. Is it yet another huge parenting fail? Yeah, probably. Does he care? Hell no. Veronica is good for Archie. Fred’s as certain of that as he is of the ocean being wet and the desert being dry, and his instincts tell him that it’s best to take a backseat and let her handle whatever situation is underway.

When they come downstairs a few minutes later, dressed to go out, his suspicions are confirmed. Archie gives him a hug, and though the boy’s still pale, the weird look that’s been in his eyes since the hospital is gone now. In its place is a calmness Fred hasn’t seen in ages, so, curious, he glances at Veronica as Archie turns to leave.

“It’s all right,” she says, nodding. “I’ve got it.”

And she really does, Fred thinks, listening to the sound of the door closing behind them. Ever since he first heard rumblings of an incident at the Blossoms—an incident that seemed to explain why Archie got home late and stressed-out the night of the dance with traces of red lipstick near his collar and a coat that smelled strongly of perfume that struck Fred as a little too exotic for most girls in Riverdale—he’s wondered about Veronica. Wondered where exactly she fits into the story of his son’s life. She is, after all, the daughter of one of the most ruthless people he’s ever met, and though he believes in treating everyone as their own individual person, he’s a dad. He can’t help squinting a little at who Archie shows interest in and worrying about whether or not they mean to hurt him, about whether or not they’re the right one for him. Which is stupid, yes, because they’re high school sophomores, there’s plenty of time to figure out right and wrong in the future, and anyway, it isn’t Fred’s call. But he is allowed to have an opinion, and in his opinion, Veronica is, quite simply, Archie’s The One. She’s playful and sarcastic on the surface, always insisting that Archie lighten up when he starts wandering down a dark and moody path, but beneath all that she’s also loyal, steady as a rock, and a shrewd judge of character with a softer heart than she likes to admit to. The two of them together are a force to be reckoned with, and Fred can envision them one day leaving town to
greet the world as a team.

As a matter of fact, it’s that impression that gives him hope.

Conclusions: Better (Together)

Fred Andrews isn’t a philosopher. He’s not some kind of expert on life, he doesn’t pretend to understand its mysteries, and he’s pretty sure he doesn’t believe in destiny, fate, or any other kind of mystic-sounding mumbo-jumbo. But what he does know is that sometimes the tiniest twists of circumstance can change a person’s entire future by first changing their entire world. And he believes with all his heart that for Archie, the future changed the instant Veronica Lodge walked into his world.

In Riverdale, there’s a very set pattern to things; you grow up, marry a childhood sweetheart you love or at least think you can live comfortably with, move into an old-but-neat little house, pop out a kid or two or three, and then just do your best to survive living in a decaying town. It’s not the worst existence in the world, but it is just that: existence, not life, and it’s not the kind of thing a parent wishes for or on their kid. Fred’s always sort of assumed—and feared—that his son will have that kind of future. That he’ll wind up with the girl next door, because Betty is a perfect fit for the Riverdale way of life and always has been. (Plus, Alice and Hal Cooper’s golden child has had her eye on Archie for years—the combination of her determination plus his easygoing nature and underdeveloped confrontation skills made that outcome seem inevitable.) And while it can’t be denied that they’ve been friends forever, are reasonably compatible, and Archie could do worse, reasonably compatible and could do worse aren’t what Fred wants for his son. The boy may look like he’s cut out for the white picket fence life in a town that just might be rotten to the core, but he’s not. He’s a kid standing at the top of the high-dive, fascinated by the faraway water and longing to jump in, but lacking the courage to try thanks to the acrophobic crowd below who suggest a return to the safe and familiar.

That’s why he needs the girl from New York. Why he’s so drawn to her. She has no fear of heights, and she’s not the sort to offer advice or shout encouragement from the ground. No, she’s the sort who’ll climb the ladder, walk out on the platform, give him the courage to take the plunge, and then take the plunge right along with him. They’re different, sure, but it’s a good kind of different. The best kind, even—she’s strong where he’s weak, and weak where he’s strong, and maybe on paper they sound like the setup for a really bad joke, but what does that matter? They also bring out the best and call out the worst in each other, and when they’re together, it’s like they’re just… themselves. Just Archie, and Just Veronica. No more, no less.

(So, no. To reiterate, Fred’s not surprised they’re dating. And it’s not like anyone’s come right out and asked him, but yes. He approves.)

Chapter End Notes

*Title taken from Riverdale 1x11”To Riverdale And Back Again.” I’ve basically had ideas for a Fred POV fic with this title since I saw that episode last spring and heard that line because to me, it kind of perfectly sums up the inevitable feel A&V have to them, so...yeah. It’s nice to finally check that one off my list.

*Clue No. 1’s title is based off a quote by Isaiah Berlin: “To understand is to perceive
patterns."
*Clue No. 2 refers to the "What's in a name?" quote from Romeo and Juliet.
*Veronica's jokingly referencing Matthew 4:4 ("Man shall not live by bread alone") in Clue No. 3
*"Better Together" is a song by Jack Johnson that popped into my head for some reason while I was writing this, so I went with it. I haven't listened to it in years though, so I have no idea whether or not it fits A&V.

*Aviva, I SWEAR your prompt is on its way! I know I keep saying that and then not posting it, but for whatever reason, I can't seem to get it into an order I like. At this point, it's like a quest, so I promise, the instant the story's progression makes (relatively?) logical sense, it WILL BE POSTED. I haven't forgotten it! It's just fighting me. --

*I really am going to try to start getting on a more regular posting schedule so I can give you guys SOMETHING new that's A/V related. I'm trying a new method where I force myself to write through any writer's block/editing problems by writing something new when an idea stalls instead of just sitting and staring at my computer. So far, it's produced the ideas for 2 AU Varchie fics, so we'll see.

*OH MY GOSH. That promo for the next episode. First off: ARCHIE AND VERONICA. <3333 Second off: I'm not even going to lie. I can't wait to see how the Veronica/Jughead possible kiss plays out. I've watched that clip and laughed my head off at it probably close to a thousand times. Like, it's so wrong that it's right, and Archie's face in the background CRACKS. ME. UP. It reminds me of that episode of Fraiser where Roz kisses Niles, and honestly, I've seen so many of the wrong people kissing each other on the CW this year, this is nothing, lol. Because hey, if you're going to have a train wreck, at least make it an entertaining train wreck, right?

*Thanks as always for reading/commenting! Hope everyone's doing well and surviving this stupid hiatus.
(Also: who else besides my Monopoly-obsessed self immediately noticed how correct that game board seems to be? Veronica winning/being the banker, Jughead losing/owning just a few cheap properties and Archie and Betty falling somewhere in the middle is just too perfect.)
The Other Guy

Chapter Summary

Archie struggles to (calmly) deal with the presence of Nick St. Clair, and Veronica tries to convince him that it's all right.

**Set during Riverdale 2x05 "When A Stranger Calls" because I started writing this not long after that episode first aired. It's not super long, but there'll hopefully be another update in the next few days to make up for that**

Chapter Notes

This began as an attempt at a prompt from Aviva, so that's who I'm giving the credit to :) See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For what already feels like the millionth time in under an hour, Archie takes a long, deep, get-it-under-control-man kind of breath. When Veronica told him at school the other day that an old friend from her so-called bad girl days was coming to visit, he hadn’t been too excited. The way she talked about this Nick guy, he couldn’t help wondering if there was more to the story. Not on Veronica’s end necessarily; he believed her when she said they’d never dated or anything like that, and besides, she’s pretty much gone out of her way to let him know that she’s got no interest whatsoever in chasing old friends from New York.

But Nick—well, Nick’s a different story.

Though Archie outwardly accepted Veronica’s original description of the situation, ever since he first heard it he’s had a nagging feeling deep down in his gut that not all parties concerned share her conviction about the whole nothing between them thing. And though he spent his entire walk to the Pembrooke trying to convince himself that he was being ridiculous, already passing judgment on a guy he hadn’t even met yet, the instant Veronica introduced him to Nick, Archie knew his guess was correct. Veronica might be under the impression that the two of them are just friends and have always been, but Nick has other ideas, and Archie doesn’t care for that.

Not. One. Bit.

It takes every ounce of willpower he has to not try to crush the life out of the other boy’s hand when they shake hello (especially after he sees the way the jerk’s eyes slide over Veronica’s entire body and linger way too long on her legs), but with Veronica smiling up at him and holding onto the crook of his arm, he somehow manages to content himself with a harder than average grip. Somehow. But the farther they get into the evening and the more he notices Nick watching her like he’s some kind of big cat stalking an unwary deer, the harder it gets for Archie to keep from exploding.

And it doesn’t help matters that he can’t think of one single thing to contribute to the conversation that swirls around him. First, Nick talks. Then Veronica talks. Then Mr. and Mrs. Lodge talk. Then Mr. and Mrs. St. Clair talk. Then Nick talks again…and the best Archie can do during all the chatter
is nod every now and then and try not to get his stupid forks mixed up, because there’s about ten of the shiny little things, and he can’t for the life of him remember which one he’s supposed to use to eat what.

It’s also beyond mortifying that he somehow manages to choke on Mrs. Lodge’s flan—a smooth, pudding-like dessert he’s never tasted before and can only assume is cooked to perfection since Nick keeps raving about it until Archie really wants to tell him to put a damn sock in it (the raving, not the flan)—right when Mr. Lodge unexpectedly addresses a question to him. Everyone says it’s no big deal of course, but Nick’s enjoyment of the whole disaster is visible, and Archie hates it.

By the time the meal ends and Veronica suggests they leave the adults to talk business, he’s so on edge that every syllable this guy utters just winds him even tighter. Despite his best efforts to stay calm, he feels like he might snap at any second, and he’s got just enough sense left to know he can’t allow that to happen. Veronica’s talked a lot about how important this investment is to her family’s business, and though Archie can’t pretend he understands how all that stuff works, he doesn’t want to be the reason the deal falls through. He certainly doesn’t want to get tossed out on his ear for taking a swing at the son of the potential investors (at least, he thinks he doesn’t—if he has to witness much more of his girlfriend getting ogled, he might change his mind). So he bites his tongue as hard as he can without making it bleed, clamps his jaw shut until it feels like it’s about to pop, and lets Veronica pull him along down the hall toward her bedroom. He can tell from the way she’s hovering close and talking in a too-bright voice that she’s trying to make him calm down (the reassuring little squeezes she keeps giving his arm also help him figure that out) but it’s just not working. Especially when he sees how comfortable Nick’s making himself: sprawling out on Veronica’s bed and kicking his feet up, sticking his hand in her face to offer her drugs, making stupid jokes about her cat ears… no, Archie can’t help it. He wants to deck the guy, and the only thing stopping him from doing it right here and now is Veronica who, when she’s not crossing the room to knock the jerk’s feet off the bed or take back her cat ears, keeps at least one hand on him the whole time. Which should, come to think of it, slow Nick and his stupid come-ons down a little bit, right?

But no.

Archie bristles as the words And just when I thought you couldn’t possibly get any sexier drop out of the douche’s mouth. Before he can do anything other than glare however, Veronica’s hand is in his, and she’s saying something along the lines of Well, I try like it’s all light and funny but it’s not light, it’s not funny, and Archie’s seen enough to gather that Nick knows exactly what he’s doing. This isn’t some weird, oh-I’m-just-trying-to-be-friendly-and-I-accidentally-flirted mistake—he’s deliberately hitting on Veronica, and he doesn’t care one bit that he’s doing it while she’s sending all the really obvious I’m Not Single signals like practically sitting in Archie’s lap.

By the time the St. Clairs finally—finally!—leave, Archie’s furious, exhausted, and ninety-percent sure he’s left fingerprints in the back of the chair that goes to Veronica’s makeup table. He manages to pull himself together long enough to tell Mr. & Mrs. Lodge goodnight, but the pointed look Mr. Lodge gives him wears his nerves down more than usual since he’s already kind of drained, so he can’t fully count that as any kind of a victory. Plus he can’t get Nick’s slick-voiced comments out of his head, so as soon as Veronica’s parents take off, he just sort of falls down onto the couch and stares crankily up at the ceiling, wishing he could just punch heads and be done with it.

“Sorry about all that,” Veronica says, picking up a cushion and tossing it aside before plopping down on his lap. “Nick’s always been a little over-the-top with the charm school routine. He doesn’t really mean anything by it. It’s just his wicked little modus operandi.” She runs a hand through his hair, her fingers scratching soothingly at his scalp as she presses a quick kiss to the tip of his ear. “Don’t let it get to you, okay? He’s like Cheryl in that he tends to pour it on if he suspects he’s anywhere close to driving someone batty.”
Archie snorts. Yeah, he doesn’t doubt the wicked MO part. But he doesn’t for one second believe that Nick means nothing. If ever there were a guy who ought to have the words Smooth Operator tattooed on his forehead, it’s that sleazeball.

“Ronnie,” he states, cinching his arms in tight around her waist as she scoots back into his chest. Her dad’s just in the next room, sure, but after sitting through a couple hours’ worth of Nick St. Clair’s arrogant jackassery, Archie’s decided that he’d rather risk a pissed off Hiram Lodge any day. Because at least with Mr. Lodge, the ultimate goal is Veronica’s safety and happiness. Not…other things. “I really don’t think you and he are on the same page there.”

“I know you don’t.” Scrunching down a little to lean her cheek against his, she chuckles. “The red face and increasingly terrifying death glares you kept sending him were kind of a tipoff. On a related note, do you by any chance happen to know that when you get jealous you look like actual steam’s about to come out of your ears? Also, while it does get very cute around the jawline and all, I feel obligated to inform you that the overall effect isn’t exactly flattering.”

Even though he recognizes the fact that she’s trying to cheer him up, he can’t bring himself to crack a smile. “Veronica, that…” Okay, she’s cocking her head to the side now, eyebrows rising, so maybe he should find a different adjective than the ones currently rolling around his mind. “…uh, that jerk is seriously hitting on you,” he finishes.

“Well, we’ll have to agree to disagree there,” she says, leaning over to bump her nose playfully against his before planting a kiss that tastes faintly of sugary caramel on his lips. “And besides, even if I’m wrong—which I don’t for a second admit or think I am,” she adds, sitting back to point in mock sternness at him, “he’ll figure out soon enough where things stand.”

Archie sighs, the sound more like a disgruntled growl. “I don’t know, Ronnie,” he says, tucking some loose pieces of hair behind her ear. “You were pretty clear tonight, and it didn’t seem like it slowed him down at all.”

“Ah, well.” She twists her face into a thoughtful grimace. “I suppose I’ll just have to be more convincing. If only there were someone who could help me—a handsome, brawny, redhead football player, perhaps. Oh, and you know what would be ideal? If he played the guitar and maybe even sang a little, because sensitive musicians with athletic physiques? Always a plus. It is a tad complicated though, since I’ve also recently discovered that I’m maybe more into sweet guys than I ever thought I’d be, so…” Propping a fist beneath her chin in exaggerated reflection, she squints. “Hmm. Where on earth should I start looking?”

“Veronica.”

He tries to sound exasperated, but it’s just too hard to maintain his irritation with Nick when she’s giving him that teasing, aren’t-you-cute smile that always ends up making him laugh. So, rolling his eyes, he gives up, lets out the laugh, and lets her pull him into a deep, toe-curling, oxygen-depleting, Please-God-don’t-let-her-parents-walk-in-now kind of kiss that ends abruptly when he loses all sense of space and almost tips them both off the couch.

“I’m serious,” he insists as he rights them, cracking up even while he says it because she’s giggling so hard at the near catastrophe that he can’t help joining in.

“So am I,” she answers, sobering quickly as she resituates herself on his lap. “And you don’t need to worry about me. One, I’m very much taken. Two, I can handle myself.”

“I know that,” he says, unable to stop the dumb grin that spreads across his face at the words I’m taken but still intent on his original purpose. “But the thing is Ronnie, watching somebody try to do
all that with you—ugh.” His head sags back against the sofa as he groans. “I don’t know, it just…”

“I get it, Archie,” she interrupts softly, winding her arms around his neck. “I do. But just so we’re clear, let me repeat myself: you don’t need to worry. Okay?” she adds, bending to flutter her lashes against his cheek. “No freakouts necessary.”

“Okay.” Exhaling, he tucks his head into the crook of her neck while her hand comes up to stroke the side of his face gently.

“You’re still going to watchdog this, are you?” she comments after a minute or two, the question half-muffled by his hair.

He smiles. Arms tightening around her waist, he pulls her in even closer. “Maybe,” he says, brushing a light kiss against her throat. “Maybe not.”

“Humph.” She gives him a smart little pat on the cheek. “Stubborn.”

Archie laughs, closing his eyes as he relaxes into her. There’s just something about Veronica, something about being with her, that’s always felt right, and it’s moments like this that he really, really wishes he knew how to express that to her. But whenever he thinks about trying, it never quite works out. His tongue gets a little tangled, his mind gets all mixed up, and the words just sort of evaporate. So he settles instead for poking her gently in the side until she responds by chuckling and folding her arms around his neck in a warm, exaggeratedly-suffocating hug.

“What?” she says, batting the hand away and kissing him on the temple. “Am I making your leg fall asleep, or have you just now dreamt up a good comeback for stubborn?”

“The second, actually,” he answers, both the kiss and the matter-of-fact way she asks the question making him smile.

“Oh, okay, so the retort would be…?” she prompts, her tone mischievous.

The smile widens. “People in glass houses really shouldn’t throw stones, Ronnie.”

“What?” Wrinkling her nose at him, she ruffles a hand through his hair. “For your information Socrates, I’m not being stubborn so much as I’m trying to keep you from turning yourself into a wizened little old man before your time with all this groundless worrying.”

“Groundless?” he questions, lifting both eyebrows.

She sighs. “Fine. Semi-groundless. Look, how about this.” Smiling down at him, her fingers toy lightly with his earlobe. “I’ll promise to keep a weather eye out for any unsolicited invitations to examine antique bedsteads, Egyptian cotton sheets, and-or silk pajama collections as long as you promise to take a temporary breather on boyfriend sentry duty and just have some fun, all right? After these last few months, I think you’ve earned that, at least. Just take a step back and let me patrol.”

Archie hesitates, wavering as the image of Nick watching her looms in his mind. But she seems so sure, and if saying yes puts her at least somewhat on guard, that’s a good thing, isn’t it? So he agrees, and laughs right along with her when she jokingly offers to send him home with a To-Go box of ‘highly chokeable’ flan.

He doesn’t forget that stupid visitor, though. Or the fact that if the St. Clairs don’t make up their minds about this investment quickly and leave Riverdale as soon as possible, he’s probably going to end up in a lot of trouble. Because so help him, if that guy tries to pull anything on Veronica…
Well, maybe he’d better not go there. Riverdale’s seen enough violence already. And *pre-mediated* is kind of an ugly word.

Chapter End Notes

*Sorry it’s taken so long between updates! I actually tried to upload this chapter four times in the last week, but three times my wifi was running slow and I couldn't get Ao3 to load, and Ao3 decided to crash on Sunday right when I actually had time to update.

*Aviva, there should be a fic coming this weekend that actually follows the prompt. This was just one of the rabbit-trailing attempts I made :D

*I'm updating in a hurry right now because I have work soon, so I haven't had a chance to check/reply to last chapter's comments. Hopefully, I'll take care of that either Thursday or Friday.

*Last week's ep was AWESOME. I haven't laughed that much in a while, and though I'm still racking my brains trying to remember when exactly Betty "defended" Veronica (lol, WHAT?? Does she mean to Alice, because I'm not sure I'd count that?) I enjoyed the core four taking cheap shots at each other. It was a nice way for the writers to both poke a little fun at the drama of the series and also be like, "Yes, we know elements of each of these stories aren't going to be everyone's cup of tea, but please remember that they're all kids and everyone flounders around when they're trying to figure out how to live their life." And it was just so sweet to see them all hanging out in the booth together at the end.

*Thanks for reading/commenting, and here's hoping you guys have a great week and that we all enjoy tonight's episode! (Which I will, sadly, not get to see until after midnight. *Sobs*)
The first time Archie experiences the conscious urge to protect Veronica from undetermined threats is a few hours after she mentions her date with Chuck.

(Or, to be more accurate, a few hours after she mentions her stupid date with Chuck. He’s not really sure why, but that’s what he’s labeled it in his head, and whenever he thinks about it, he gets inexplicably annoyed and kind of wants to kick something. And it’s weird, because while he isn’t exactly dwelling on the fact or anything like that, it does lurk at the back of his mind until practice begins and chases away everything except an all-consuming awareness of how much wind sprints suck.)

About eighty minutes into what’s fast becoming one of those grueling, kill-me-now, heavy on conditioning practices that Coach likes to hype as prep for the playoffs, Archie’s jogging to the coolers with an energy he would’ve sworn he wasn’t capable of right up until the whistle blew. Turf thumping beneath his cleats at a speed close to that of the blood pounding through his head, he blows past the stragglers and grabs up the nearest squeeze bottle. As pretty much the lone underclassman on starting varsity, he needs water breaks even more than most, and he’s too hot and sweaty at this point to care who knows it. Besides, is collapsing from dehydration really going to prove his toughness to the older guys? He doubts it.

Tilting his head back, he closes his eyes as a steady stream of welcome coolness gushes into his mouth. It tastes a little plastic-y, sure, but he can’t bring himself to care. For a few blissful seconds, life is wonderful. There’s a slight breeze gusting over the field, the sweat’s not dripping in his eyes too much, and behind him, he hears the noise increasing to usual levels as the rest of the guys hustle up. Everything’s cool. Everything’s normal.
That’s when he realizes that someone’s calling his name.

Swallowing in a hasty gulp, he turns around to see Chuck and a couple of his buddies approaching, the three of them laughing fit to kill over whatever it is they’ve been talking about.

“Yeah?” he says, coughing a little as the water goes down the wrong pipe. “What’s up?”

Chuck grins, pointing at him with his helmet. “Had to track you down, man. I’ve got a date with the new girl tonight, and I hear you’re the one to talk to.”

“Oh.” Damn. So much for his temporary mellowness. Archie forces himself to hold his ground, though the desire to walk away from this entire conversation before it even gets going is strong.

“Yeah, uh…not really, actually,” he says, trying to smile. “If you want to find out what she likes and stuff, you should probably just ask her. She’s pretty upfront. I’m sure she’ll tell you.”

“What, are you kidding?” Chuck demands. “Upfront? That’s all the tips you got for me?”

Archie frowns, unsure what that’s supposed to mean. “Tips? I don’t—”

“Come on, JV!” Laughing again, Chuck gives him a shove. “You’re the only dude in school who’s been with her. I know you get what I’m talking about, so just spill it. She any good, or is it all just for show?”

Any good? For show? There’s nothing necessarily wrong with either of those questions—though as a matter of fact, he’s not too clear on what they mean coming from Chuck—but for some reason, the way they’re asked makes Archie uncomfortable and he hesitates.

“Why?” he says at last, his frown deepening.

“Research” comes the answer right as the whistle shrills in the background. Pulling his helmet back on, Chuck winks. “I like to check around beforehand,” he says, mouth guard garbling his voice. “You know, do my homework. See if any of my ladies are book-worthy. Pretty standard procedure.”

“Okay.” None of this makes any sense at all to him, but the other guys seem to think it’s hilarious, so Archie smiles as politely as he can under the circumstances. Book-worthy? What does that even mean? “Like…an address book?” he suggests.

They crack up again, confusing him more than ever.

“Give it some time, Andrews,” Chuck tells him, lifting a hand to signal Coach that they’re on their way. “And tell you what. You ever drop that squeaky-clean, Mama’s Boy routine of yours and fill us in on what really happened in that closet at Cheryl’s—we could be writing your name down one of these days.”

“What?” Archie gasps, stumbling to a halt as at least part of his teammate’s meaning sinks in. “No, Chuck, Veronica and I, that’s not what...I mean, we didn’t—”

“Yeah, yeah. I know, man. Mantle told us. You spent the whole seven minutes with Veronica Lodge playing canasta.” The other boy grins as he gives him a friendly shove toward the huddle. “Sure. We believe you. Now, line your ass up. We’re about to tear this defense a new one.”

“Yeah,” Archie mutters, the uneasy feeling in his stomach intensifying as he jogs toward the twenty-five with the rest of the team. “Right.”

God, why does he hate this so much? Why can’t he let it go? The whole thing bugs him, and he
thinks about it all the rest of the way through practice, but it’s not until he gets home that he finally identifies it as one of two things: worry or jealousy.

It’s not until 1:53 a.m., when he’s scowling sleeplessly at his alarm clock, that he realizes it just might be both.

Which doesn’t make sense, because that’s impossible, isn’t it? After all, it’s not like he likes Veronica or anything. He’s just concerned about her well-being. Because she’s his friend. And because she’s nice. And because he doesn’t want her to get hurt. No, it’s not jealousy, and it’s not worry. It’s just… good old-fashioned friendship. That’s probably all it is.

Probably.

***

He has to keep reminding himself of that the next day.

First, when she crashes into his chest in the locker room and knocks the breath out of him in more ways than one. Second, when she informs him in no uncertain terms (I mean it, Andrews. Hit the showers, and stay out of my way!) that’s she handling this herself and shoves past him, leaving him to stare goofily after her while she has a tense argument with Chuck. Third, when she slams the door to the locker room behind herself and Betty in the single greatest show of temper he’s ever seen from her, and fourth when he goes in search of her (post-shower, since she kind of seemed serious about that) after Moose awkwardly tells him to check Facebook if he wants to know why Veronica’s so pissed.

And why does he have to do all that reminding? Because he’s so horrified by the stupid post and all the even stupider comments that he can’t let himself forget for a minute that he’s got to come up with a reasonable explanation for the disgust he feels at what’s been done to her. He’d feel awful for anyone that kind of thing happened to, of course. But the fact that it’s been done to Veronica…somehow, it makes the whole thing infinitely worse.

“Veronica!” he calls, spotting her by her locker. He’s going to be late to class if he stops to talk, but at this point, he doesn’t much care. He didn’t know when she ran into him earlier what was going on, and the idea that she might think he did and just didn’t care sickens him. Sprinting down the hall toward her, he raises his voice. “Veronica, hey!”

She doesn’t respond or otherwise give any indication that she’s heard him, so he repeats her name several times before it finally registers that she’s not replying on purpose. As he skids to a stop beside her, she heaves a loud sigh.

“She doesn’t respond or otherwise give any indication that she’s heard him, so he repeats her name several times before it finally registers that she’s not replying on purpose. As he skids to a stop beside her, she heaves a loud sigh.

“What?” she says bluntly, peeking under a notebook that’s within her locker. “I’m not really in the mood for chit-chat, Archie. Or anything else, despite what you may have heard from certain unreliable and highly Neanderthalic sources.”

“No, that’s not—look, Veronica, I just found out a little while ago,” he tells her, scrambling to catch the pinkish-purple binder she half-hands, half-shoves at him.

“What?” she says with false, exaggerated brightness. “Mindboggling, isn’t it? Here I am the star of Chuck’s grotesque little show, and he didn’t even see fit to tag me. Kevin had to impart the news.”

He stands quietly for a bit, watching as she hunts through her locker for something and occasionally stacks school supplies on the binder he’s holding with more energy than is probably necessary.

At length, he clears his throat. “I’m really sorry, Ronnie.”
“Yes.” She pauses her rummaging long enough to give him a tight, humorless smile that gives him an almost uncontrollable urge to track Chuck down and punch his lights out. “So am I.” Handing him a small pink bag with Paris scrawled on it in fancy black letters, she retrieves the binder and the rest of the stuff from his arms and crams it all back in. “You’d think that after my Spence days I’d be able to recognize the stench of power-trippy, over-compensating douchebag from a mile away, but no. Apparently I’m either dangerously out of practice or newly aware of the insufferable specie’s existence in Riverdale. My mistake, really. You can bet I won’t be doing that again.”

There’s not so much as the hint of a tremor in her voice, but even with her face half-hidden in the locker, he can see the stubborn set of her jaw and it worries him. She’s angry; he knows that much. But her eyes are glassy in a way that tells him the anger’s being used to hide something a lot harder to deal with, so he reaches out tentatively and touches her arm.

“Are you okay?” he asks quietly.

She rolls her eyes, shrugging off his hand like it burned her. “Of course I am.” Slamming the dinky little door shut with a report that echoes through the hall and makes him jump, she takes the bag from him and tucks it into her purse. “But even if I weren’t,” she adds, her voice sharper than a whole box of knives, “I would never give that cretin the satisfaction of admitting it to anyone. I don’t know what kind of girls he’s used to dealing with, but he sure as hell tried to screw over the wrong one this time, and he will live to regret it.”

And how, Archie thinks, both frightened and impressed at how simultaneously calm and furious she is. She’s always so fun and outgoing that he’s never been too sure about those rumors of her squaring off with Cheryl during cheer tryouts, but now that he’s seen her anger for himself, he has no trouble believing it. Still, that undercurrent to her wrath bothers him, and he opens his mouth to ask her about it.

“No, it’s not true,” Veronica snaps belligerently before he can form so much as a single syllable. “But most people in this school already think it is, so if you’re squeamish about being seen with the super-sluty bitch from New York, I suggest you get a move on before someone sees us talking and your image gets tarnished.”

“Ronnie.” He jumps in front of her as she starts to stomp off, his concern finally getting the better of his nerves and freeing his tongue. “I wasn’t going to ask that at all. I just wanted to know if there’s anything I can do to help?”

She exhales loudly, folding her arms as she slumps back against the lockers. “Thank you for the offer, but no. People already think I did God knows what to you in that closet at Cheryl’s. If you get mixed up in this, it’ll only add grist to the rumor mill, and I’ve just about had it with this place and its wannabe Perez Hilton-ness.”

Archie’s face warms at the reminder of the first time they were alone together. “I don’t think everyone thinks we—you know….”

“Archie.” She turns her head toward him, expression wry. “I’m glad you’re optimistic about the charitableness of humanity, but even Betty thinks we Marvin Gayed and got it on during that stupid game. And I’m pretty sure that assisted in almost the entire student body labeling me a maneater, or at the very least Easy Pickings before my first week here was finished, so do you really think you sticking up for me is going to convince them otherwise?”

What? Confusion setting in, he frowns. “Wait. Didn’t you tell her—or, them, I guess—what really happened?”
Veronica hits him with a raised-eyebrow stare. “No, I didn’t. Did you?”

“Well, no.”

The answer is out before he can even think about it—an immediate, knee-jerk type of response that might just as well be a loud *duh*, and he winces, wondering uncomfortably whether or not he’s said the right thing. But judging by the little smile she’s plainly trying to hold back, he has. Surprisingly. Which is good.

(He thinks.)

“There you are, then.” she says, waving a hand. “Ob-la-di, ob-la-da.”

“So, uh. Why didn’t you say anything?” he asks after about a millisecond, because he just can’t help it. “I mean, everything that happened—what we did? That…” He clears his throat uneasily as the memory of her lips working against his pops unbidden into his mind. “That wasn’t all you. By any means. You could’ve at least corrected them.”

“I know.” She lifts a shoulder halfheartedly. “I could have. I just…didn’t see the point in expending a whole lot of effort to set the record straight when everyone was already so convinced about what did and didn’t happen behind closed doors. Plus I couldn’t in all honesty say we did nothing, could I?”

He nods—a little guiltily, because even now, even after everything that went down, he really doesn’t think he would do anything differently. And try as he may, he can’t for the life of him seem to regret any part of that moment.

“Besides,” Veronica says, interrupting his very unproductive train of thought, “what we *did* do doesn’t strike me as any of their business. What’s your excuse?”

Excuse. Right. Why hasn’t he broadcasted the details of the truth to anyone, again?

“Don’t know that I have one,” he answers, brow furrowing as he realizes that it’s actually true. “I’ve just kinda told people whenever they start hinting around that we didn’t…”

She nods, thankfully seeming to understand his vague gestures. “Yeah.”

He folds his arms awkwardly, trying to find a stance that’s somewhat relaxed. “But, you know,” he continues, leaning back against the lockers beside her, “now that I think about it, you’re right. I don’t think anybody actually believes me, and telling them everything—it just feels kinda wrong.”

Glancing down at her, he starts inwardly when he finds her already looking at him. She so rarely drops her usual quippy façade in favor of total seriousness that it always catches him off guard when it happens. Especially since Veronica being serious kind of does things to him—it’s like her eyes get bigger and darker or something, and the effect is nothing short of mesmerizing.

But it’s also, he realizes, a little heartbreaking. Because no matter how many people are around at a given time, he’s pretty sure he’s the only one who notices how hard she works to seem bulletproof and in control. This whole thing has hurt her, and badly, but there’s no way she’ll let on. She’s a fight over flight kind of person, and begging for sympathy just isn’t her way. She’ll let people say their worst and face them down with the kind of icy confidence he can only envy, and she’ll do everything in her power to bury the hurt where no one will ever find it without major detective skills.

He just has to accept that.
Maybe.

Taking a deep breath, he forces a quick smile and bumps her arm gently with his. “I’m sorry if I made things worse for you.”

“Ditto,” she says, sighing out the word. “But, never fear. You didn’t. And speaking of making things worse, shouldn’t you be getting to class right about now?”

“Oh! Yeah.” Sheepishly, he starts turning in the direction of American History like he knows he ought to. But when he sees that she still hasn’t moved, he halts again. “You’re sure you’re all right?”

“Archie…” Her eyes roll again, but this time a laugh follows. “It’s sweet that you always want to jump in to defend your friends. Truly. And I appreciate the concern. But you don’t need to worry about me. We quote-unquote ‘basic bitches’ are built of sterner stuff than the puritanical masses ever expect. And just in case you’ve forgotten…” She tilts her head to the side as if daring him to disagree. “I’m a Lodge. Public stonings aren’t exactly unfamiliar occurrences. Besides that…I’m always all right.”

“Yeah.” He laughs too, but the tightness in his chest doubles when his eyes land on hers and he sees it again—that tiny little flicker of sadness that she camouflages quickly behind a dazzling smile. “I know.”

And he does. Really.

That’s why he stays out of it.

For the time being, at least.

***

It’s a while before the protective instincts surface again, but when he thinks about it, it’s really not much of a shock what—or rather who—brings them screaming to the forefront. After Chuck’s sudden reappearance in the school cafeteria sends Betty flying into a frenzy that disturbs them all, Archie keeps sneaking glances at the dark-haired girl sitting across the table from him. She laughs and jokes same as usual, but there’s something different about it, so he watches his chance and stops her as they’re walking to their next class.

“What?” she says, frowning up at him. “Am I about to be regaled with some juicy piece of gossip, or do I have salad in my teeth and you just want to warn me?”

“No, neither. Just…are you okay?” he asks, lowering his voice since there’s still a lot of people milling around them. “About Chuck, I mean? You seem like something’s bothering you.”

“Of course I’m okay.” The frown changes swiftly into a smile and her voice takes on a crisp, jaunty note, but if anything, the sudden shift makes him even more suspicious. “Why wouldn’t I be? He pulled his disgusting stunt, I had the satisfaction of hearing him admit the truth and seeing him escorted off the school premises to serve out his suspension—nope.” She tosses her hair breezily. “As far as I’m concerned, young Mr. Clayton and I are one hundred percent even.”

Now it’s Archie’s turn to frown. “But what if he doesn’t agree? What if he, I don’t know, says something?”

Veronica chuckles, the sound a little too dry and rustling for his taste. “Sticks and stones, Archiekins,” she says lightly, her fingers curling around his forearm in a gentle squeeze. “Besides, no one’s going to buy his tall, notches-in-the-bedpost tales without proof this time, so whatever
unimaginative drivel he has to say will have to be said to my face, and I’m honestly not sure he’s
courageous enough to make that kind of move. Let’s just—forget about him, and to get to class, all
right?”

Archie nods and lets her lead the way, but privately resolves to keep on high alert for any sign of
trouble. Chuck’s general attitude doesn’t exactly scream repentant, plus Archie’s played ball with the
guy long enough to know that he’s not the type to let any hit go unavenged. And he’s usually pretty
smart about his retaliation, too—never pushes back until he’s sure the refs aren’t looking, never does
anything extreme enough to get himself kicked out. If he’s got any intention of trying to intimidate
Veronica, he’s not going to do it in a room jam-packed with people. He’ll do what he did the first
time: wait until he can get her alone. And, sure enough, not long after practice ends, Archie rounds
the corner of one of the halls to find Chuck standing about two feet from Veronica and her locker.

“So, what? I wasn’t inclined to be the bride of Chucky, and it bruised your ego?” Veronica’s saying
icily. Even though the size difference between them is marked (especially since she’s still in her
cheer uniform), she stares Chuck down with an almost bored expression. “Get over it. Rejection’s a
part of life. You may as well get used to it now.”

Chuck takes a step forward, everything about the movement designed to be intimidating. “Look, if
you think I’m going to sit back and let some stuck-up rich bitch with a jailbird father get away with
ruining my entire future, then you’re even crazier than that—”

“Hey!” Archie barks, sprinting the last few yards down the hall. “Don’t touch her,” he snaps,
slamming both hands into Chuck’s shoulders with enough force to send the bigger kid stumbling and
crashing back into the lockers. “Ronnie, are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” she answers, yanking urgently on the arm he puts in front of her as Chuck gets up
glaring daggers. “But Archie, don’t. He’s not worth you getting a suspension. And so help me,
Chuck,” she adds in a louder voice, “if you don’t back the hell off him right this second, I’ll go
screaming down this hall for Weatherbee and get you thrown out of here once and for all. That is
absolutely, positively enough of this half-assed, macho posturing. Okay? Let it go. It is over.”

Chuck’s eyes narrow like they do right before he’s preparing to make a tackle and Archie tenses,
getting ready to push Veronica back toward safety in the event that the other kid has no intention of
listening. But right as the guy takes a step forward, a door slams somewhere in the direction of the
main office, and he instead gives a shrug.

“Whatever,” he says, starting off in the opposite direction of the footsteps now clomping their way.
“Word to the not-so-wise, though, Andrews. I’d be real careful of that one if I were you.” Smirking
widely, he jerks his chin toward Veronica. “She’s got headache written all over her. You got half a
brain in you, you’ll hit that and then run like hell.”

“You know what—” Archie begins, but the hand is tugging insistently at his sleeve again, and he
clamps his jaw shut right as Weatherbee appears at the end of the hall. It sort of kills him to let Chuck
just walk away, but there isn’t much he can do to wipe that smug expression off his former
teammate’s face with the freaking principal watching, so he takes a deep breath and turns back to
Veronica.

Who is now facing the lockers. Sniffling.

“Ronnie?” he says softly, unsure what else to do. “Hey, are you o—”

“I’m fine,” she repeats. Her tone is stronger this time, but the words come out on a half-muffled sob
that pretty much renders everything she’s saying pointless. “Really. It’s not a big deal.”
He barely holds in a sigh. He’s never been great at standing around and doing nothing while other people hurt, but seeing her cry is a whole new level of awful. Like—staring at her hunched shoulders, there’s a war between instinct and common sense going on inside of him. In his head, he knows she doesn’t want sympathy. That it messes with her pride and whatnot, having someone act like they pity her. But he also can’t help feeling like she needs to know that she doesn’t have to pretend she’s some kind of emotionless robot with him.

“You sure?” he asks, leaning a hand on the locker a foot or so above her so that his body shields her from any prying eyes that might happen by.

“Yes.” Her head bobs up and down vigorously. “It’s not stupid Chuck or anything like that. Or not all of it, anyway. I just, I mean, my…oh, nothing.” The sentence fades into another loud sniffle, and she brings both hands up to cover her face. “Archie, don’t take this personally, but can you please just go away right now?”

“Okay,” he says, glancing back to see that Weatherbee’s nearing them. “Yeah, okay, I can definitely do that, but Ronnie, just hang on a sec, all right?”

“What?” she mumbles.

“Ms. Lodge. Mr. Andrews. Is there anything I can help the two of you with?” a deep voice interrupts, explaining the situation better than Archie could’ve even if he had the chance.

“Uh, no, Mr. Weatherbee,” he responds quickly, patting Veronica on the back while he gives the principal the biggest, most casual smile he can manage. “Just a…contact problem.”

“Yes, you wouldn’t happen to have any eye drops on hand, would you, Mr. W?” Veronica chimes in without missing a beat, her watery voice now tempered by laughter. “This is beginning to become more than a little embarrassing, and I’d really like to get the issue resolved. With minimal makeup damage, if it’s at all possible.”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t have anything of that sort with me just now. But if you want to head down to the nurse’s office—”

“Oh!” In what’s easily one of the greatest performances of his whole entire life, Archie beams as though he’s just had some kind of revelatory breakthrough. “Ronnie, Dilton’s got some in his locker. We can ask him.”

Weatherbee frowns. “I wasn’t aware Mr. Doiley wore contacts.”

“He doesn’t,” Archie says quickly, shifting so that Veronica’s better hidden. “Or, not that I know of, anyway. But he keeps a stash of stuff like that on hand in case of emergency.” Which is true, although neither he nor Veronica actually plans to take advantage of it. “I’m sure he won’t mind sharing some.”

“Very well, then.” The principal shakes his head, starting off down the hall again. “But if you can’t locate him, Ms. Lodge, make sure you go by the nurse’s office.”

“Yes sir,” Veronica answers. The second the footsteps scuff around the corner however, she wheels back around, sort of propping her head against the units.

For a long moment there’s no sound. But then a loud sniffle escapes from the small figure in front of him, and Archie’s insides twist strangely in response. Very gently, he rests a hand on her shoulder, wondering if she has any clue how much he hates seeing her like this and how much he wishes he could fix everything that’s bothering her. He wants to help. He does; seriously and horribly. He just
doesn’t know where to even begin to commence to start, and oh, crap, didn’t she tell him to go away? Didn’t he just get through saying he would?

Slowly, he starts to withdraw his hand. But right as the first three fingers lift off, a smaller hand slides over his and drags it back down, squeezing once, hard.

“Thank you,” Veronica says.

Her voice is faint and she doesn’t turn around or lift her forehead off the locker, but even so, a tidal wave of relief surges through him. This—well, it’s not much, but at least he’s able to convey a tiny part of what he’s feeling. At least she’s allowing him to do something. The urge to screw caution and just throw both arms around her is increasing wildly by the second, but as another snuffling shudder rattles her petite frame, he realizes that he can’t do it. Not as in can’t like he’s not capable of it—just, he can’t. He shouldn’t. Because the last time he had his arms around her…

Yeah, okay, that line of thinking definitely isn’t going to help. The important takeaway here is that hugging Veronica Lodge isn’t the same as hugging any of the rest of his friends, and he needs to be careful about stuff like that. After all, hasn’t he ruined enough things with thoughtlessness lately?

Eventually, at a loss for what else to do, he just squeezes her shoulder in return.

“Anytime, Ronnie,” he says, hoping she knows how much he means it.

They stand like that for a while, the silence that envelops them bordering on creepy since this place is almost never quiet. But it’s peaceful too, and, in a weird way, full of clarity. By the time she finally straightens up, throws back her shoulders, and tells him with a too-wide smile and a light pat on the bicep that she’ll see him at the party, he’s made up his mind to keep an eye on her and do whatever he can to help whenever she’ll let him. Because she’s his friend and he’s just worried about her like he’d be worried about any of his other friends. Really. That’s all it is.

He swears.

The trouble is that he doesn’t know whether or not he should believe himself.

Chapter End Notes

*Title inspired by a line from Taylor Swift’s “Ours” because every time someone’s nasty about Veronica on this show, I always think about it.
*Not sure if this explanation is necessary or not, but “Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da” is a reference to the Beatles’ song by the same name. It’s followed by the line “life goes on,” so that’s what V’s referring to.
*This is set in S1 because around the time I was trying to figure out when in S2 I could make Archie have time for something like this, 2x07 made me struggle a lot with what I think of Chuck. I’m very much a Fool Me Twice, Shame On Me person and he kind of burned the second chance I was cautiously willing to give him back in 1x10, but that dance scene with Josie was super cute and I do also believe that people can change if they really, really want to. So until I knew more about his character, I thought it best to go with a S1 setting instead. Also, the fact that Chuck goes after Betty more than anyone else at the party gave me a lot of ideas. I think the writers mainly just needed a way to introduce the ‘darkness’ topic/an antagonist for her since they’d already lined up Cheryl for Veronica, but it’s kind of interesting to speculate about. Veronica’s
technically the one who sparked the issue in the first place because she wasn’t willing to go quietly, but Chuck doesn’t even bother attacking her at the party. My friend and I discussed this once and she thinks it’s because he knows that Veronica would tear him to shreds in an argument but I’m not sure I think it’s that simple. It’s almost like the two of them have an understanding…he wronged her, she wronged him back, and now they’re even. Betty’s the one who escalated everything, not her, so as long as he doesn’t start anything else, they’re good. Which made me go, “Hey, what if they maybe had a confrontation at school that we never got to see?” So anyways.

*Aviva, I tried very hard to include an actual punch, but I couldn’t figure out a way to do it that would work with everything the episode established. Because if ARCHIE punched Chuck, it would definitely leave a mark that we would’ve seen at the party. And Archie probably would’ve gotten himself tossed out of school for the week.

*Sorry that I’m just now uploading this after promising an update almost two weeks ago! A bunch of bad weather blew through that weekend (seriously, I haven’t seen that much hail since I was like ten…it looked like it had snowed), and I had a lot going on last week. I did get to watch the episode though, and AHHH! Where do I sign up to fight people for Veronica and Cheryl? I feel like an angry mother or big sister. NOBODY attacks my girls and gets away with it. (Although upon calmer reflection, I’ll give Josie THIS ONE PASS. She’s been a solid friend up ’til now, and the only reason she isn’t being one now is because she thinks Veronica isn’t.) V punching Reggie was everything I hoped it would be, and more. I’m so proud of my girl. And speaking of girls I claim…TONI! Ugh, I love her. She’s my smart, tough, tiny child and I can’t wait to see her and V go after Cheryl. On a slightly unrelated note…is there a support group anywhere for people who WANT to like Betty Cooper but are getting really tired of constantly making allowances for her increasingly petty and childish behavior? Asking for a friend.

*Thanks for reading/commenting! Hope you guys have an awesome day and week :)}
Motives

Chapter Summary

Takes place in Riverdale Ch. 23 “The Blackboard Jungle” from Archie, Cheryl, and Veronica’s POVs.

*The format is kind of funky for this one because the sections were each attempts at separate fics back when the ep. originally aired. Also, I’ve never attempted anything from Cheryl’s POVs, so she may sound a bit off. Sorry!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Act I, Scene 1

“When you see a guy reach for stars in the sky”

Location: The front steps of Thistle House

“What do you want, Archie?”

Cheryl’s obviously startled to see him, and considering the hour and the gigantic amount of tension in their last conversation, he can’t say he blames her. But he decides to waive all formalities and just plunge right in, because he knows deep down in his gut that this idea of his is insane, and if he lets himself think about it for even one second, he might chicken out.

Which he can’t do.

Not for his dad’s sake, not for Veronica’s. They need to be kept safe whether or not Mr. Lodge is involved in some kind of shady deal, so that’s his priority right now. He tells Cheryl that he thinks he knows how to get the check she deserves a hundred times over for what that asshole did to her, delivers his weird request—one of Jason’s old blazers—and she agrees with surprising ease (and an even more surprising smile), but tells him to come back in the afternoon to get it. So he does, but this time, when she lets him in and leads him into what, even by daylight, looks like the creepiest living room in the entire world, the smile is replaced by a look that’s more searching than anything else.

And when she returns from wherever she went upstairs, a bulky, rubberized black bag in her hands, the scrutiny is even more pronounced.

“Not so fast, Red Knight,” she says, moving the big, suit-encasing rectangle out of the way when he reaches for it. “Astonishment may have prevented me from asking questions last night, but I’ve had all day to reflect on the bizarreness of this sudden interest in my well-being, and I think I’d like to know just what type of mission will be effectively financed by my dead brother’s clothing. Spill.”

“Cheryl—” he begins, but she cuts him off with a hard stare that makes him realize the futility of arguing. “Okay look,” he says, deciding he may as well just go ahead and level with her as much as
he can without giving away anything that absolutely has to be kept secret. “I told you I’m going to New York to pay a visit to you know who, and the thing is, I don’t stand a chance of getting in to see him if I don’t at least look like a student. I own one suit, and I don’t know all that much about clothes, but I do know it doesn’t look nearly as fancy as it should. That’s why I came to see you.”

“I see,” she responds, and though her tone’s still icy cold, he believes she really does. “Am I to infer that that need is why you’ve offered to play collection agent for me? A favor in return for a favor? Or is this simply a means of making yourself feel more like a righteously avenging angel and less like a revenge-seeking, guilt-ridden boyfriend who desperately wants to gag the only witness? Because if it’s the second, you can forget the whole thing. No one’s buying my silence. Not ever again.”

Archie pauses, unsure how he’s supposed to answer that. He told Agent Adams that he had an idea for a ruse, but now with Cheryl’s narrowed eyes practically boring holes into him, he’s beginning to wonder exactly how true that explanation is. Because ever since he found out that the nightmare Cheryl went through could very well have happened to Veronica, it’s like he’s constantly seething—even when he’s not thinking about it, the knowledge is there, slowly but steadily eating away at the back of his mind like some kind of lethal acid or something. He visited Thistle House last night intending to convince Cheryl that he’s going to visit Spence so he can clobber Nick St. Clair on Veronica’s behalf, but now he’s not too sure the primary reason he’s prepared to go through with this has anything whatsoever to do with the FBI. Maybe he’s not using Nick as an excuse to investigate for the FBI at all—maybe what he’s really doing is using the FBI as an excuse to confront the loser who went after both his girlfriend and a girl who’s like some weird cross between a friend, an enemy, and an older sister to him. Honestly, he doesn’t know. The whole thing is just so beyond complicated.

“I’m going there anyway, Cheryl,” he says finally, because if he’s not sure what the actual truth is, he can at least mention the stuff he knows isn’t a lie. “I don’t care whether you believe me or not when I say this has nothing to do with guilt, but it doesn’t. I think what that bastard did to you, what he did or tried to do to Ronnie—” He breaks off, jaw clenching at the thought. “It’s wrong. And if I can make him pay for it, I will. Do you still want to help me, or no?”

For a few seconds, Cheryl studies him. Then, wordlessly, she holds out the bag.

“Thank you,” he tells her gratefully. “I promise I’ll bring it back as soon as I’m done.”

She nods, the gesture quick and sharp. “I assume Veronica knows nothing about any of this?” she says, folding her arms.

“No. She doesn’t know anything.” A pang of guilt ripples through him, but he steels himself against it because he has to. Veronica can’t know; that’s the whole point of this deal, and even if her not-knowing wasn’t one of Agent Adams’ frontrunner conditions, she’d never go for the idea of an angry him visiting the king of the douchebags. “If I told her…”

“She would exterminate you,” Cheryl supplies calmly. “Probably on the spot.”

“Yeah.” Without exactly meaning to, he cracks a smile at the mental image of himself explaining to Veronica that he’s making an unscheduled field trip to Spence Academy. “And then she’d probably resurrect me and give me a long speech about stupid ideas and acting on them.”

Okay, is he starting to lose it, or does Cheryl almost smile, too? There’s no way to be sure, though. Whatever he saw is gone too fast for him to identify it, and when she speaks again, there’s not one trace of laughter in her voice.

“I see.” Lips pursed, she folds her arms. Bright red fingernails drumming busily, she gives him
another hard stare. “Well, I suppose that since I do benefit in part from this little venture, it wouldn’t be sporting of me to shout it from the rooftops. You can rest assured that your purported lady love won’t learn this particular secret from me.”

“Thank you,” he tells her again, gritting his teeth as her meaning whacks him upside the head. Now really isn’t the time to remember how much he wants to throw up when he thinks about that stupid kiss, or about how Veronica might very well never want to speak to him ever again because he couldn’t think fast enough to realize that it was going to happen or to shove Betty away once he did. “Cheryl, I really do appreciate this.”

“Don’t bother thanking me,” she says almost harshly, a tight, weird sort of smile stretching across her face. “I’m not doing any of this out of the goodness of my heart. Just…be on your way and don’t let yourself get caught. If you do, I can’t guarantee I’ll help.”

“You won’t have to.” Giving her a quick nod, he folds the bag over his arm and starts toward the door. “If anything like that happens, I’ll just say that I stole the blazer and did everything on a dare.”

“Whatever,” Cheryl says in a bored tone as she begins to close the door behind him. “Just keep my name out of your list of wiling aiders and abettors. If he thinks I sent you for extortion purposes, fine. But I won’t have that despicable lowlife thinking I was so afraid to face him that I begged you to do my dirty work for me.”

Archie nods again. “Okay.”

The heavy door clicks shut almost in his face, and he heaves a sigh of relief. Sweet. Mission number one is officially accomplished. His excuse and disguise are set.

Now if he can just get to New York and keep from annihilating his source of information, he might be all right.

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**Act II, Scene 1**

“*This is the story of a girl*”

*Location: A bedroom in Thistle House*

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It’s late when the knock sounds. So late, in fact, that what’s clearly meant to be a quiet report echoes through the ghastly halls of Thistle House with all the subtlety of a gunshot, and for one horrible second, every muscle in Cheryl’s body tenses. It’s another *caller*—one of those dimwitted, sex-starved drones who slink in after dark to temporarily spice up their bland vanilla existences with a dash of Penelope Blossom, AKA the unofficial Jezebel of Riverdale. But there’s no flutter of answering footsteps and as reason reasserts itself, she remembers that Mother’s already met her sordid quota for the night and won’t be expecting anyone until tomorrow at the earliest. For once, the knock is most likely for her. After all, Lord knows there’s no one besides a certain redhead errand boy who would be stupid enough to visit the castle of the dragoness—or is it dragonesses, plural?—at this hour.
Setting aside the essay outline she’s been trying to focus on all evening, she tosses back the covers with an annoyed sigh and retrieves her dressing gown from its silken heap on the floor. What Veronica sees in that harebrained swain of hers, she’ll never understand. He’s good-looking of course, and with a body like the one he’s got there have to be enjoyable fringe benefits, but even so, why would anyone willingly subject themselves to the endless headache that is Archie Andrews and his myriad of quixotic, mind-numbing issues? Particularly a girl of Veronica’s intelligence and fashion sense. It just seems so absurd.

Tiptoeing across the hall and down the stairs—habit, she admits grimly to herself, since it’s very likely that not one person under this roof would care enough to come investigate if she put on her chunkiest pair of heels and scream-stomped her way down every single step—she follows the eerily-distinct puddles of moonlight toward the door. She hates those stupid windows, she thinks bitterly, a shiver meandering down her spine as the shadow of some ugly plant outside crosses one of the panes and appears on the floor. Hates the way they seem to block the sun and welcome the darkness with open arms just to spite her. Hates the heavy curtains that enshroud them with all the homely charm of a funeral parlor. As if there weren’t enough ghoulishness in her life, she has to deal with the very architecture—with the very décor!—conspiring against her.

It’s enough to drive a person mad, and sometimes, secretly, she wonders if maybe it already is.

Maybe, even as she stands—or walks—here thinking about it, she’s losing her mind. Maybe every bit of the trauma she’s experienced over the last year has finally caught up to her, and maybe someday, she’ll be nothing more than a spooky Riverdale legend—the ghost story gruesome little brats try to frighten one another with, the tall tale good parents whisper in hollow tones around campfires when their children beg to be scared out of a good night’s sleep.

Cheryl Blossom, the teenaged Bertha Mason of Thistle House.

(Shes has, after all, already burned down a luxurious mansion belonging to an old, arrogant family, and Thornhill is rather disturbingly similar in name to Thornfield. Is it really out of the realm of possibility to wonder if she’s destined for the same dark fate?)

It’s in the throes of this less-than-cheery frame of mind that she reaches the door. Scowling defiantly at the monstrous thing, she undoes the bolt and flings the whole contraption open to find—sure enough—none other than Mr. Superman Complex himself shivering on the front stoop.

“Well?” she demands unceremoniously. He exhibits none of the triumphant signs she’d expect from a conquering hero, so he can’t have been very successful. “Enlighten me. Did you storm the castle or get tossed from the battlements to meet your grisly end below?”

“I got it,” he says, apparently not registering the sarcasm as he reaches into the pocket of that tacky letterman’s jacket she wishes he wouldn’t wear so often since it sometimes fools her into thinking that she’s seeing Jason. “The check.”

She stills, surprise making her hand tighten on the door handle. “He…gave it to you?” she says, unable to take her eyes off the little folded piece of paper. “Just like that?”

“More or less,” Archie answers, an uncomfortable sort of look flashing over his face as he gives the thing a small shake. “Here. I think this is yours.”

Suddenly speechless, she takes the check from him. “JJ’s blazer?” she hears herself ask as if from a distance, a dizzying wave of relief sweeping over her in tandem with wild joy. It’s done now. It’s over. Her mother no longer needs to auction herself off to the highest bidder, and she no longer has to live adjacent to the nightmarish world of provisional harlotry.
“I brought it with me.” He holds it out, and though he’s wadded up the entire thing and somehow managed to zip a quality garment bag the wrong way, she’s so grateful to the naïve simpleton before her that she could hug him. “Thanks again for letting me borrow it.”

“Of course,” she answers automatically, eyes traveling back to the piece of paper in her hand.

She should thank him, shouldn’t she? And sincerely, with neither shade nor cheek. That’s what Jason would do, what he’d tell her to do, and what he’d do for her if she refused. She feels it in her bones, just like she feels the chill of the wind, the lifelessness of the house, the glow of gratitude she just can’t seem to repress as her fingers smooth over the precious little rectangle in her hand. A kindness has been done for her, and to accept it while offering nothing in return—it feels wrong.

Especially considering who’s imparting that kindness.

Archie isn’t Jason, of course. He doesn’t love her and has probably never much liked her; if anything, he most likely fears her above all else, and with good reason. But he’s always been nice to her, helped her when there was absolutely nothing to be gained from the extra effort, and Cheryl has the memory of an elephant. She may allow things to go unmentioned, but that doesn’t mean she forgets them. He’s been there for her at some of her lowest moments exactly like a friend would, and even after she verbally sliced and diced him in front of half the high school at that wretched birthday party, he didn’t think twice about running out onto that ice to save her life. Is she really going to let this new good deed go un-thanked?

“Um…” Archie clears his throat, and she looks up, realizing with a start that she’s been staring almost unblinkingly at the check lying in her open palm. “I’m gonna go now,” he says, giving her a small smile. “Sorry to bother you so late, and…see you at school, I guess.”

She nods, head still spinning. “Right. Yes.”

He jogs off down the driveway, sneakers slapping faintly against the stone. Fingers crumpling around her newly-acquired key to a relatively normal life, she waits until he melts into the darkness before closing the door and slumping against it.

Thank you, she screams after him internally, sliding down into a heap on the floor when her knees randomly give out. Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU, you can’t possibly imagine what this means to me.

Without warning, her vision mists over and she jams a fist against her mouth to muffle the choky half-sob that burbles out. No, Archie isn’t JJ, he never has been and he never will be, but he’s got the same crazy-generous heart underneath all the idiocy, and if he doesn’t love or even like her, at least he seems to give a damn some of the time. And maybe that stems from nothing more than the not-so-common decency his stupid family cared enough to instill in him, but what of it? He was ready to fight a would-be rapist for her just like Veronica had been, and—oh, God.

Veronica.

Veronica, who chased after her when she ran out of a pep rally in tears and hugged her without censure or useless pity; who stood by her before, during, and after the worst memorial service for the best boy who ever lived, and who faced down her own judgmental succubus of a mother while Cheryl huddled by the fire feeling like a lost heap of pathetic weakness. Veronica, whose happiness she could potentially destroy by releasing one tiny piece of information.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Cheryl impatiently claws back a handful of hair as a heavy, weary sort of deep-blueness seeps into her soul. Why, why, why is she like this? First Josie, now Veronica—it’s like she’s some spiteful, malicious witch, irresistibly compelled to stamp out joy whenever the urge strikes, and why? Because the scarred, ugly part of her that she uses to hide the pitifully lonely
person inside *enjoys* wreaking havoc. She’s like an angry two-year-old, hell-bent on ruining everyone else’s fun simply because their fun doesn’t revolve around or even involve her. To preserve the school life she’s accustomed to, she’s willing to threaten the happiness of people she might dare to call friends if she were the kind of girl who actually let herself want things like that.

Because real talk, Cheryl Blossom doesn’t have *friends*. She has minions, haters, the occasional semi-deranged-worshipper-from-afar, and the chosen few she chooses to hang out with and in whom she places a modicum of trust: Josie and Veronica.

And yes, maybe they’re not what most people would label *friends*, but they are dear to her. For lack of a better description, they’re…her girls. The ones to whom she can reveal Achilles’ heel locations because deep down, in their powerful and occasionally-exasperating souls, they’re all three cut from the same unyielding, fashion-forward cloth. Josie has been loyal for years now, and considering they’ve shared a divas-only bond for quite some time now, no one questions why they get along.

But Veronica? That one’s a different story. Unless Cheryl’s greatly mistaken (and she knows she’s not), most of Riverdale High is still trying to understand why the two of them haven’t torn one another limb from limb yet. According to every Rule for the Deportment of Mean Girls ever outlined by a jealous, try-hard wallflower who couldn’t achieve Queen Bee status even if she were handed the *For Dummies* manual, they should have. Cheryl ought to hate Veronica with a burning, poisonous passion, because as all the sad little Would-Bes around her like to whisper behind their hands whenever she and Veronica go from bickering about choreography to planning a girls’ night at the Bijou, Alpha Females aren’t supposed to coexist even relatively peacefully.

Yet somehow, she doesn’t, and somehow, they do.

There are, of course, those delicate moments where opinions don’t mesh and they each flex their well-toned and well-honed HBIC muscles while the general peasantry gawks at them in wonder, but in a way she knows the vast majority of said general peasantry will never be able to comprehend, Cheryl enjoys those battles. Until Veronica arrived in Riverdale, exhilarating skirmishes were literally nonexistent and life was well-regulated but boring, because Josie flatly refused to trade insults during a fight and everyone else around Cheryl was too weak and witless to pose even a small challenge. Plenty of plebes disliked her, sure, but not one of them was ever brave enough to say it to her face, so though it was infuriating to have Veronica waltz in and drag an insecure interloper into the very heart of the extra-curricular world, Cheryl appreciated the challenge.

And now, though she suspects they’ll still have moments where they’ll roll their eyes at one another and terrify everyone in the vicinity with nothing more than verbal sparring, Cheryl holds a deep respect for the other girl (a respect she’ll categorically deny except in dire straits, but a respect nonetheless). She’s never had or wanted a sister, but it’s becoming more and more apparent that her relationship with Veronica is rather of that nature. Sometimes they’re like besties, sometimes they loathe the sight of one another, often they squabble, occasionally she melts down and Veronica steps in to hug and remind her that while boss bitches may cry when no one’s looking, they don’t ever let what caused the tears defeat them—they get up and kick it in the teeth with style, grace, and merciless accuracy.

Is she really willing to do this to the frenemy/sister/fellow Vixen who’s also come closer to the machinations of Nick St. Clair than either of them ever wanted?

Unfolding her hand, Cheryl studies the innocuous-yet-glorious scrap of paper, gasping when she realizes the amount is much higher than expected. The look on Archie’s face when he learned what his girlfriend went through runs through her head, and she thinks suddenly of how he smiles in class when Veronica makes some joke that no one else can hear. She thinks of the way Veronica looks at
him when he’s not looking at her—which is almost never, but still—and she sighs. They’re so sickeningly crazy about each other that it disgusts her sometimes and makes her feel as though they’re parading their happiness around at the expense of the forever alone, but even so…she’s gloomily glad they’ve found each other. They’re a perfect fit somehow, and there’s no way in hell she’s going to be the one to tear them apart. Not now, anyway. Archie’s going to have to decide on his own what, if anything, he wants to tell Veronica.

For once, Cheryl Blossom refuses to be the town crier.

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**Act III, Scene 1.**

“*You always hurt the one you love*”

*Location: A booth in Pop’s Chock’lit Shoppe*

A long, almost sluggish count of three ticks by, but all Veronica can do is stare at the boy in front of her. She’s dimly aware that nothing around them has changed—the air’s still full of grease, of music, of the sharp clinks of dingy cutlery knocking against chipped plates, of low voices buzzing about things that might be cheerful or things that might be melancholy—but inside, she’s as off-balance as if a rug has just been yanked out from under her. Because in a way, it has. He’s speaking again, words tumbling over each other with a desperate sort of honesty that the perpetually calm, sensible part of her brain recognizes as the truth, but still. None of it’s really registering. She’s too busy being latched onto the news he’s just imparted—news that’s shaking her in a way she never expected news from any boy, ever, could possibly shake her.

“You kissed Betty?” she says haltingly when he pauses for breath, because maybe, if she says it out loud, she’ll be able to understand it. Maybe it’ll make more sense.

Only, it doesn’t.

Veronica Lodge is no coward when it comes to the awful truth. She believes in confronting facts, in facing reality head-on, in never, ever playing ostrich and burying heads in the sand no matter how inviting such a move might seem, but this—this is almost impossible to comprehend. She repeats it again (*You and Betty kissed?*) and again (*You and Betty kissed.*) but the reasons behind it all continue to elude her. Because…she knows both these people. She loves both these people, for heaven’s sake. Betty is her best friend, easily the realest one she’s ever had, and Archie…

Oh, Archie.

She looks at him again—really looks this time, and the cold, tight ball that began building in her chest the instant he blurted out his confession suddenly loosens. It’s still there, an unpleasant, aching knot of *WHY*, but she’s now able to notice that he’s clearly experiencing a similar sensation. He practically exudes abject misery, and she’s reminded with a sharp pang of how lost he looked when she left him standing all alone in that dismal parking lot.

In the back of her mind, she knows what every girl who’s never been in her exact position would advise her to do—scream at him, storm off, ‘respect’ herself enough to conclude that she deserves
better and walk with all possible speed away from a lying tool like that. But Veronica Lodge isn’t the kind of girl to let emotions cloud her judgment. Not for long, anyway. She’s already seen too much of the world to believe that any issue is as strictly black-and-white as it may seem, and as much as this revelation sickens her and tempts her to shout BETRAYAL! from the rooftops, she refuses to let herself succumb to the pettiness of that temptation. Archie isn’t a lying tool. Therefore, she won’t treat him as such.

She’s not, however, entirely sure she can rationalize what the hell’s going on in the mind of her best friend—the one who claims to be above this sort of thing, the one who’s spent literal months moping over her beanie-wearing ex-boyfriend and worrying about the nature of his relationship with Toni Topaz, and the one who, Veronica doesn’t doubt for a second, is the initiating party in this mess. As one of the few people privy to the full story behind the Archie-Val breakup due to her friendship with all parties involved, Veronica knows very well that Archie took half-responsibility for something that Cheryl, even in her bitterest of moods, freely admits she started. There may be no tangible proof that Betty’s the one who instigated the kiss, but Veronica’s no fool. She’s been with both of them during moments of intense emotional distress, and she knows which one is more likely to lose their tenuous grasp on logic and jump to extremes first.

All that aside, though—she knows Archie. He’s unsure of himself and exasperatingly prone to impulsive behavior, but he does love her. A lot. Like no one else ever has, not in her whole entire life. That’s why she was so freaked out when he first told her, and why she’s so asea right now. This boy with the red hair, mammoth grin, and abysmal judgment matters to her on a level she almost fears, and for a horrible instant right after he told her he’d kissed someone else, she could feel all sense of reason slipping away and wondered wildly if he had just tired of dealing with the insane amount of drama her family brings into his life. Wondered if he’d decided he maybe didn’t love her enough after all to want the bother of putting up with the shadiness, or the never-ending barbs her father insists on hurling his way at every possible turn. But the way he’s talking to her, the way he’s so obviously bracing for impact and waiting for her to ream him out and leave like almost everyone who’s ever been important to him does time and time again—it tells her that he means every word.

And that, more than anything, is what decides her.

She’s grown up in a glamorous, false paradise created for her by a lot of well-meaning and not-so-well-meaning liars, and it’s hardened her in a way most people don’t notice and probably wouldn’t be able to grasp even if they did. Trust is rare. Forgiveness isn’t done. Caring is an ill-advised luxury, and sharing private concerns is tantamount to sheer stupidity, because secret-revealing means making oneself voluntarily vulnerable, and making oneself voluntarily vulnerable essentially means inviting hurt. She’s not sweet. She’s not pure. No one outside of (maybe) her grandmother has ever mistaken her for an innocent good girl who needs shielding from the cruelty of the world, nor will they, nor should they. She hasn’t forgotten the sheer ugliness of those comments made about her right after she moved to Riverdale, and how many of them all ended with the same sort of sentiment when the occasional guilt-ridden soul ventured a half-hearted rebuke: She’s a bitch. She can take it.

Yeah, she is.

And yes, she can.

But that doesn’t mean looking like she doesn’t care is an easy thing to accomplish, or that she dreams of going through life depending on no one but herself simply because she possesses the apparently abnormal ability to function that way. It’s nice to be able to lean on someone every once in a while. Someone who doesn’t make her feel like she’s her only port in a storm. Someone like the boy sitting across from her, his face taut with worry as he alternates between staring at her like he’s afraid she hates him and hanging his head. He’s never held her reputation against her, not once, and even when
she tries to push him out of the way and do everything herself the way she’s always done, he persists in sticking around. In trying to help her just because.

What kind of idiot would she be to flip out over one kiss that happened at a tense, dramatic moment during an interval in which the two of them were broken up—and by her choice rather than his?

No.

She’s not that spiteful. She’s not jumping for joy or anything, but—she is not that spiteful. She refuses to be. Even the old Veronica, the one who had no qualms about metaphorically flaying anyone who’d possibly wronged her—even she would balk at pulling a stunt like that.

Reaching for his hand, she takes a deep breath.

“It’s okay,” she says softly, explaining her reasons to him as clearly as she can given the exhaustion she feels at the internal war of emotions inside of her.

Relief floods his face, and when he tells her he loves her, it’s like déjà vu. Except this time, she doesn’t hesitate to say it back, and this time, she thinks about how running away from what she feels is what started this train wreck in the first place. But when he leans over the table and kisses her, she also thinks about how in the grand scheme of things, none of that matters.

Bottom line: he loves her. That’s why he came clean and gave her the chance to torpedo everything.

Footnote under the bottom line: she loves him. That’s why she didn’t.

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**Act III, Scene 2**

“When you say nothing at all”

*Location: The Andrews’ House*

Although they leave the diner hand in hand and don’t let go until they’re safe inside his room, she can tell he’s still worried. And it’s both senseless and a little frustrating, especially since she assured him multiple times on the way over that she forgives him. But when he turns back around from shutting the door, the almost frightened way he’s scanning her face makes the pieces of the puzzle fall suddenly into place:

He’s waiting for her to backtrack. To put a recall out on her forgiveness. To say something snide and cutting about how she’s been hurt, about how he’s hurt her, because that’s what he’s used to, and that’s what he thinks he deserves as punishment for what he’s done. And it breaks her heart a little, because he can’t ever seem to understand that no matter what happens between them, she’s always going to care about him. That she hasn’t thrown her lot in with his just to crumble at the first sign of trouble on the horizon. Being loved, giving away her love…that’s what scares her and makes her second-guess herself. Not the potential for an uphill battle full of complicated obstacles.

But again, he doesn’t know that, does he?
Squaring her shoulders, she tosses her purse aside and steps toward him, reaching up to place both hands firmly on either side of his face.

“Archie,” she intones, looking him straight in the eye, “I meant every single word I’ve said since we were sitting in that booth. I am not thrilled any of this happened, but neither am I harboring any kind of resentment toward you for anything you did while we were broken up. For one thing, that’s so Rachel Green, circa ninety-whatever, and for another, I’m possibly the last person on earth who should be judging spontaneous kisses.”

“Veronica…” He steps closer, hands curling around her waist.

“No.” She shakes her head, tapping her thumbs gently against his cheeks. “I’m serious. The first time we ever kissed—it wasn’t something I planned on doing. At all. And I’m pretty sure you didn’t plan on it either. It just happened. As things do. We were there, it was dark, no one else was around, we’d had a little bit to drink, there was…I don’t know, something between us, and we gave into it. It’s insanely hard to control actions in the heat of a moment, and it’s ridiculous to demand penance from someone just because—”

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“Veronica.”

The grip on her waist tightens, simultaneously cutting her off and sending shivers galloping through her. For an erratic heartbeat or two they stand about a foot apart, just staring at one another. Then he locks his arms around her and tugs her flush up against him, sighing as he presses his forehead to hers.

“It was nothing like the first time we kissed, okay?” he says softly.

Confusion rising, she lets her hands drift down to his shoulders. “What do you mean?” she asks, leaning back a little so she can frown up at him. “Or—how so, I guess I should say?”

His voice lowers. “I mean I didn’t even know there was a chance it might happen until right when it was happening. Like, she was panicking one second and I was trying to get her to focus, and then the next—I don’t know, it was so weird and so random, and afterward, I kind of wanted to just forget it ever happened. But with you…” He swallows, the rest of the sentence fading into a whisper. “Ronnie, I really, really wanted to kiss you. And I didn’t want to forget.”

Veronica inhales sharply. The way he’s looking at her, those honey-gold eyes of his begging her to understand what he’s trying to say, to forgive what’s already been forgiven—it pains her more than she knows he’ll ever believe. He’s a born protector, bound and determined to fight the battles of everyone who seems like they might be in need of a champion and she loves that about him, but he’s also so dense at times that it makes her want to scream at him on his own stupid behalf. She’s not some alabaster saint, smiling beatifically down from her immaculate pedestal on the unworthy masses below. Rather, she’s the tarnished product of an unscrupulous past who has to work hard just to keep the wicked impulses of yesteryear at bay, and why he can’t ever see that, why he insists on behaving like she hung the damn moon and he’s not worthy to breathe the same air—God, it’s infuriating, and no, she’s not going to allow it. Apologies and/or restitution are fine. Groveling is gratuitous, and she doesn’t need or want that. Not from anyone, but especially not from him.

Slowly, deliberately, she brings her hands up to cup his face. Even in the murky light of his one-lamp room, she doesn’t miss the way his skin reddens beneath her fingertips, or the way he leans into her touch while his gaze stays locked on hers. And all at once, it dawns on her that, for as long as she’s known him, words haven’t exactly been his strong suit. Multiple times now, she’s watched him express those intense emotions of his in every non-verbal fashion known to humankind, and since he’s also one of the most guileless people on the planet, of course he’s no good at reading between
“Archie,” she says as firmly as she can around the lump that’s rapidly forming in her throat. “I don’t take the word *forgive* lightly, and I certainly don’t say it if I’m not actually feeling it. So you can stop with the atonement. Yes, I believe you, and yes, I forgive you for an unplanned kiss that happened while we weren’t together.”

The words are barely out of her mouth when he engulfs her in a hug that should seem suffocating, but instead warms her from head to toe.

“I love you,” he whispers into her hair, and though she can’t see anything but a dark and close-up view of his shirt, she knows she’s at last convinced him that she means what she’s saying.

But he also sounds closer to breaking down than she’s comfortable with, so after she whispers her second *I love you, too* of the night into his chest, she wriggles her head out from under his arm, smiles softly at him, and pulls him into a slow, scorching kiss.

“Can you stay?” he asks when they finally come up for air, his voice shaky.

She nods, eyes closing on reflex as his lips travel down the side of her throat. If Andre reports her absence to her parents when they get back from their weekend meeting with some of the potential investors, so be it. She doesn’t care. “No one else is home tonight.”

“God, Ronnie,” he breathes, the words hot against her pulse. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t.” She hangs on when he hauls her up into his arms, fingers digging into his shirt, legs wrapped vice-like around his torso. “Please, don’t. I can’t do that right now, I just…”

“What?” he says uncertainly, stilling with one hand cupped around the back of her head. “Are you—do you want me to stop?”

“No,” she blurts out, her grip strengthening when she feels his relax ever so slightly. “Not that. That’s not it.”

“You sure?”

*Sure?* She trails a finger along his jawline, heart stuttering under his gaze as she thinks that she’s never been surer of anything in her life. “I’m sure,” she whispers. “Just kiss me, Archie.”

The arm encircling her waist tightens, and in an instant, his mouth is on hers. Heat rages through her, a tiny flame-turned-wildfire that blazes brighter with every scuff of his lips, every slide of his hands, every ragged breath he spills onto her skin, and she revels in every second of it. For now at least, there are no walls between them—no secrets. It’s just her, just him, and in this moment they’re indestructible. Untouchable. Safe.

*For now.*

Later, when they’re lying side by side under the blankets, his arm tucked under her head, he asks her why she kept quiet about Nick. Why she didn’t tell him what almost happened to her. And because she doesn’t know how she can even begin to explain the reasons behind her silence—mortification, fear of how he’d react, the way her family operates—she goes with the safest, if most humiliating part of the truth, and admits that the whole ghastly affair shook her confidence. But when he asks if she shared the information with anyone other than Cheryl, she lies outright. Because she’s already tainted. He’s not. If deceit is the one and only way she can protect him from her family’s dark side, then she’ll deceive him. Every time. Even he hates her for it, even if she hates herself for it.
Which she already does.

Especially when his arm goes over her protectively and his fingers link up with hers. He’s so close to her now, both literally and figuratively speaking, that it’s terrifying. She’s always taken care of herself, kept everyone at a convenient distance, hidden any and all vulnerabilities so that no one would ever have the chance to see, let alone exploit them. But Archie has a knack for circumventing her defenses, and now, with his chin tucked into the hollow of her shoulder, his breath buzzing softly in her ear as he starts to drift off into dreamland, she realizes anew how much of her heart belongs to the lovable hothead beside her. How much his concern means to her. How much she wishes she could just push a button and keep him safe and happy forever. Most of all, though, she realizes how much she doesn’t want him to see the tears dripping down her cheeks. He’ll only attribute them to the wrong thing, and she doesn’t think she’s up to correcting him. After all, she’s only just learned to let out the I love you. At this moment in time, voicing the whys is so beyond her capabilities that she hides the telltale drops of salt-water without a second thought.

She’s not sure how successful the attempt is, though. Because when she wakes up, she’s huddled in his arms. He doesn’t mention her traitorously damp and puffy eyes, or the way she’s holding onto him like she’s drowning and he’s her life preserver. But his thumb never stops tracing comforting little paths over her shoulder blade, and when he buries a kiss somewhere in her tangled mass of hair, she can feel the latent worry as easily as she can feel the steady thumping of his heart. So when he whispers a soft Morning into her ear, she takes his hand. Makes sure he can see the smile that that hesitant, husky voice of his brings to her face even during those moments when she feels the most like crying.

“Morning,” she says brightly, planting a resounding kiss on the back of his hand before tossing it away and snuggling closer. “Now, shut up and give me five more minutes. I’m a little tired after the nighttime calisthenics.”

He laughs.

She smiles.

And it's stupid to even think it, but for three seconds, she honestly believes the world is perfect.

Chapter End Notes

* “When you see a guy reach for stars in the sky” is a line from “Guys and Dolls.” It seemed appropriate here because Archie’s the kind of guy who’ll go above and beyond for his girl. (As evidenced by last week’s episode which, by the way, OH MY GOSH, MY POOR LITTLE BABIES! Nick St. Clair can go play chicken with a train as far as I’m concerned. I haven’t hated a non-main villain this much in a while.)

* “This is the story of a girl” is a line from “Absolutely (Story of a Girl) by Nine Days. It’s one of my favorite songs ever, so of course I reference it whenever possible. Also, I feel like it weirdly fits Cheryl?

* “You always hurt the one you love” is a line from a really great song by the same title. There are about a hundred different versions of this song, but the Connie Francis, Peggy Lee, and Mills Brothers versions are my favorite. I used it here because I always think of it when something goes wrong for my favorite couple. I love this scene in the show (even though it’s hard to watch), in part because A obviously feels horrible about
everything, but mainly because V doesn’t pitch a fit. She stays smart, stays cool, and
hears Archie out rather than jumping to conclusions. She actually *gasp* USES HER
HEAD!!! I was so happy when that happened that I had to pause the ep. and take a
moment.

* “When you say nothing at all” is a line from a song by the same title. I grew up on
three different versions of it (Ronan Keating, Alison Krauss, and Keith Whitley), but the
Ronan Keating version is the one I had in mind here, and I used it because in my
opinion, A&V are both very active, very rooted-in-the-present people. They’re each
capable of using words to communicate, but that’s not necessarily the medium they
gravitate toward. Throughout the series, we’ve seen them respond better to physical
demonstrations of emotion rather than verbal…a hug, for instance, is both of their go-to
offers of comfort, and each of them seems better comforted by a hug than by a bunch of
encouraging words. They tend to read the other person’s mood and then do what they
can to help it rather than being like “What are you feeling? Tell me everything. Let’s
sort through your fears.” For them, endless talking isn’t going to make them feel any
better, and there’s a chance it’ll actually make them feel worse. At the end of the day,
they’re action-oriented, and showing rather than telling is their strongest suit.

* Bertha Mason is a reference to a character from Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte. Even
if you’ve never read the book, there’s a good chance you’ve heard of her.

* I have a couple lighter-toned fics that were supposed to go up before this one, but after
Nick turned up in last week’s ep, I decided I might as well upload this one now. I meant
to do it a few days ago when I had time, but then I missed the window and figured I’d
better wait until I saw how intense 2x20 was going to be. Considering how next week’s
ep looks, it seems like a good idea to reserve the happier ones and post this one.

**Random note: I love Archie and Cheryl’s weird, almost sibling-like dynamic and
want to see more of it (ditto for Veronica and Kevin). In my head, Cheryl’s like
Veronica’s sister and Kevin’s like her brother, so basically, Cheryl and Kevin are
Archie’s sis and bro-in-law. Or maybe Cheryl’s Archie’s sister and Veronica’s sister-in-
law? I don’t know. I just love it. Also, why aren’t there more Cheryl/Kevin scenes?
**Random note #2: I have no idea what color KJ Apa’s eyes are other than some variety
of brown, and since brown is a terribly vague description, I may have taken some
liberties with the exact shade of Archie's eyes. Seriously, does ANYONE on earth have
gold eyes? I doubt it.

***Thanks for reading/commenting! Sorry it’s been so long since my last update, and
hope you guys are doing awesome! (Which you should be after THAT scene last night.
Whew! *Fans self* Anyone else think it didn't last long enough???)
Chapter Summary

To help one person—and maybe to impress another—Veronica volunteers for a task that’s a little beyond her expertise.

Set somewhere between 2x11 “The Wrestler” and 2x12 “The Wicked and the Divine.”

Chapter Notes

I have no idea how Riverdale time works, but Archie was trying out for basketball/wrestling, and those definitely take place in the fall, so theoretically speaking, the kid should be extraordinarily busy with all that and football stuff at this point, hence Veronica wanting to help. Beware, though...this one came from a random idea, so it's sort of rambling and plotless :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No! Bad dog. Off. SIT.”

Frantically angling her head to the side, Veronica grimaced as a fresh batch of liver-laced canine breath wafted into her face. An enthusiastic lick from a spongy tongue followed close upon the heels of the unpleasant sensation, and she gritted her teeth as her already-dwindling patience all but evaporated.

“Vegas!” she hissed, struggling in vain to push the giant animal’s paws off her shoulders so she could at least see where on the collar she was supposed to clip the damn leash. “Stop it!”

“Everything all right down there, sweetie?” a voice called from somewhere upstairs. “Do you need any help?”

Veronica winced as another unwanted swathe of dog saliva got smeared across her cheek. “Yes,” she called back. “I mean, yes, it’s all good, Mrs. Andrews! No, I don’t any help. Thank you for the offer, though. I do appreciate it.”

“All right, then. Just holler if you change your mind, okay?”

“Will do.”

Squaring her shoulders, Veronica watched her chance and ducked as a cold, wet nose appeared in her face again. For a moment, the world turned furry and she felt certain that she would be spending the rest of the week trying to wash leftover bits of bulk-buy dog chow from her hair. Then, with a gasp of relief, she heard the hook click into place.

“All right, you,” she muttered, stepping back and leveling a stern glance at the deceptively innocent-looking creature. “We are going for a walk. Not a speed-walk, not a jog, and most certainly not a
run. So don’t get any ideas.” As if in answer, the dog gave a short, quick bark, and she rolled her eyes. “Good. Glad we’re on the same page. We’re leaving now, Mr. and Mrs. Andrews,” she called up the stairs. “Be back soon.”

“All right, hon,” the woman responded. “Be safe, all right?”

“I will. Best of luck at the doctor’s, Mr. Andrews.”

“Thank you,” came the distant reply. “Oh, and Veronica, make sure you take the spare key. We’ll probably still be at the checkup, and Archie may not be back in time to let you in.”

“Got it,” Veronica answered, heading into the kitchen to collect the extra key from its new spot in one of the kitchen drawers.

After the advent of the Black Hood, Archie had moved the key indoors, saying that he and his dad would have to just remember their keys or deal with the inconvenience of being locked out if that’s what it came to. And though the Black Hood was officially no more, he had yet to return it to its original location. Personally, Veronica was beginning to doubt he ever would. Leaving a key under the doormat where anyone could get at it was an act of trust. Now that so much of his trust—in the town, maybe in humanity itself—had been broken, Archie wasn’t eager to extend any more.

That was, she thought, eyeing her quadrupedal companion suspiciously, a good part of why she was now stepping out into the dying sunshine with a dog in tow.

Archie had been held up by something football-related at school, so she’d offered to drop by his house earlier than she’d planned on and explain to his parents why he was later than usual. When it came to the people he cared about, her boyfriend was a chronic, albeit fairly silent worrier, and he didn’t need any additional stress—if she could lighten his already unnecessarily-heavy load, she intended to do it.

But when she’d arrived and found his mother in the process of trying to figure out how to take care of a restless dog and still make the doctor’s appointment on time, her trouble began. Seeing a chance to offer her services, Veronica had volunteered to take the Labrador on his afternoon constitutional (a suggestion that had earned her the same skeptical look Archie had given her several months ago, although the one from this redhead was more heavily veiled in politeness). She’d insisted it was no trouble, that she’d be glad to do it, but she had a feeling she hadn’t convinced anyone. Least of all Mary Andrews.

Which, in all honesty, bothered her.

Veronica Lodge wasn’t one to worry much about whether or not people liked her. Experience had taught her that no one can please everyone all the time, and in her opinion, the best plan was to simply be oneself and carry on about one’s business regardless of outside commentary. But she suspected that Archie’s mom found her woefully lacking in basic life skills, and though she knew it made no sense, the notion troubled her. She wanted her boyfriend’s mother to know that even if she had only theoretical knowledge of how to work a washing machine or the proper way to rake leaves, she wasn’t incapable of learning how to do any of those things.

Caught up in the moment, she hadn’t given any of it a second thought. But now the realities of her predicament were setting in, and now she had to somehow convince the largest dog she’d ever been around that the only place they were going to visit today was the park. Already, Dear Fido showed signs of wanting to explore every single noise that surrounded them, and Veronica yelped as his abrupt pursuit of a raucous squirrel nearly jerked her arm out of its socket.
“Hey! Stop it,” she commanded, heels clacking wildly on the sidewalk as she broke into a
dangerously-speedy trot just to keep up. “This isn’t the fifty-yard dash, you little fiend.”

Oh God, why on earth hadn’t she thought to change into her cheer shoes for this? They were just
sitting there, gathering dust in her bag. Too late now to mourn the neglecting of sensible footgear,
though. She was already straining just to slow their far too brisk pace; no way in hell was she going
to be able to steer them back toward the house. What was that thing said to dogs in order to make
them slow down? She couldn’t remember. The only dogs she’d ever had more than a passing
acquaintance with could fit inside a fairly small handbag, so breakneck events like chasing after
squirrels had never posed much of a problem. But now, with her energetic charge sprinting toward
his chattering quarry and the threat of bodily injury to both her and the fluffy-tailed rodent looming...

A small twig snapped beneath her left heel, and like a revelatory flash, it came to her.

“Vegas, heel!” she commanded, gasping in relief when the order was heeded fast enough to almost
run her into the wagging tail. “Okay, good boy.” Bending over to catch her breath, she closed her
eyes as another juicy lick greeted her. “Ugh,” she muttered, scrubbing the back of her hand across
her mouth in disgust. “Can we not, please?”

Another cheerful bark was the only reply, and long before they reached the park, Veronica found
herself constructing contingency plans for what she’d do in the event that Vegas and his overzealous
exercise regimen caused her to fracture something.

Which, she reflected gloomily, was looking likelier by the second. Especially taking into account the
way the lab seemed to consider it his personal mission to investigate everything he laid eyes on or
picked up on the breeze, even if doing so meant dragging her through every puddle and scratchy
shrub in the area. And she wasn’t too thrilled with the way he was currently eyeing the gang of
rowdy ducks waddling toward the pond, either. The whole scenario seemed ominous.

“Vegas, you stupid mutt,” she warned, planting her feet as firmly as the soft ground allowed. “Don’t
you dare.”

It was, she thought as the dog charged forward, almost funny how good that animal was at ignoring
her.

Almost.

~*~

By the time she began the slow trudge back from the park, Veronica had broken one heel, gained
several pounds of mud, and arrived at two very important conclusions.

Conclusion Number One: it was nothing short of an actual miracle that no one had borne witness to
the harrowing fall she’d taken when Cerebus personified darted at the quacking squad. (Just as it was
also a miracle that she could still walk.) Conclusion Number Two: she was now, henceforth and
forevermore, a cat person.

And no amount of apologetic nosing was going to change her mind, either.

Yanking her hand away from all the snuffling, she aimed an exasperated glare down at her cheery,
now-docile companion. “Yeah, you’d better feel guilty, you demon.”

The initial falling to her knees had been bad enough, but the dragging—through sludgy mud and
over more rocks than she’d ever known existed in that park—had been worse. She’d let go of the
leash the instant she hit the ground, but since the leash had somehow wound itself around her leg, it
had done little good. She’d taken a miniature tour of the grounds in a way no human being should ever have to, and then to top it all off, the party responsible for her tumble came bounding joyfully up to lick her face, pant doggy breath everywhere, and shake scummy pond water all over her. Now, with the back pockets of her pants all but ripped out (thank God she had decided to wear a car coat rather than a bolero jacket), the fabric around her knees torn and muddy, and her left pump sans its heel, all she cared about was being able to sit on something not comprised of stone, leaves, or mud.

Wait, was that her phone?

Halting, she pushed the leash farther up her wrist and dug around in her vibrating coat pocket. The sun hadn’t quite finished setting and she was only a half-block away from the Andrews’ house now, so surely it wasn’t…

ARCHIE CALLING.

Okay, so maybe her luck wasn’t the greatest, but that didn’t necessarily mean that he was calling to find out where she was, right? Maybe he was just now leaving school.

As if on cue, a door slammed off in the distance, and Veronica sighed when she glanced up from her phone’s screen to see a familiar streak of bright orange bobbing toward the sidewalk. She had hoped that she’d at least make it back before he did, but c’est la vie.

“I’m almost there, so don’t freak out,” she announced in lieu of a greeting when she hit the answer button. “Just look up the street.”

The orange streak turned immediately, and in a few seconds there it came jogging toward her, gleaming in the fading light.

“Are you all right?”

The question drifted toward her above the sound of pounding sneakers, and she rolled her eyes. That kind of unwarranted hustling just reemphasized the disastrousness of the whole dog-walking endeavor. Instead of helping her hassled boyfriend, she’d only added herself to his list of worries.

“Yes, I’m fine. Just a little hobbled at the moment,” she responded, exhibiting her mangled shoe as he drew up even with her. “Hence the larghissimo pace.”

“Oh my God.” Mouth hanging open, he took in her disheveled appearance with a kind of horror. “Ronnie, what the hell happened?”

Sighing loudly, Veronica stepped over the leash as the friendly perpetrator once again tried to wind it around her legs. “Long story short: I set out to walk your dog, and your dog walked me.” Seeing his eyes widen, then start to twinkle as they went from her to Vegas, then back to her, she resumed her uneven march with as much dignity as she could muster under the circumstances. “If you laugh at me, I’ll stab you with my broken heel.”

“Your broken…?”

She could practically feel him staring at her feet as he hurried to catch up with her—a feat accomplished in two quick strides, thanks to her obnoxiously slow speed and his longer legs—but didn’t bother elaborating.

After a second or two, he coughed. “Uh, Ronnie, I hate to say this, but I think you left your broken —”
Silently, she stuck a hand down the front of her shirt, extracted the heel from where she’d stashed it after the fall, and held it aloft for inspection. “You were saying?”

“Oh.”

She glanced at him sharply, eyes narrowing at the telltale quiver in his voice.

“I’m not laughing!” he insisted, the denial flatly contradicted by the intense pucker around his mouth. “I’m not, I swear.”

Emitting a huff of disgust, she turned her gaze straight ahead and continued on down the walk. At this point, it was almost impossible to decide which smarted more—her pride, her knees, or the left side of her ass which she low-key thought might be bleeding—but she refused to admit any of that with him a foot away. Particularly since he’d decided to act as though he weren’t cracking up at her wretched state.

Head held high, she limped along frostily. Fine. If he wanted to poke fun, that was his prerogative. But before she could formulate a crushing reply to apprise him of that fact, a pair of yellow-leather arms slid around her middle and brought her progress to an abrupt halt.

“Seriously?” she said in the grumpiest tone she could manage considering that the present combination of frustration, pain, and his easy affectionateness was mere seconds away from making her cry. “You’re going to stop me when I’m this close to returning the Hound of the Baskervilles to the lair from whence he came?”

She felt rather than saw his smile bloom against her cheek.

“Yeah, kinda.” In one smooth, Prince Charming-esque move, he swept her neatly up off the ground. Tongue sandwiched between his teeth in a wide, playful grin, he shifted his lower arm to a more secure hold beneath her knees. “’Cause maybe this way you’ll be less mad at me?”

Oh, please.

Rolling her eyes, she clasped her hands together behind his neck for added stability as he set off down the walk. It really was unfair how difficult he made it to maintain a sour disposition around him.

“For the record, I’m not mad at you,” she informed him, a massive sigh escaping as she let her head fall onto his shoulder. “I’m just extremely annoyed with both Man’s Best Friend and myself right now, and you finding everything hilarious is the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back.” Casting a disgruntled look down at the dog trotting placidly along beside Archie, she shook her head. “On the bright side, though, after chasing the Riverdale fauna to his heart’s content, your sprightly little pup should sleep well, so I did accomplish something.”

“Hey.” The hand closest to her waist pressed gently.

She frowned. “Yes?”

“I get why you’re pissed at Vegas,” he said, chin receding hilariously into his neck as he tries to get a look at her. “That one’s pretty obvious. But why are you mad at you?”

“Because…” She hesitated, reluctant to explain her ridiculousness to him. “I should’ve been smarter about my decision-making. I mean, something as simple as not thinking to change into my cheer shoes before taking a dog on a walk touched off an entire Fibonacci sequence of misfortune. Honestly, I’m better than that, and it’s an absolute tragedy that my Loubs paid the ultimate price.”
“Yeah, about that. The dog-walking, I mean, not the whatever-you-just-said.”

“Loubs.”

“Yeah, that.” Eyebrows raised, he aimed a curious squint at her. “Ronnie, why did you even offer to do it in the first place? I thought we talked about that a while ago.”

She bit her lip. “Well, we did, but…”

“But?” he prompted, tightening his arms inward in a surprisingly good (and remarkably comforting) half-hug. “Why would you even do that to yourself if you knew you had no idea what you were doing?”

“Well,” Veronica sighed, maneuvering the leash out of the way as they turned up the walk so that he didn’t trip, “which explanation would you like first? He needed to go out, your parents couldn’t take him without making themselves late…”

“And?”

Ah, yes. Of course he had to sense the and of the situation.

She growled out a sigh. “And frankly, I didn’t want to give your mother yet another reason to think I’m completely and utterly useless.”

“What?” He stared at her, eyes wide. “Ronnie, why on earth would my mom think that? Why would you?”

“I don’t know. Just…” She shifted slightly in his arms, embarrassment washing over her now that the truth was out. “We all have our areas of expertise. And I can’t help noticing sometimes that my particular skillset doesn’t really extend into the practical, everyday sphere. I mean yes, I’m more familiar with finances, negotiations, and business operations than anyone else I know. Yes, I can plan the perfect gathering for anywhere from four to four hundred guests, and yes I can even dress them all according to the latest fashion. But my knowledge of basic chores is limited, I have literally no clue how to fix any household appliance I might accidentally break, and not only do I not know how to cook, I can’t even pretend I want to learn.”

He snorted. “So?”

“So, your mother’s an A-plus attorney who’s every bit as at-home in the day-to-day world as she is the in the courtroom,” she returned, trying to squirm down when he reached the porch steps. (But in typical Archie Andrews fashion, he just tightened his grip and kept right on climbing, holding onto her until they were inside and he’d deposited her safely on the kitchen counter.) “I burned the Pop Tarts I tried to make you the other day. What do I look like to her except the inept chip off an old block she’s too polite to say she hates in front of me?”

“Well,” he said finally, frowning as he plucked the leash from her hands and unclipped Vegas, “I don’t know. I guess I’ve never really thought about it. But does it matter?”

“What your mother thinks of me?” Veronica folded her arms, working hard to keep the pessimism from her tone. “Yes. It does. Not because I need her to love me or anything. I just…don’t want her feeling like her only child is dating some incompetent moron.”

“Gee.” Eyes dancing, he settled his hands atop her thighs as he smiled crookedly up at her. “Why does that sound familiar?”
Oh, right.

Laughing at his wry expression, she reached out and wound a little clump of coppery hair around her finger. “I’m sorry you were put through all that,” she said, tapping a toe against the side of his leg. “If it’s any consolation though, I don’t think Daddy considered you totally incompetent when he staged that ham-fisted disgrace of a measuring contest.”

“Just partially incompetent?” Archie teased, his hands skimming up to her waist.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m trying to be encouraging here. For both our sakes.”

“Yeah, I know.” The smile grew broader as his gaze fell to her mouth. “And hey, I think you’re doing okay.”

“Whoa, sailor!” She stopped him with a hand to the chest as he leaned in to kiss her. “Not now.”

He frowned at her, lips frozen in a cartoonish half-pucker. “What’s the matter?”

“I’ve spent the last hour or so being kissed by your dog,” she informed him. “Unwillingly, I might add, and I’m still wearing all the trace evidence. Trust me, you do not want the sloppy seconds.”

“Wait, dog germs? Is that all?” Snorting out a laugh, he moved her hand aside and planted a firm, smacking kiss on her, notwithstanding her horrified squeal. “Vegas has always been friendly. It’s way too late for me to be grossed out by anything like that.”

“Oh. My God.” She could feel her face wrinkling at the mental image that particular bit of information conjured up. “Archie Andrews, if you have any plans on ever, ever touching these lips again, I want your solemn vow that it won’t be post French-kisses from your dog. Because if I taste liver truffles or Milk Bones on your breath, I swear to you…”

He grinned, thumbs tapping choppily against her waist. “I’m not insane, Ronnie. At the very least, I would brush my teeth for fear of instant death.”

“Uh-huh.” She cocked an eyebrow as a floppy-eared head popped up beside them, its owner panting happily as he worked to get his nose above the countertop. “Remind me to always carry a bottle of mouthwash with me anyway. Just in case one or both of us experiences the sudden need to gargle.”

Archie laughed again, nudging his way in between her dangling legs.

“All right,” he said mischievously, unfolding her arms and draping them around his neck as he moved in closer. “I’ll make sure to put a big sign on the fridge or something.”

“Excellent. Aah!” She stiffened, sucking in a breath when he went to kiss her and his hip brushed against the rawer of her two knees. “Okay,” she announced in response to his silent, accusatory question, “In truth, that I’m-fine I gave you earlier may have been a slight exaggeration.”

He groaned. “Ronnie…”

“It’s nothing, really,” she hastened to assure him. “My knees just withstood some incidental wear and tear, that’s all. No biggie.”

“Incidental—here, let me take a look.” Bending down until his nose stood about an inch away from the original point of impact, he inspected the scraped area with a critical eye. “Ooh, yeah.” A sympathetic little hiss issued from between his teeth as he traced a finger around the fraying edges of the jagged rip. “That’s pretty ugly. How’s it feel when you bend and straighten it?”
Veronica cautiously extended a leg, tensing again when her poor, abused nerve endings began screaming in protest. “Not wonderful. I foresee longer skirts and shorter heels in my future until these go on the mend.”

“Yeah.” Giving her calf a light squeeze, he stood back up. “Come on, I’ll help you to the bathroom.”

“When you say ‘help,’ you do mean help, right?” she began, scooting gingerly toward the edge of the counter. “Not—”

He caught her right when she started to slide down.

“Well,” she commented dryly. “Question asked, question answered.”

“I mean ‘help’ as in ‘I’ll carry you’ Ronnie, because you have no business walking,” he finished for her, the crooked little grin resurfacing as he headed down the hall with her once again firmly ensconced in his arms.

“Archie. I appreciate being transported storybook style by a strapping young hero as much as anyone, but I’m a pathetic excuse for a dog-walker,” she reminded him, rolling her eyes. “Not an invalid.”

His chuckle ruffled her hair as he pulled her in tight to his chest and turned sideways to fit them through the doorway. “Just go with it babe, okay?”

She harrumphed, but abandoned the argument as per request when he gave her that frustration-mixed-with-fondness look that was somehow more effective on her than an eloquent monologue on the merits of calming down and letting someone else help for a change. After all, the vast majority of her joints were already beginning to feel abnormally stiff, and it wasn’t like she loathed being carried places by cute, musically-inclined football players who liked to worry about her safety more than they probably should.

“Okay,” he said when they reached the bathroom, setting her carefully on her feet, “So. I’m going to go grab some stuff from my room so you don’t have to hang around in muddy clothes for the next couple hours. Do you need any help getting out of your pants?”

She snorted out a laugh, propping herself butt-first against the wall for balance. “Yes, actually, but I have to say—considering the number of times you’ve both participated in and witnessed my expert quick-changes, that question’s a teensy bit insulting.”

“I guess it is.” He stepped back in front of her and pulled her upright again, eyebrows jumping almost wickedly as he slid his hands down to undo the button on her pants. “But I just thought maybe you could use the assist in this case since you’re kinda trying to play through an injury?”

“What, so you’re only volunteering to play doctor with me because I’m operating at ninety-five percent capacity?” she joked, resting a hand atop his head when he squatted down to work the fabric carefully over her red, puffy, and already-darkening knees. “Such gallantry, Archiekins.”

He smirked up at her, extending a hand for balance when she started to raise a foot and wobbled. “Yeah, I think I’m gonna plead the fifth on that one.”

A smile fought for escape as she watched him work, lifting her feet up one by one to peel away the pants. Even when he was teasing her, he couldn’t quite forget to be sweet. That chronic thoughtfulness of his just sort of bled through the cracks, and before she even knew it, there she went all over again—inwardly melting into a pile of sentimental mush while outwardly, she made light of everything.
Just like now.

“Well,” she commented, pursing her lips in pretended thought as cool air from the overhead vent hit her bare legs. “Since mindreading is, tragically, an ability I’ve yet to master, I guess I’m going to have to acquit you without further commentary.”

“Without commentary?” He stood again, the grin on his face broadening when she hooked a finger down the front of his shirt and tugged him toward her. “I’ll believe that when I don’t hear it, Ronnie.”

“Point taken.” Returning his smirk, she spiraled a fingernail teasingly across the hard ridges of his stomach. “But can I help it if the bon mots simply fall from my lips?”

Archie laughed. “Yeah, I have no idea what that means,” he murmured, the jacket-padded warmth of his forearms pressing into the small of her back as he drew her close. “But I’m guessing the answer is no?”

“Aww,” she breathed, giving his hair a playful tweak as he lowered his mouth to hers. “How very astute of you, Sherlock.”

“Thanks.”

Faster than she could process, his hands slid lower. One moment, she was poised on her toes and straining upward to meet him. The next she was suddenly at eye level, his palms cupped beneath her thighs while his lips caught at hers.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, smiling into the half-broken kiss when the drastically-increased contact pulled a gasp from her. “Just wanted to make sure I can reach you.”

“Mhmm, but easy now,” she joked, drumming a heel against the back of his leg. A giggle, high-pitched and silly, escaped her throat when he grinned up at her, and she felt the afternoon’s frustration fade into irrelevance as she smoothed that ever-present fluff of hair back from his forehead. “If we have any hope at all of getting me cleaned up and relatively clothed before your parents get back, the Don Juan routine is going to have to wait.”

“Yeah, I know.” He heaved a sigh, tucking a warm, tickly kiss into the little valley between her jaw and ear before setting her back down. Twirling a mud-caked clump of her hair between his fingertips, he grinned sheepishly. “So, uh…any preferences on what kind of clothes?”

She shrugged, biting back a smile as she took in his flushed face. “Surprise me, Giorgio.”

His forehead creased. “What?”

“Giorgio,” she repeated, chuckling as she watched his confusion deepen. “As in Armani?”

“Oh!” He brightened. Evidently, things were clicking into place. “That’s like a clothes guy, right?”

Well, maybe not. Because a clothes guy? A clothes guy?

Veronica sighed out a laugh. “Oh, Archiekins.” Doing her best to keep sober, she stood on tiptoe to give him a quick peck on the lips. “Someday in the very near future, when I’m dragging you from boutique to boutique with me and forcing you to memorize the names of every designer ever, remember this moment. Remember it, and curse its very existence.”

His nose wrinkled. “I made a mistake, huh?”
“To put it mildly—yes. You inadvertently committed a cardinal fashion sin, but not to worry.” She patted his cheek gently. “My professional shopper skills and I will do our level best to ensure that you don’t become a recidivist.”

“Hey.” Eyes alight with humor, Archie bent down to sneak another quick kiss. “Long as you model everything Ronnie, I think I still come out of this a winner.”

“Mm.” She lifted an eyebrow, placing both hands on his chest to give him and his smirk a light shove toward the doorway. “You absolutely will, but go get the clothes before my resolve breaks and I let you distract me. I’d really rather not have your parents walk in on us right when things start to get interesting.”

“Sure?” he joked, raising a brow to match her.

“Not in the least,” she answered, waving him off with a laugh when he took a mocking step forward. “So hop to it, Lover Boy.”

~*~

“Okay, there you go. All done.”

A sturdy hand closed briefly around her ankle, and with a sigh of unmitigated relief, Veronica tore her gaze off the ceiling. Archie had been as gentle with the wound-cleaning as could be expected from a teenaged boy who’d grown up playing almost every rough-and-tumble sport known to humankind, but the administering of the antiseptic had proved challenging (the part where he accidentally set his elbow down atop the worst bruise and then spent about five thousand and one minutes apologizing was singularly unpleasant). In an effort to keep her mind off the stinging in her knees, she’d spent the majority of the cleaning and bandaging process staring straight up and mentally tracing the discolorations caused by leaking water, and it was nice to have a break from that neck-destroying angle.

“Wow,” she remarked, eyebrows shooting up as she beheld the giant patches of gauze and ridged white stripes that now enshrudded each joint. “You’ve done beautiful work Dr. Andrews, but just out of curiosity, did you happen to save any athletic tape for yourself?”

He laughed, lifting her foot off his knee and setting it carefully down on the cool tile floor. “I’ve still got enough to tape half the football team to the wall, so don’t worry. Can you stand?”

Veronica rolled her eyes. “Yes. As aforementioned, I don’t need to be carried,” she reminded him again as he took her hands. “I’m officially all doctored-up and hunky-dory.”

As if determined to contradict her, the hem of the enormously baggy t-shirt he’d brought her fell down and bumped against her knees, making her cringe. Archie cleared his throat pointedly when she sucked in a loud breath, his expression screaming You were saying? louder than any words could possibly have done.

“Okay, semi hunky-dory,” she amended through clenched teeth as his arm wrapped around her waist. “God, is there somewhere I can just sit and hate the guts of your stupid dog and his penchant for running hither and yon?”

“The couch,” he said, giving her a swift kiss on the cheek as he ducked under her arm. “We’re going to have to figure out a way to get you home later anyway, so it’s probably a good idea to get you set up on the ground floor.”

“Aye-aye, Captain,” she quipped, puffing along beside him as he helped her into the living room.
“Oh, and since we’re on the subject—let me do the talking when we get to the Pembrooke. I don’t want Daddy going all overprotective He-Man on you before I have the chance to explain that this is one hundred percent my fault.”

“Okay, but you’re not going up those steps on your own, Ronnie,” he informed her, steadying her as she lowered herself cautiously onto the sofa. “There’re way too many of them, and you can barely limp as is.”

“Point taken and conceded,” she returned. “But I’ll only promise to accept the assistance on the condition that you promise to actually assist, not carry me.”

He frowned. “Why?” he asked, dropping down on the cushions beside her.

She laughed, reaching out to pat his cheek gently. “Because as much as I adore being borne dramatically in the arms of my boyfriend, I want him in one piece more. My red carpet appearance in your shirt is going to cause enough of a stir. Let’s not push our luck with the Snow White routine, huh?”

“Well, all right.” Pulling her into his side, he rested his chin atop her head. “But if you end up hurting so bad you yell or anything, I’m carrying you anyway.”

“Hmm.” She sighed contentedly, sliding her arms around his waist as she leaned into him. “You’ve gotten a little too good at this bargaining business, haven’t you?”

His laugh shook through her, making her smile. “With all the practice I’ve had, I think I kind of ought to be.”

Veronica snorted. “Since I’m too stiff to move disdainfully to the other side of the couch, I’ll have to let that crack slide. But for the record...” Prodding a finger into his ribs, she tilted her head up to see him. “I’m mentally stalking off with my nose in the air.”

He flicked a piece of hair back from her face, eyes twinkling. “Will it make it mentally better if I say you can pick the movie this time even though it’s technically my turn?”

“Mmm...” She tapped a finger against her chin in pretended thought. “You know, it just might?”

“Okay, then.” The arm around her tightened momentarily, and he laughed as he stuck a loud kiss to her forehead. “I’ll go microwave the popcorn while you think about what you want to watch. I got to warn you, though—we don’t have any fancy cheese stuff. Just the regular kind.”

Veronica reined in a smile. Not long after they’d all started hanging out, Betty had invited everyone over to her house for a movie night, and Veronica had offered to bring some extra snacks since Jughead always ate more than the rest of them combined. Among said snacks had been a couple of tins of the gourmet popcorn (parmesan, white chocolate, and salted caramel) her mother always ordered specially from a sweet shop in New York, but because Archie wasn’t around when Betty poured the popcorn into little striped paper bags to match her Classic Cinema party aesthetic, he got a nasty surprise about five minutes into Raiders of the Lost Ark when he unwittingly switched from white chocolate to parmesan. Even his natural politeness wasn’t equal to that kind of gastronomic ambush, so he ended up spitting out the entire mouthful and apologizing profusely for all the soggy shrapnel that landed on Veronica.

“I think it’s probably a good thing for everyone that you don’t,” she called after him as he disappeared into the kitchen. “I can’t imagine your parents want to find popcorn spackles on the walls and furniture, and I did just get cleaned up.”
His happy explosion of a laugh floated back to her. “Hey, you don’t have to worry. Vegas is here. Trust me, you want any spilled food cleaned up—he’s your man. Or, dog, I guess.”

“Uh-huh.” Veronica raised a brow as the culprit of the hour trotted in, tongue lolling and tail wagging. “As encouraging as that offer is, I think I’ll pass, thanks.” As if on a cue, a cold, damp nose bumped insistently against her outstretched calf and she sighed. “Although it seems the defendant is attempting to plead his own case.”

Archie’s laugh sounded again. “Don’t make eye contact or you’ll lose.”

“Excellent advice,” she responded, rolling her eyes when the four-legged nuisance, apparently tired of being snubbed, jumped up on the sofa and plopped his head in her lap with the sort of proprietary confidence it was difficult to rebuff. “But I’m afraid it’s a bit late to discuss things in terms of wins and losses. I think the battle’s already done.”

“What?” Wandering back in with a greasy-looking paper bag, Archie stopped short when he saw her begrudgingly scratching behind her new seatmate’s ears. “Oh. Wow. No kidding.” Squeezing into the small space between her and the arm of the couch, he grinned at her as he sat down. “Not gonna lie…I kinda thought you’d be tougher than this, Ronnie.”

“Well, what can I say?” she responded, rolling her eyes again as she realized that the two of them were now crammed onto one cushion so the dog could stretch out comfortably. “He won me over with his puppydog charm. Like pet, like owner, right?”

“Hey.”

She giggled, pinching his chin gently between her thumb and forefinger as he leaned over to kiss her. “I promise that’s a compliment.”

“You sure?” he murmured back, lips drifting over hers. “Of course.” Her smile wide, she poked at his earlobe. “And though I’m sure there’s a Good Boy joke to be made here, you’ve been so sweet I think I’ll actually keep it to myself.”

His answering snort rattled against her ear. “Thanks,” he said, dropping his arm back around her shoulders and pulling the popcorn away from a too-interested Vegas. “I appreciate it. Now, what are we watching?”

“American Graffiti,” she replied, relaxing into him as she selected the film. “After today’s misadventures, I feel the need for a good soundtrack.”

“Okay.” He kissed her fingers teasingly when she fed him a few fluffy kernels, making them both laugh. “No falling asleep like you did during The Exorcist, though.”

“Please,” she scoffed, elbowing him softly. “That was a boring film. This one isn’t.”

He burst out laughing. “Yeah, I’m going to have to disagree with you there, Ronnie.”

“Be that as it may,” Veronica returned airily, chuckling as she recalled being yanked from a sound sleep by Archie and Betty’s simultaneous shrieks of terror, “the point is that I find it entertaining, so this time, much like Katy Perry, I’ll be wide awake.”

(It was, she supposed later, only fitting that the first thing he said to her after a bark from Vegas jolted them awake was Katy Perry, huh?)
*Chapter title inspired by Florence + The Machine's song by the same name (even though I've never really liked that song).

*Sorry about how long it’s been between updates again! I’m embarrassed to say that this chap has been done since before the season finale aired, I just meant to post it the week after and forgot. Then I remembered, but Ao3 was having issues and I couldn’t log on, then my wifi was having issues so I REALLY couldn’t log on, and then…I…forgot…again. (But on the bright side, I have three other fics that are almost done being edited, so the wait won’t be as long this time, yay!)

*The idea for this story has basically been rolling around in my head since the S2 premiere because I love the dog-walking conversation between A&V SO DARN MUCH. V being ready and willing but not having any clue what she’s doing is so cute, and I love how Archie just grins at her because he knows. Also, dogs are the best/most in-the-way pets ever, and I’m kind of dying to see more of that on Riverdale. Like, forget HIRAM interrupting the cutest kiss ever (*shakes fist because I’m still not over that*)…how about VEGAS sticks his nose in between Archie and Veronica when they’re trying to make out?? Now, THAT’S realism.

*I feel like we barely see Mary Andrews on Riverdale because Molly Ringwald plays her and they can only get her so often, but I’ve been intrigued by her character since she shut Alice Cooper’s passive-aggressive act down in the high school bathrooms back in S1, and in my mind, she visits more often than the show suggests. (I also tell myself this because I find it slightly hypocritical of her to chew ARCHIE out for abandoning his father when, um, okay, Mary…who is the one who stayed with Fred and who is the one who hightailed it to Chicago?) We get to see all the time how much Archie is like Fred, but what’s interesting to me is how much of his mother I see in him too…Fred’s so calm that I kept wondering how he could be related to Archie, and then when Mary exploded at Archie over all the Hiram stuff it kind of made me go, “Aha. THAT’S where Archie’s fight comes from.” I could see Mary maybe being a little leery of Veronica because Veronica’s probably the only girl in Riverdale besides Cheryl Blossom who can scheme with the best of the adult schemers (plus…all the parents knew each other way back when), and Archie’s so naïve that it’s bound to scare a mom. Ultimately though, I think Mary’s the kind of person to give respect where respect’s due, and I feel like once she sees for herself who Veronica really is, she’ll love her. (Watch me be totally wrong on this in S3, lol.)

*I have several half-finished prompts in the works because I’ve been forcing myself to write SOMETHING whenever I get stuck on one idea, so if you have any specific A/V scenes from S1 or S2 that you’d like to see an interpretation of, let me know. Those are the easiest for me to complete when I’m having writer’s block because it’s just describing action rather than inventing action, and they can usually be completed in 1500-3000 words which = slightly swifter updates.

*Side note: THAT FINALE, THOUGH. My objective inner TV viewer loves Mark Consuelos’ dastardly portrayal of Hiram Lodge with all my heart. (Honestly. He’s the best. I love hating him so much and I want him to stay forever.) My more subjective inner TV viewer wants Hiram Lodge’s head on a stick right this instant, because ARCHIE! My little BABY! I could clobber that man. Also, if I don’t get some serious
1920s Gatsby costumes out of this Veronica owning a speakeasy plotline in S3, what’s even the point?

**Thanks as always for reading/commenting! Hope everyone’s having a great summer, and if you’re not, then just remember that every day that passes brings us one step closer to a new season of Riverdale! :D**
When The World Falls Into Pieces

Chapter Summary

Veronica Lodge + relationships = complicated. Veronica Lodge + Archie Andrews = something special

Told from Veronica’s POV, covers random moments from 1x13—2x20

**Because I’ve posted a big fat NOTHING for months (sorry!), here’s the longest A/V fic I’ve completed for this collection. It’s rambling and possibly incoherent in places, but it’s my favorite so far because I got to touch on some of my favorite scenes/eps from Season 2, so I regret nothing. (Except any potential typos. Those I preemptively regret with all my heart and soul, just FYI.) Notes are super long at the end of the chapter, so in case you don’t want to bother with them, thanks for reading/commenting, and here’s hoping you have a great weekend! :)

Chapter Notes

This was an attempt to fill a prompt from Windito (A/V sleeping together), and it kind of spiraled WAY out of control. As usual, it turned out more angsty than fluffy, but there are fluffy bits, so hopefully that’s okay?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the still of a night that began with bright lights, music, and laughter, it feels…new.

Different.

Foreign?

No, that’s not it.

It feels weird, she decides, eyes falling on the smooth cotton cuff of a dress shirt that doesn’t belong to her. Hugely.

Falling asleep beside another human being isn’t something that sits in the Veronica Lodge wheelhouse of expertise, and this awkward business of sharing everything—mattress space, pillows, blankets, body heat, breath—just seems so personal. Maybe too personal, if she’s being honest. She’s never before spent the night with a guy she actually wants to find still in her bed come morning, and when she rolls over at some point in the wee hours and her face ends up pressed into the hard, warm planes of his chest, there’s a moment where the unnerving strangeness of it all almost paralyzes her. Especially since his automatic response is unlike anything she’s ever experienced: without so much as twitching an eyelid, he pulls her close and kisses her on the forehead.

Yes, it’s only a haphazard little smooch that catches a lot of her hair, and yes, she really shouldn’t be affected by it since she’s already been treated to a demonstration of all the mind-blowingly wonderful
things Archie Andrews can do with his mouth. But it makes her shiver just the same, and like a bolt from the blue, she’s overcome by a wave of unfamiliar shyness.

Officially, he’s now her boyfriend. Officially, she’s sleeping—or, rather, trying to sleep—in her official boyfriend’s arms. They didn’t hop into bed together on a whim or by accident; this was a deliberate move on both their parts. She extended the invitation because she wanted to. He accepted because he wanted to, and neither of those is a fact she can downplay or brush off as poor judgment combined with too much alcohol. For all his impulsiveness, Archie’s careful about situations like this. He’s not a casual fling type of guy, and maybe that’s what’s getting to her. If she thinks too much about the potential implications of why he’s lying here beside her, why a drowsy forehead-kiss from him releases thousands of butterflies in her stomach, she just might panic.

But then, almost as if he senses her rising tension, his arms tighten around her. Without so much as a change in breathing, he pulls her back into his chest and cuddles—actually cuddles; she can’t believe it but she also totally can because it’s Archie—her close.

“You okay?” he mumbles, the words slurred and fuzzy.

“Yeah.” She leans her head back, reaching up to run a hand over the arm that blankets her. “Just squirming around like I do. Go back to sleep, all right?”

“‘Kay. Good night, Ronnie.”

A smile creeps over her face. “Good night.”

His kiss catches the tip of her ear this time, and as suddenly as it started the fear fades, vaporized beneath the warmth his sweetness ignites in her. This level of intimacy still has her adrift in an uncharted sea, but somehow, just knowing that he’s there steadies her. In many ways, Archie’s the fire to her ice—sometimes blazing up without warning until she wades in and cools him down, sometimes melting off the hard edges she’s spent years cultivating lest anyone suspect she’s not quite as indomitable as she appears.

But it’s more than that, too. He’s also the calm to her storm. The one rock in the rapid-flowing stream of her life that doesn’t roll out of the way or erode to silt when she and her floodwater-force personality crash into him; the exception to maybe every rule she’s ever had. He’s sun, and rain, and cozy winter nights spent curled up before the fireplace, but he’s also lightning, and riptides, and skydiving at sixty thousand feet with a parachute that may or may not work. When he kisses her, it burns. In the best way possible, like it never has with anyone, ever, and when he sits on the end of her bed the next morning to kiss her goodbye, she thinks she’s maybe got a handle on this relationship stuff after all.

(She doesn’t.)

The next time they sleep together in the literal sense is a few days after the shooting, when everything’s still a bit chaotic. Fred’s officially been declared in stable condition, and Archie’s so tired by now that it takes hardly any effort to convince him it’s time to temporarily abandon his hospital sentry post and get some rest. Veronica accompanies him to make sure he arrives safely, stands over him while he robotically consumes the messy peanut butter sandwich she slaps together after a fashion, then bundles him off to his room and tucks him in, telling him to call if he needs anything because she’ll be right downstairs.

Only she never makes it to the door, let alone downstairs. When she starts off, he holds onto her hand, staring up at her from the depths of the pillows with a forlorn look of appeal she knows she’ll never have the strength to resist, and just like that, her course of action is mapped out.
Nodding in response to the unvoiced *Can you please*, she steps out of her heels and goes back to his dresser to fish out a clean shirt. In a matter of seconds she’s climbing in with him, drowning a little in his oversized tee, but too worried about him to care that her attire looks like an outfit featured in a thrift-store themed issue of *Vogue*.

“You okay?” she whispers, smoothing some hair off his forehead.

This time, he’s the one to nod. “Yeah.”

But he doesn’t volunteer anything further; instead, he locks his arms together behind her waist and half-rolls, half-lifts her so that she’s lying on top of him. Goosebumps prickle across her skin as his palm slides up her leg, and a gasp bursts out when his hands travel up her spine and splay out along her shoulder blades, pressing her fully down onto him. Relaxing into him shouldn’t be this natural, not considering the length of their acquaintance and how much of the pre-relationship segment they spent sitting apart and carefully not-touching. But somehow it is. And she can’t seem to regret that.

Or resist it. Her lips home in on his immediately, and for several minutes she just lies there, eyes closed, fingers curled around the edges of his jaw, soaking in the steady throb of his heartbeat while her tongue traces lazy shapes against his.

They don’t talk, but here like this, here with him, she gets it—the fear he feels. The guilt. The overwhelming desire to forget what he can and ignore what he can’t because it’s just too much for one person to handle. Here with no one else but her to play witness, his pent-up emotions are leaking out, dribbling into his every movement, and she absorbs them as best she can until finally, she’s kissing him so hard through his crazy jumble of rage and grief that they can both barely breathe.

And still, that fear lingers. She can feel it. Taste it even, right along with the ghost flavor of that damn sandwich (which *should* make her laugh, but instead makes her want to cry because food is so normal and boring a thing it just doesn’t seem to belong in the craziness of their new reality). Archie’s walking a line that’s thin and fraying, pushing himself to a point even he must know he can’t sustain, and for what?

“You have to sleep,” she tells him the second there’s a bit of space between their mouths. It emerges less like the order she intended and more like a near-unintelligible pant, so she follows it quickly with a firmer, “Now.”

“I can’t,” he mumbles back.

“Yes, you can.”

She moves off him, too aware of the exhaustion he’s trying to downplay to let herself be swept up in the moment like she did a few days ago in the shower. And he’s drained now, worn-out to the point that he can’t even scrape up a decent protest, so that’s good.

But he’s right about one thing: sleeping is more of an ordeal than it should be. He tosses and turns beside her for nearly an hour; finally, she pulls his head down to rest against her shoulder and lulls him off by humming every slow song she can remember while her fingertips rub soft circles into his scalp. Then it’s maybe another hour before he’s wide awake again, sweating and shaking and close to tears from whatever horror-embellished version of events have been invading his mind, and there’s absolutely nothing she can do to help except hug him with all her might and whisper the only thing she can think of: *It’s okay.*

It’s not, of course, and she feels stupid just speaking the lie. Useless too, because vague reassurances accomplish nothing.
But it feels like the right thing to do, and weirdly, it seems to work. When she wakes up the next morning, confused about where she is and what she’s wearing, he thanks her. Sincerely, in between kissing her neck and smiling at her attempts to fix her smudged makeup and scruffy hair. And though she asks him why, asks what on earth she even did to warrant all this gratitude, he just shrugs awkwardly, leaning into her while his fingers straggle through her hair.

“You know,” he says.

She doesn’t; not really. But she recognizes that it’s got something to do with a very basic desire for tangible human companionship, sees that he’s floundering now that the one support system he’s always been able to count on is lying in the hospital, so she lets the subject drop and flirts with him until he’s as red as his hair and laughing.

They don’t talk about it after that, not at all, but eventually, it becomes an understanding: the two of them are a pair. Whenever the world gets to feeling too bleak, too sinister, or just too damn big, they find each other. And maybe it’s not a cure that can fence out the dark she sometimes senses bearing down on them, but at least it’s a treatment. At least it takes what remains of the light and coaxes it into something larger than a match flame at midnight, a glow-stick in a subterranean cave.

Us. Together. We.

They’re words she’s used countless times before, but also ones she’s never really thought about. Maybe that’s why she’s been so resistant to the concept that, once upon a time in New York City, she embraced fully. Hiram, Hermione, and Veronica. Daddy, Mom, and Me. That used to be her us, together, we. The unit she took for granted, the base upon which her crystalline world was founded, where she pledged her allegiance. These days, she’s not really sure. There’s still a Hiram and Hermione, but she’s no longer convinced that Veronica fits into that picture. Not the way she’s expected to, at any rate, and certainly not the way she wants to.

But with Archie, the together is different. They both bungle the definition time and time again, creatures of Only-Child habits that keep them guarding secrets they don’t even know they can entrust to the other, but they’re getting there.

Like the night he participates in the stupidest fight ever, and she’s so incredibly angry with him and his half-baked, hotheaded, utterly asinine decision-making that it takes a full nine minutes of pacing his dingy living room to realize that the fury’s just a mask for the nauseating fear she feels every time she considers the probability of his getting hurt or worse.

When the Serpents show up, he tells her to stay at the house. To protect it or some such nonsense he thinks will convince her to keep out of the way and safe, because oh, of course, it’s perfectly fine if the idiot risks life and limb in a fistfight with a bunch of brain-dead, testosterone-teeming Neanderthals (as far as Veronica’s concerned, there’s no difference between the two pathetically-posturing groups of apes, except perhaps a slight fashion and a definite physical fitness advantage in favor of the Bulldogs). But heaven forbid she should risk a little rain damage by following to pick up the pieces!

“Idiot,” she mutters. “Stupid, harebrained, out-of-control, gun-buying idiot!”

He’s going to get himself killed. He is. And it’ll serve him right, it totally will, but there’s no comfort in that at all, and she hates him so much for making her care that if he were here right now, she’d scream it right in his adorable face, the dumbass.

Only, he’s not here. She is. With “Wilbur’s” gun. He’s out there, undoubtedly right in the middle of the brawl, and yes, okay, he’s an idiot, but he’s her idiot, and if those S.E. Hinton rejects harm one
hair on his head, she’ll end every last one of them.

Grabbing up the gun, she storms out of the house and down to the site of the battle royal. Archie’s nowhere to be seen amid the pandemonium and that terrifies her, so she disengages the safety, angles the weapon up into the air, and fires. Serpents scatter one way, Bulldogs scatter the other, and just like that it’s over.

For a long moment, all she can do is stand there, outwardly motionless but inwardly shaking like she’s got the chills. Two figures help a third to Reggie’s car. Scared, raised voices—Archie, Reggie, and Dilton, she thinks numbly as she clicks the safety back in place—yell at each other about knives, about hurrying, about the emergency room. One car door slams, then another, and Reggie and Dilton roar off into the rain while Archie half-limps, half-runs toward her.

_Idiot_, Veronica thinks again.

She’s going to yell at him, she decides. She is. He deserves it, and in spades, the absolute dimwit. But then he’s there, and though he’s scratched up and wheezing he’s very much alive and in one piece, and without a second thought, she flings her arms around him.

“T’ll kill you if you ever pull a stunt like this again,” she chokes into his neck.

He nods, arms tightening around her. “I know.”

How they get back to his house, she never knows. The walk is too full of are-you-hurt and we-have-to-hurry questions to tell for sure, and anyway, she doesn’t care. He’s injured and rattled to the core, and all the force of her anger is gone, melted by rain and worry.

They go up to his room together, and she realizes vaguely as she orders him to sit down so she can help him get cleaned and bandaged that she’s somehow past the point of caring whether or not she’s coming across as a nagging, clingy girlfriend—screw the kid gloves approach her mother, Betty, and so many of the Vixens swear by; it’s never been her style, and from now on, she’s going to speak the hell up when she thinks he’s wrong just like she’s always done.

“Hold still,” she commands.

He obeys without a murmur, a bruised, damp, forlorn shadow of his usual self that goes straight to her heart. She doesn’t let on immediately of course, deeming it best to let him vent his guilt and regret before telling him what she thinks, but eventually, it pours out of her, a wealth of certainty based on tons of examples that her brain somehow condenses into one bland sentence: _You’re not a killer._

Then they’re kissing, and he tastes like rain now—rain and regret and relief. A jolt of that indescribable electricity his touch causes goes surging through her with the kind of power that doesn’t fade, and she wonders how something so complex can feel so simple. Because after everything that’s happened, her world seems distilled down to the most basic terms imaginable: Archie was in danger. Now he’s not. If he won’t keep himself safe, she will. If he thinks he’s expendable, he’s going to damn well rethink that because he’s wrong.

She tells him as much en route to the bridge, and he squeezes her hand. There’s a look in his eyes she hasn’t seen before, and by the time they deliver the gun to the watery depths, Veronica’s feeling it again—the twinge of her heart, the sort of comfortable glow that wells up inside her when she’s with him and he’s not doing anything more than existing. She’s not sure what that glow is, when it started, what the hell it means. She only knows that it’s there, strong and subtle, slowly burning her from the inside until she explodes into some sort of unexplained action, like dancing, or laughing, or leaning her head against his arm just because. It’s wild but soft, scary yet soothing, and it’s like
nothing she’s ever known. Burying it beneath jokes and nonsense doesn’t help her ignore it; trying to
tame it only intensifies its scope, and even throwing herself into his arms the second his bedroom
door shuts behind them does nothing to lessen her giddy little fervor.

Which it should, she thinks later, curled into his warm side beneath the covers, the two of them still
overflowing with pants and breathless laughter. The honeymoon phase of a relationship isn’t
supposed to last this long. She’s not supposed to be content with sleeping on a crowded little mattress
under cotton/polyester blend bedding simply because he’s there beside her. His arm draped across
her stomach isn’t supposed to make her feel small and valued and safe.

She’s supposed to be lying here annoyed, thinking of how next time, they’re going to do this in
larger, more luxurious quarters, where they don’t have to contend with tiny pillows, elbow-scraping
walls, and an audience comprised of gaudy posters. Reflecting on how she’d endure far worse
accommodations—a hotel with no WiFi, a seedy motel room or even, God forbid, a musty old RV—
if it means she gets to be with him is just too strange.

Because Veronica Lodge isn’t the kind of girl who goes doe-eyed over the mundane aspects of a
relationship. Not even a little bit. She’s got a signature style when it comes to romance, and that style
most certainly isn’t anything along the lines of sweet and blushing. It’s bold, flirty, and casual—
blazing summer sunsets versus pale spring dawns. Hibiscuses versus tea roses. Devil’s food cake
versus angel’s food cake. She doesn’t go shy, and she always knows exactly where she stands.

Except this time, she’s not so sure that’s true. This thing she’s got going on with Archie—it was
supposed to be just that: a thing. An easy, laidback test of…something. Attraction, maybe.
Compatibility. A neat little box with messy trappings they both stepped into because it felt right. And
it still feels right; oh, does it ever feel right—but weirdly enough, that’s what’s once again starting to
scare her.

It’s all well and good to joke about wanting to play with nice boys for a change, she thinks, an inane
giggle she’s reasonably certain she’s never giggled before escaping as he pecks a series of hot,
ticklish kisses along her shoulder. But what do you do when it maybe stops being playing?

“Ronnie?”

She starts, eyes flicking up to his. “Hmm?”

He’s looking a little unsure again, his finger tracing the curve of her lips. “You okay?” he whispers.
She doesn’t have an answer for him.

Actually, she doesn’t have anything even remotely suggestive of an answer, so she does the next-
best thing: smiles her brightest smile, reaches up to pull his head toward her, and kisses him so
deeply neither of them gets the chance to possibly ruin anything by talking.

Because whatever this is, whatever they are right now, she likes it. And since they seem to be
teetering on the brink of an unnamed, spectral something or other, she’s determined to protect the
current status quo. Just in case the future proves her right and turns out to be dangerous.

Which it does. Naturally. And they up their defenses in response, but the sense of impending doom
looms stronger than ever, and now she’s getting sloppy. Making mistakes. Letting little mini-disasters
that just might unravel the entire fabric with which her life is woven happen.

Like Nick.

God, that one hurts.
Why she didn’t see it coming, she’ll never know. Her family’s known the St. Clairs for forever, and Nick’s sort of just been there, walking the border with her, the two of them chasseing around one another in a dance too intricate for her to ever concentrate on anything other than remembering the steps. But he wasn’t into her, not seriously, and though he never failed to pour on the flirtatiousness, he wasn’t ever so thoroughly *vile*.

Unless…he was, and she was just too blinded by the label of friendship to realize it.

Really, she thinks, that’s what haunts her most: the preventable nature of her stupidity. Cheryl’s tears, pain-filled and mascara-blackened, are the tears she wants to cry, but also the tears she can’t cry—because if she starts, she might not stop, and anyway, it’s all her fault, and what good is apologizing to Cheryl until she’s blue in the face? It won’t change what happened, won’t lessen the sting. The second that contemptible sadist tried to make a move on her, accused her of sending him signals, she should have known what he was capable of. She should have seen through that apology, should’ve trusted her own conviction that she wasn’t accidentally encouraging him…should’ve *known*.

There’s a sudden pressure on her leg, soft and warm and soothing, and something in her heart cracks a little as she realizes she doesn’t even have to look to know that it’s Archie. His touch is as familiar as her own reflection now, and recalls the good portion of last night—all the moments when they ignored the rest of the world in favor of holding onto each other and laughing and swaying along to the music, all the gorgeously fuzzy song lyrics he sang in her ear while her hips ground into him and his lips worked their way up and down her jaw.

It also overwrites the memory of the other set of hands that tried touching her, and though she wants to thank him for that, she stays silent. He’s already a stick of dynamite just waiting to go off; she refuses to be the match that lights the fuse. And besides, Cheryl needs to get some rest. Veronica can’t look after one redhead if she’s busy trying to keep the other from doing something insane.

But while she’s in the process of shooing everyone out, he catches her hand at the door.

“What?” she says, hoping her voice isn’t as brittle-sounding to him as it seems to her.

He uses his free hand to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Her smile’s cardboard, just a dull stretch of the lips, but he’s the only one around to see it now, so it doesn’t much matter. “Or I will be, anyway. Sweet dreams, Archiekins.”

Something she can’t quite read shifts in his expression as his fingers tighten around hers. “You too.”

She clings to him when he kisses her. Just a little; he’s her habit now, and it’s like her insides are made of fractured glass. But she can’t hang on for long, because if he knows how badly she wants him to stay and hold her, he won’t leave. Unless it’s to hunt down Nick which she absolutely cannot allow, and besides, doesn’t he have enough troubles without her throwing this lavishly bedecked tier atop the layer cake of traumatic problems that’s become his life lately?

“Ronnie?” His hands settle on her waist, a note of anxiety in his voice as he steps closer. “Are you su —”

“I’m okay,” she answers before he can finish the question.

“Okay.” He nods, but the doubt lingers in his eyes. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

She thinks of that lie later, when the last few minutes of peace they have before the stupid street race
to end all Stupid Street Races is shattered by a phone call from Cheryl. Archie’s curious about his girlfriend’s immediate tension, and why wouldn’t he be? One second she’s kissing him and leaning on his chest; the next, she’s sitting bolt upright in bed, staring at nothing while she processes Cheryl’s shrill news. All happy vestiges of the night before are gone now, along with her previous state of relaxation. And though she appreciates the supportive hand on her back, she can’t accept its comfort when she’s still bound and determined to hide the stress origin story.

“Ronnie?” The covers rustle behind her, and she turns in time to see him prop himself up on an elbow. “What’s wrong?”

“Not sure I’m at liberty to say just yet,” she answers, trying to maintain what calmness she can. “But I do need to get going. It’s…kind of an emergency.”

She tries to climb out over him, but he catches her before she can manage it.

“How bad an emergency?” he asks, his hands keeping her firmly in place astride his stomach.

There’s a wary look on his face, probably the upshot of her risky jaunt to the Southside yesterday evening, and she hesitates. After all, it’s only been twelve hours—maybe—since the epic freakout he ruined by inadvertently complimenting her mid-rant (Veronica, you can’t just go wandering around the Southside looking hot! It’s not safe!). If she were him, she’d pry for info too.

But she still thinks he needs to be kept out of this, so she forces a quick smile.

“Nothing I want you to worry about, Steve McQueen,” she says brightly. “You just focus on whatever it is you have to do to get ready for Thunder Road.” Framing his face with her hands, she bends down to plant a long, heavier-than-usual kiss on his lips. “And you may tell Jughead for me that if I end this day wringing my hands over you in a hospital waiting room, I’ll have every Serpent in town made into snakeskin boots. Starting with him.”

“Hey.” A loopy little grin twists his mouth as he reaches up to scrape a handful of hair back behind her shoulders. “Like I said—I plan to be careful.”

“Well.” This time her smile’s genuine, and she hugs him tightly to her when he sits up. “I plan on killing you if you’re not careful, so see to it that you are. Or else, got it?”

His chuckle lands like a balmy sea breeze against her skin. “Yeah, I think I got it, babe.”

Babe.

Veronica struggles mightily to ignore the sentimental rush that one simple word sends through her.

“Excellent,” she chirps, rubbing her hands briskly up and down his arms. “Now. As much as I truly hate to say this…let go of me so I can get up and get dressed.”

He laughs. But though he insists on driving her home and refrains from further questions, she glimpses his little frown out of the corner of her eye when she quiets down again.

And a few months afterward, when they’re back in his bed, one breakup, some overdue L-words, and a couple of awful truths under their belts, she knows he’s still thinking about it. Knows he’s questioning why on earth she’d lock that kind of secret away from him when he’s made it clear from the beginning that he wants to be there for her.

I just wanted to protect you, she thinks, thumb skidding over the hand he’s got resting on her shoulder. And really, isn’t that the cruel irony of it all? He wants to protect her. She wants to protect
him. They each feel like personal hurt is acceptable as long as the other is safe, but all that does is upset the one being protected. So round and round the cycle of secrecy goes. Where it stops, who the hell knows?

Slowly, she draws a deep breath. All things considered, it’s been a taxing day. Mostly in the mental sense, what with the bombshell pieces of news she had to absorb—her boyfriend went all the way to New York to pay a violent visit to her already-injured harasser, her BF and her BFF apparently locked lips in the middle of a murder investigation, etc.—but also in the physical sense, because Archie Andrews never does anything halfway and clearly, all that football conditioning is paying off. Saying she’s tired is putting it mildly, but even so, she can’t sleep. Not now; not with a silence hanging over them that feels a lot like waiting. It’s just too strange being close to him in body and miles away in spirit, especially since they’re both rather bad at nebulous, implicit concerns. What needs to happen, she thinks, is for one of them to say something.

Anything.

And eventually Archie does, asking her point blank why she never told him what happened with Nick, but it just seems to make things worse. She wants to tell him the truth; she really does. But the trouble with this particular truth is that although it’s simple in and of itself—I didn’t want you to worry—it’s surrounded by a web of complexity, and if she tries to explain it, she’ll only drag him straight into a mess she’s been trying to shield him from since the beginning.

So she mentions the shame she felt instead, claims Kevin’s the only person she told besides Cheryl (because Archie can’t get mixed up in whatever dubiousness tends to follow her father; he can’t and he won’t, because she won’t let him).

He—of course—accepts the explanation without a murmur and rolls onto his side, arm curling protectively over her, chest pressing into her back.

Like always, she thinks, sadness spearing through her as she rests her cheek against his arm and realizes that this is one of those moments that should be idyllic. Should, except it’s not. How can it be, when his sweetness just makes her feel even more like a threadbare liar who’s miserably glad neither of them can see the other’s face?

Blinking hard so the gathering tear-storm doesn’t get the opportunity for betrayal, Veronica reflexively nestles even closer to him.

“Goodnight, Ronnie,” he mumbles, lips jostling against her ear.

“Goodnight.”

Her gaze falls to their interlocked fingers, and a tiny smile sneaks out as he drops a light kiss on the nape of her neck. They’re such a mess, the two of them. A crazy, wonderful, improbable mess that feels so right she’s almost afraid of it, because what if this is all some kind of horrible mistake? What if she’s giving her love to someone who doesn’t see the real her as much as she hopes he does? What if he wakes up one day, realizes that the girl lying beside him is nothing more than an extremely flawed, borderline awful human, and ends up hating her? What if she’s letting in the only person in the entire world who just might be capable of destroying her?

Surprisingly enough, all it takes for her to explore that last fear is a weekend, an upscale cabin in the woods, and one to three too many drinks. What begins as a joking attempt to patch up her best friend’s relationship—because Betty’s apparently never filled Jughead in on the whole random smooch thing—ends with the most lackluster kiss Veronica’s ever experienced, and just like that, it’s as if a bomb’s been detonated.
Not an atomic bomb by any means, but a bomb nonetheless, and Veronica’s not quite sure how to handle the fallout. For the first time ever, being in bed with Archie is a truly awkward experience—he’s moody and quiet, the noise next door is laughable but irritating since she actually could use some sleep if they’re not going to take advantage of this place’s remoteness, and, now that she’s reasonably sober, she’s able to reflect on everything that went down in the hot tub.

Which both tickles her immensely andgrosses her out a little.

No, scratch that…a lot. It grosses her out a lot. Jughead unquestionably falls into the category of boys she would have to be drunk to even consider joke-kissing, but still. Sober Veronica would very much like a word with Buzzed Veronica. Especially since it doesn’t even work as a revenge move; it’s like someone stealing a slice of gourmet cheesecake and making “restitution” with a Twinkie. For heaven’s sake, Betty got to kiss Archie. Veronica got to kiss Jughead. The unfairness of the swap is mindbogglingly ludicrous.

And speaking of mindboggling…

“Hey,” she says suddenly, rolling onto her side and snatching the pillow off her silent-treatmenting boyfriend’s head. “Pardon moi, but are you seriously going to pout all night because you think I enjoyed that pitiful liplock? I mean my God, that lecture we had in bio last week on the reproductive habits of mollusks was sexier.”

A loud, martyr-ish sort of sigh issues from somewhere within the mounds of pillows. “Look, Ronnie. I’m really—”

“Tired. Right.” She rolls her eyes, irritation warring with amusement, because really, the pettiness is so obscene it’s almost funny. “I got it. Just…wanted to clarify.”

“Yeah,” he says, his voice paper flat. “Goodnight.”

Oh, please.

Annoyance wins out over humor, and Veronica leans over and grabs his face in both hands.

“Fine,” she says sourly. “Goodnight.”

Bending down, she kisses him. Firmly. And so thoroughly that their lips actually pop on release, the sound amplified in the too-quiet room until it and the half-strangled gasp he emits afterward seem like a shout. Then, adopting the dignified, indifferent air he’s maintained for a good hour, she rolls onto her side and yanks the covers up, devoutly wishing her brain would quit pointing out the difference between the two of them in this bed when they first arrived and the two of them in this bed now.

She fully expects the strain to last all night, so it’s something of a mini-shock when the bedsprings they abused earlier squeak rustily and an arm slides over her waist.

“Yeah, you’re not getting any now,” she comments, stroking the hand pressed against her stomach anyway. “I do hope you’re aware of that.”

“Yeah.” His laugh is soft, little more than a fuzzy breath against her ear as he tucks his chin into the crook of her neck. “I kinda figured. This is just me apologizing. For, you know—the pouting.”

“Oh.” A smile squeezes out of her at the sheepishness in his tone, and she turns over at once. “In that case,” she adds, reaching up to trace the edges of his grin as she snuggles into his chest, “all is forgiven.”
“Thanks.” He tacks a kiss to her fingertip when it wanders too near his mouth. “I can’t promise it won’t happen again, though.”

“I’m sorry?” She leans back to get a better look at him, scowl already forming. “Did I not make my unmitigated disgust at the thought of being attracted to Jughead Jones clear enough?”

Archie snorts. “No, not that.”

“What, then?” She lifts her brows, eyes scanning his face for a hint of whatever’s going on under that orange thatch of his. “Am I to expect angry pushups and stony silences every time I piss you off in the future? Because if so—”

“No, Ronnie.” An awkward chuckle floats out, and even in the murky light, his flush is discernable. “Look, I just really hate seeing you kiss anyone who’s…not me, you know?”

Oh.

Beneath his stare, her pulse kicks into high gear. He’s smiling and trying to play it off like a quip, but there’s a disarming air of earnestness about the words that slices right through her, and it’s intoxicating.

Fighting off an enormous smile, she holds up a finger and taps it against his nose. “One second, Othello.”

In a flash, she’s out of bed and rummaging through the top drawer of the dresser until she locates the little box she brought with her from home. A few more seconds of fumbling with clasps in the dark, and she’s got what she’s after: arguably the most inexpensive gift she’s ever received, but only from a monetary perspective. Piling back under the covers, she scoots over to him and dangles the bright piece of silver an inch or so from his face.

“See this?” she says. “As a rule, pearls are kind of my thing. But a really cute, really sweet boy I know had this engraved for me, and maybe it’s silly, but I love it and I take the words on the back very seriously. Help me put it on?”

For a second or two Archie just lies there, blinking at it. At her. Then, slowly and steadily, like an ebbing tide, a self-conscious grin spreads over his face and he nods.

“You know, Ronnie, I can’t believe you brought this way out here,” he says, taking the tiny heart from her and draping it around her neck while she scrapes her hair out of the way.

“Oh. Well.” She feels the blushing, maddening confusion beginning again and laughs to alleviate it as the burnished weight settles comfortably on her collarbone. “Turns out even Veronica Lodge has a bit of a sentimental streak in her after all. Who knew?”

He turns her back around, smile huge as he cups her face in his hands. “Me,” he says, kissing her softly. “And you, I think.”

“A and V forever, huh?” she says, sighing contentedly when he rests his forehead against hers.

“Yeah.” She doesn’t need to see him to know his grin is incredibly wide. “A and V forever.”

They fall asleep tangled in each other’s arms, and she wakes with the cheesiest of cheesy smiles on her face.

But, of course, it doesn’t last. The instant she spots Andre lurking about, Veronica’s seeing all shades
of vermilion and scarlet. Rationally speaking, it’s unfair of her to rip into Archie for colluding with her father and the family bodyguard in what’s clearly a protection maneuver, and she knows it. But it’s early morning, he knows she loathes being kept in the dark like some fragile little hothouse flower, and frankly, she’s too angry to care about being rational. If she’s being secretly protected, that means there’s something dangerous going on that she hasn’t been apprised of and Archie has, and how dare he kiss her and hold her and sleep beside her like nothing’s wrong when he’s out here enabling the unilateral decision-making Hiram Lodge has been imposing on his wife and daughter for as long as she can remember?

It kills her. So she lets him know that, spitting out a harsh, And try not to choke on your own testosterone while you’re at it before stomping off in the hopes that throwing verbal daggers at him’ll do something to lessen the fury kindling inside her.

(It doesn’t.)

All day, the locket hangs on her—an albatross that burns like a live coal, and for a long time, she’s so mad at him, the overprotective lout, that she doesn’t care what she does. Shopping is a distraction—not much of one; the selection’s decidedly limited—and so is the flirting. (Also not much of one; the selection’s so limited it might as well be nothing, though she doesn’t bother to explain that to Betty, who views flirting as some sort of sacred rite rather than a useful skill or pastime for the bored.) She wants to yell at him, to accuse him of boyfriend sedition and treason for going behind her back with someone she loves but whose motives she doesn’t fully trust; wants to pretend for five minutes that she’s never heard of Archie Andrews, because if she’s never heard of him, then she can’t love him, and if she can’t love him, then she can’t be hurt by what isn’t a betrayal but feels horribly like one coming from him.

More than that, though, she wants to lean her head on his chest and just stay like that as long as she can, listening to his heartbeat and counting the breaths until all the jagged edges she can’t smooth out of her life fade into insignificance. Try as she may to convince herself otherwise, she misses him when he’s not around. Him and his stupid grin and little touches, and the way he always seems to know when to tease her and when to hold her.

It’s a mystery, she thinks when he approaches her all full of tentative apology, how a person can be so furious with someone and love them so much at the same time. Because she does love him.

And she’s furious with him.

And he seems to know both those things as well as she does, but he doesn’t let them talk him into pushing too hard too fast or intimidate him into not speaking, and maybe, just maybe that’s why being with him is such an exhilaratingly perfect blend of easy and challenging. He gets her, and she gets him. Even when it’s inconvenient, they understand one another. Want to make things better, any way they can.

It’s why, when they’re attacked later, her fear is almost exclusively for him. In terms of knee-jerk responses, the four of them are all predictable—she’s coldblooded enough to keep her wits about her in the face of danger and figure out the smartest move; Jughead’s bright enough to ID an ominous situation when he sees it, and though Betty defaults to some sort of crippling mental paralysis that makes her both useless and a bit of a volatile liability during a crisis, she naturally defers to whoever’s giving her orders.

But Archie—he’s clearly the lone physical threat out of their group, he tends toward recklessness, and he’s already had way too much happen to him this year. Any minute now, he’s bound to do
something stupid and get himself hurt, and she can’t let that happen. So the instant an opportunity presents itself, she seizes it, tells him she’ll be fine, and hopes he knows and trusts her enough to let her handle this.

To her relief, he does.

Reluctantly, and she can see on his face how much he hates it, how much he’s freaking out inside, but it just strengthens her determination. He’s not the only one who wants to protect those he cares about, and this is the one avenue she sees where the four of them get out of this without some kind of escalating fight.

Her heart almost stops when he chases after the lowlife who stole her necklace, and later, when they’re safely back in Riverdale and he’s saying goodnight in the foyer of the Pembrooke, she scolds him good for it. Tells him between brain-galvanizing kisses that if he ever, ever pulls a stunt like that over a piece of jewelry again, it had better be because someone’s life actually hangs in the balance. Which makes him laugh and promise he’ll listen—unless it’s the heart locket again, so if she wants him to not go after it maybe she should take it fewer places?

“Seriously?” she grumbles, planting her hands on her hips so she can glare up at him. “That’s your solution? Wear it less?”

“Not less, just…save it,” he jokes, kissing her noisily on the cheek. “You know, for like, super-special occasions or something.”

She rolls her eyes, but does.

And it takes every ounce of willpower she possesses to not think of that moment a few weeks later when she tucks a small, round pill between the two heart-shaped photos.

Because now she’s got a mission to complete, and it isn’t the time to dwell on how worried she is about him, how bruised and battered he looked in that picture she got a two-second glimpse of, how he’s dead if she doesn’t give the performance of a lifetime. She has one shot at saving her boyfriend, and even if that shot has a sickening price tag attached to it, she’s got to take it. Not for one instant does she think Nick will adhere to his half of the bargain, but even so, she’s agreed to it and needs to give the appearance of delivering—preferably on a silver platter—what’s been ordered: herself.

She just prays the fiend’s egotistical enough to think she can be swayed into wanting it. If he’s smart enough to know how intensely she despises him, he’ll take what he wants and she’ll have to endure until the timing’s favorable. And if that happens…

No.

Teeth clenching, she raises her head. She refuses to even entertain those thoughts. The goal is saving Archie, and the steps to achieve that goal are also clear: smile, play nice, and wait to strike until the target’s impossible to miss. No matter what it takes.

She repeats the instructions to herself the instant she sees Nick’s smirking, self-satisfied face, and again when he starts talking. And again when he sits beside her like this is a date and she’s playing coy.

It’s just a game, she thinks, forcing down the nausea every time he touches her. Only a game. Winner take all. Drink a little. Flirt. Enough so that he thinks he’s gaining traction, but not so much that he starts to question the compliance. Drag it out. Dance with him. Now you’re in the lead; don’t blow it by cracking too soon. Let him put his hand there, the reptile. Means to an end, means to an
end, means to a damn END.

He’s getting slower now. Sloppy. Leaning into her, hands starting to roam unrestrainedly. She steels herself when he nuzzles into the side of her neck, forces down the horror roiling in her stomach when his lips make contact with her skin, but she can feel the fissures appearing in her nerves. If he doesn’t drop soon, she thinks she just might vomit. The things he’s whispering in her ear, the way he’s all but pawing her…

Finally, mercifully, the slurred voice trails into silence. Nick slumps suddenly against her, and Veronica staggers, the dead weight almost dragging her to the floor along with him. Squatting precariously, she dumps him onto the ground then stands, looking around for something—anything—to tie him up. Before she can settle on anything though, something slams against the door, and she steps hastily over the prone figure, placing it between her and the entrance as she wonders whether she should scream for help or try to buy off whatever hired thug is coming to his nefarious client’s rescue.

But then the door bursts open, and the world’s righted so abruptly that all she can do is stare at the boy lying just past the threshold, panting like he’s run miles. He can’t be here; it’s impossible, yet here he is, and even though he’s dirty, bruised, and bleeding, he’s jumping up and kissing her, asking if she’s hurt, and God, she’s never been so happy to see anyone in her life.

There’s still work to be done of course, but with Archie safe and beside her now, it’s as if she’s been given a burst of unstoppable energy. In what feels like next to no time, they’re back at the Pembrooke, minus one aspiring teen mob boss and plus one hefty bag of cash she takes vindictive joy in using to shock her parents when they return. The combination of stress, adrenaline, and relief has her keyed-up to the point of near-reckless abandon, and it’s really beginning to take its toll on her; when Archie exits the study, she forgoes all pretense of subtlety. Grabbing him by the collar, she yanks him into the fiercest kiss she dares give him with all those scratches on his face.

“I already told your dad you’re staying with me,” she tells him when they separate, voice shaking as she realizes anew how close she came to losing him. “Don’t even think about going home, all right?”

He nods, exhaling slowly. “Servants’ entrance?”

“No.” She holds fast as he starts to walk away, feet skidding on the carpet. “Lord and Lady Macbeth are too busy brainstorming damage control for our ‘exploits’ to notice whether you leave or not. Let’s just go straight to my room and get you cleaned up.”

“Okay,” he says as she pulls him down the hall, “but Ronnie, I can’t shower.”

“Why not?” She shuts and locks the door behind them, clicking on the light. “I told you, they’re scheming. They won’t notice. Even if they did, what’s suspicious about it?”

“I meant I don’t have anything clean to change into,” he corrects. “Maybe I should——”

“First,” she interrupts, placing a finger over his lips before he can suggest returning home, “like I care if you’re wearing or not wearing clothes when it’s just the two of us. Second…” She leans over and pulls out a bureau drawer, pointing to the contents. “I’ve got enough of your RHS football, baseball, and basketball shirts here to offer you a selection, so quit arguing with me and get in the damn shower.”

“Ronnie.”

His tone is rickety, a note of fractured something lurking in the quiet syllables, and she stops on a
dime. “What? What is it? Are you hurt and you didn’t tell me?”

“No.”

He takes a breath, hand gathering up hers. And as painful as the grip should be, she loves it. His touch is familiar, comforting—a remedy no one on earth can offer save him. It soothes the part of her that feels weak and low and sullied, steadies her in the space of two heartbeats, and she understands at once what he’s asking, because it’s what she needs too.

Standing on tiptoe, she plants a soft kiss on his lips. “Unzip me.”

Unlike the last time she climbed into a steam-filled shower with him, there’s no urgency tonight. No lingering cloud of fear they’re trying to wall out through sensualistic abandon, no fevered motions or turbulent kisses. When he wraps his arms around her, her only instinct is to hang on tight, to close her eyes and savor the blissfulness that envelops her as he buries his face in her neck. Her name tumbles out of him, a whisper obscured by the noisy water, and though that’s all it takes to unravel her—out of nowhere she’s broken and shaking, asking him to please, please, just make her feel until there’s no room for thinking about all the horrors that could have been—it’s perfect. Beneath the hot, stinging rain, beneath the paths his lips trace across her body, restiveness melts into tranquility, and it’s all she can do to stay on her feet.

By the time they crawl into bed, damp, scrubbed, and both of them smelling like a New York salon thanks to her shampoo collection, it’s plain the weariness is taking over. Archie’s got darkening bruises everywhere and is starting to move stiffly; Veronica feels like someone’s drained her battery now that her brain doesn’t have to function at top capacity every single second. As inexorably as iron drawn by magnets, they find their way to each other and stay there, in the exact center of the mattress, pressed together like the leaves of a book. She lays her head on his chest and thinks drowsily about how his breathing is slow. Steady. A cadence that gets under her skin and in her blood and trickles through her until it evaporates any remaining tension in her limbs.

Neither of them says anything for a while, but then he combs a hand through her hair and she hears the question in her head before he actually asks it: You okay?

Because even though she’s already answered it once, too much evidence to the contrary now exists and he’s worried. So this time, burrowing deeper into his side, wondering when his closeness began feeling so necessary, she gives him the correct answer: I am now.

He drops off soon after, but Veronica lies awake for a long time, too tired to sleep. Listening to the rise and fall of voices from somewhere in the study’s vicinity, she weighs the shadowy aura of furtiveness that’s always seemed to pervade her life against the certitude of the snoring redhead beside her. All her days, she’s believed in family. Trusted its constancy and protected it, even when she didn’t always agree. Loyalty isn’t so much a code of ethics with her as it is a part of her DNA, and the concept alone of severing ties with those she cares for is repugnant to her. The Godfather jokes aside, siding against the family feels wrong. Fundamentally.

But by that same logic, not siding with Archie also feels wrong.

He’s an extension of her family now, and the loyalty she has toward him isn’t of the rote, dutiful variety like it is with her parents—with Archie, her loyalty feels earned rather than demanded, treasured rather than expected, and she knows in her heart she’s prepared to do battle on his behalf in a way she no longer is for Hiram and Hermione Lodge. He’s the one she’s afraid to trust but keeps finding she can; they’re the ones she wants to trust but keeps finding she can’t. Sooner or later, she’s going to have to choose. Not a side, because sides and issues shift like sand in the desert, but who she stands with. And why. If she’s going to turn her back on the family she was born into for good,
she needs to be damn sure she’s making the right choice.

The instant she sees the fear in her mother’s eyes after the attempted shooting at the debate, she is sure. H and H Lodge may be willing to sacrifice everything for their precious Plan, but their daughter isn’t. She’s tired of trying to steer things from the inside, tired of finding better ways to accomplish the same goals only to have them dismissed because of personal agendas or vendettas, tired of being advised to cajole instead of compel. Veronica firmly believes she was born ready to play, but even she can’t dominate a game that isn’t her own. It’s long past time for her to quit restricting herself to house rules and start inventing her own again.

So, chin up, teeth set, she goes to the Andrews’ house and declares her support for the man her father views as the opponent. And though she knows it won’t sit well with either of her parents, immediately, it’s as if a load’s off her mind—shadiness, deception, and denial have never been her weapons of choice, and now she’s free to go back to her forte: direct confrontation. Almost giddy with relief, she returns Fred’s understanding smile and glances toward Archie.

Which is maybe a mistake.

The boy’s staring at her from the doorway, a smile on his face that turns her insides into a squirming, writhing mess, and she just knows it’s going to be her undoing. With his father standing right there, the look in his eyes feels both far too intimate and not nearly intimate enough; she came here intending to just deliver her message, but now her blood’s quickening in her veins and that plan’s fast falling to pieces. The few seconds they spend chatting in the entry seem interminable, the space between them inadequate. And no one—not even Fred, she suspects, since he scratches awkwardly at an ear and announces with almost studied casualness as he heads into the living room that he’s going to watch a little TV and they’re welcome to join him (or not)—is ignorant of that fact. Certainly Archie’s not.

The moment his dad’s back is turned, he gives her a smile she feels all the way down to her toes, and it crosses her mind that her little guitar hero has come a long way from the nervous, what-if-your-mom-hears-us boy she led to her room for the first time. Now he’s the one leading the way to the stairs, and she’s the one trailing after and wondering about nearby parents.

But when she leans against the door to close it, fingers going up to fumble with her dress tie, she discovers that one aspect hasn’t changed at all—he still looks at her like she’s the overly-clichéd simile to his matching overly-clichéd simile, and all the purple prose in the world can’t describe how soppy and undeserving that look makes her feel.

I love you.

It’s the thought that dominates as the jacket plunks to the floor behind her, but she’s incapable of voicing it with her eyes locked on his. A blast of cool air buffets her skin when she moves forward, and as the distance between them shrivels, her heart seems to expand.

Pulse pounding, she halts in front of him. Wonders if he’ll ever have a clue how much she cares. How much he’s made her care. Her hands drift up to his shoulders, maybe deliberately, maybe automatically; she doesn’t know, because all she’s conscious of now is him. For a beat or two his mouth hovers inches away from hers, and it’s like holding her breath on the edge of a cliff so high she can see clouds below.

Then he’s kissing her, quick and soft and wonderful and right, and it’s beautiful. Perfect, even. But it’s just not enough; she wants more, needs more, needs him, needs to make him understand the extent of what lies behind those three words she can barely say, so she kisses him again.
And again. And again, deeper and hotter, longer and fiercer, each one so much better than the last that it’s almost unbearable. His touch is charged, a spark-shooting accelerant that ignites her as she twirls blindly across the room with him; by the time he moves a step back to strip off that shirt, she’s as good as dazed, floating and falling at the same time. The blurry moonlight seems only to magnify the heat in his eyes, and it rolls over her with hurricane-like force as he crashes back into her.

When he lifts her she holds on, senses aflame, breath scrabbling out. The impact of her back meeting the rough edge of the nearest wall jars through her, but she barely notices. His lips are restless, active, tearing at hers with a strength and speed it takes all of her to match, and she wouldn’t trade it for anything—it’s glorious, unbridled, exactly what she needs, and the best part is he knows that. She doesn’t have to explain or coax, doesn’t need to defend; with him she can simply be, and she can’t take any more of this.

“Bed,” she rasps, chest heaving with the effort of pulling away long enough to get the word out. It’s half-plea, half-command, all faint-voiced hoarseness, and she tightens her knees around him for the emphasis she can’t express verbally. “Now.”

He nods, his smile a glint in the bluish light.

In a twinkling she’s on the pillows, flushed and impatient, fingers embedded in his shoulders while he drags a kiss down the curve of her throat. His hands are everywhere, sliding up her legs, down her sides, working past yards of fabric to settle under her, digging into her hips as he flips her over to yank off the skirt, tangling through her hair until her breath comes in gasps. He’s tireless, ardent, both her anchor and the storm-tossed sea that leaves her not knowing where to stand, and as she shatters beneath him and he collapses on her, she thinks hazily that this is it, this is how it’s meant to be: Him and her. Together.

“Ronnie,” he breathes finally, lips smashed awkwardly into her collarbone.

She can’t hold in a giggle.

“Archie,” she responds, mimicking his dazed tone.

On a high she wonders if she’ll ever come down from, she winds limp arms around his neck. Presses a wobbly kiss against his forehead, because it’s all she has the energy for anymore, and anyway, it’s all she can reach with him still sprawled on top of her.

“You okay?” she asks after a second or two, because she’s too happy and dizzy to resist the opportunity for teasing.

A laugh, muffled and delirious, vibrates through him and drags another ditzy-sounding giggle from her.

“Yeah,” he says, grin lopsided as he raises his head to look at her. “Better than, actually; thanks. You?”

She stifles a guffaw at his messy, rearranged hair, heart swelling as she reaches up to touch the side of his face. “I think I’ll manage, Casanova.”

“Good.” He kisses her gently, hand trailing down her arm until their fingers link up.

And she realizes as she falls asleep, crammed against him with his sweaty arm slung over her, it doesn’t feel weird anymore. It just feels right. No matter what life throws at them, no matter how it tries to tear them down or break them apart…this is the way the story ends. The small-town boy with
the heart of gold and the big-city girl who can’t help loving him.

Archie and Veronica, A and V.

Forever.

“Te amo, Archie Andrews,” she whispers, eyes fluttering shut.

The arm around her tightens, making her smile. “Love you too, Ronnie.”

Chapter End Notes

*Title is from the song “Queen of Hearts” by We The Kings. I can’t separate this tune from Archie & Veronica, so I gave up, added it to my mile-long A/V playlist, & now I’m weirdly compelled to name this fic after it.

*So. I obviously didn’t update “soon” like I said I was going to on the last chapter (again…sorry!). Life got in the way, & I used most of my spare time this summer for writing, not editing. To prevent issues like this in the future, whenever I say things like, “I’ll have another update SOON,” please counter-jinx me with a “No you won’t.” It may be the only defense.

*On a related note: the large period of not-posting time was very productive in writing terms. I currently have 3 ready-to-go A/V fics plus 2 almost ready-to-go fics, 3-4 partially-done random drabbles-turned-fics, & a couple longer AU fics I’ve been messing around with off and on since October. The primary reason y’all haven’t seen any of the AUs is that the chapters are longer & it takes longer to edit them (I H A T E posting stuff I know I edited while tired because ugh, dumb errors), & I’m already so horrendously sporadic that I don’t want to leave people hanging for months while I try to edit 7K+ words. I did that once on a fic, & I’ve learned my lesson! (I think.)

*I wrote this in 2 days, maybe a week before the deleted scenes came out, so in case anyone wonders, that’s why there’s no mention of THE Study Scene. (By the way, OH EM GEE. I’ve suspected for a while now that the show’s been trimming the steamier A/V scenes for the sake of that 8/7 central time slot, but ahaha, now there’s proof! Man, I love my too-hot-for-primetime-TV babes.) Also, the fact that they cut the 2x19 scene where Fred calls V about Archie burns me up. It was like 30 secs long, explained lots, & I spent about 20 min brainstorming an explanation for Fred’s absence for this fic. Ys, my guess turned out to be the exact same one the Riverdale writers chose which is awesome, but still. I want my 20 minutes back, & I want them back NOW.

*Side note: I love V in 2x19. I mean, I love her always & she’s been my girl since the beginning, but this ep…wow. It’s like she pulls the ultimate queen’s gambit, bartering herself for Archie’s safety, & it’s kind of horrific that she has to use Fantine/Scarlett O’Hara methods to achieve her endgame. That lipstick part? My BABY! It hurts to watch, but I’m so proud of her too. As the saying goes, strong women don’t play victim, don’t make themselves look pitiful, and don’t point fingers…they stand and they deal. (One of these days I’m going to write an essay on why that quote perfectly fits Veronica Lodge.)

*2x14: okay. 1st: the kiss. Sorrynotsorry, but I still fall out laughing every time I think about it. The idea of V&J is too funny, & it will never NOT crack me up that Archie got
jealous. Like...the boy really needs to look in a mirror once in a while. He’s too humble for his own good. 2nd, I headcanon that the reason V’s wearing the necklace in the morning scenes is that she put it on in the middle of the night, so that’s what I ran with for this fic. 3rd: I LOVE the part during the robbery where A doesn’t want V to go with the two-bit criminal & she tells him she’ll be fine. It baffles me when I see things like “Archie let himself be buried alive for Betty but he let Veronica put herself in danger, lol” because I thought the point was kind of obvious: Archie HAS to let himself be buried alive for Betty, because B's incapable of functioning rationally enough during an emergency situation to say NO, STOP, TAKE ME. Neither V nor Jughead would allow Archie to climb into a coffin, & they certainly wouldn’t bury him—an “Over my dead body” would most likely be issued (melodramatically in J's case), they’d then be killed on the spot, & that’s exactly why the writers put B&A, the two hotheads, together in that scene. (In case it’s not clear, that scene really grinds my gears. Friends don't let friends get into coffins on their behalf, & friends absolutely, positively do NOT bury friends alive! Ugh. Sorry. My Slytherdor self still low key despises Betty for the disloyal cowardice, but I’m trying to move past it.) A lets V go because she steps up & essentially says “I got this, trust me,” & he DOES. With Betty, Archie’s always having to reassure/defend.be the voice of reason. With Veronica, he gets to be protected once in a while because V’s a loyal boss, & that's why A/V are my ship & I just don't get how anyone who actually watches this show can possibly ship A/B while claiming to like either Archie OR Betty, let alone Archie AND Betty.

But I digress.

***As always, thanks for reading and/or commenting! Hope everyone’s having a good fall so far & surviving the Archie/Veronica/Reggie rumors as well as can be expected.
Chapter Summary

The happier (happyish?) portion of 3x01, from Archie's POV.

This is maybe half the length of the last chapter, but happy Friday, everyone! Sorry I haven't updated in a bit. I promise I'll try to have something cheerfuller on Monday :D

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As days before impending doom go, this one starts out pretty near perfect. It's sunny, hot with an edge of chill in the shade, and exactly how the end of summer and the beginning of fall should feel.

Archie tells his parents he'll see them in the morning; that he and his friends are going swimming and sort-of camping. They smile, hug him, tell him to have a good time like there's nothing out of the ordinary, and he laughs like he believes it and says he will. He then pulls out of the driveway as fast as the little jalopy’s rubber-band engine will let him, and goes to pick up Veronica, Jughead, and Betty, all of whom seem unusually ready to get the hell out of town. The drive over is relaxing, full of wind and sun, and Veronica's hand playing with his hair, and it warms him in a way even the balmy temp never could.

The swimming is great, too. The water’s colder than anyone expects, but that only adds to the craziness since they all come up yelling and splashing, and in five minutes of really bad water fights there’s already more laughter happening than all the rest of the days in the summer put together. No one can agree on who the Chicken champs are since Veronica and Betty fall off in near-perfect sync (Betty argues her fall shouldn’t count because Jughead lost his footing when she was pushed while Veronica insists the only reason she slipped off Archie’s shoulders at all is because she laughed so hard at Jughead’s trying-to-hold-on face and anyway, she hit the water second) and it escalates into a free-for-all splash battle that ends with all four of them floating on their backs and trading lazy insults back and forth.

“This is nice,” Veronica tells him at one point, leaning her cheek against his when he swims up under her and pulls her back into his chest so that she’s floating with her head partially balanced on his shoulder. “Excellent call, Archiekins.”

“Thanks.”

He angles his head, catching the corners of her lips in a watery kiss that makes her giggle and him smile. Every time he’s with her lately, it’s like he can hear a clock ticking in the back of his head—a clock that says he’d better enjoy it while he can, because he doesn’t have that long with her. That no matter how much he hates the idea, sooner or later, he’s going to have to let her go.

“What?” Veronica says, creating little ripples around them as she twists to face him. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he answers, smiling in spite of himself when she scoots closer, legs wrapping around his waist. “Just thinking.”
“Oh.” She props her elbows on his shoulders, hands ruffling through his plastered-down hair, eyes soft as she leans in to kiss him—once on the lips, twice on the tip of the nose, third time right between the eyes. “Anything I can potentially help with?”

He shakes his head, hugging her close. “You already are, Ronnie.”

“Sure?” she says softly.

“Yeah. I’m sure.”

He kisses her. Slowly this time, bound and determined to hang onto her while he still can. And they bob together for a while—laughing and talking in low voices, tossing out stupid jokes and exchanging kisses until he notices that her fingers are getting all pruny, so then he suggests they get out and go start the fire.

After that, it’s like everything begins to fizzle. Maybe it’s the overwhelming onset of darkness or maybe it’s just that he’s been staring into the flames for too long, but he feels guilty again. Here he is, hanging out with his girlfriend and his two best friends and enjoying every second of it when really, he has no right to. He didn’t kill anyone, but he’s not exactly innocent. Not the way he sees it, anyway. Because there’s a chance he could’ve stopped it. He just didn’t take it; he chose instead to do as he was told and let things play out. He ran away and he let someone get murdered.

He tries to explain it to the others, but they don’t seem to get it, and it just depresses everyone which only makes him feel worse. By the time Jughead clears his throat and stands, saying he and Betty guess they’ll set up camp on the other end of the beach, that cold ache is back in Archie’s stomach and he wishes he’d just kept his mouth shut.

And it doesn’t help that Veronica asks almost immediately if he’s all right. She’s been amazing all summer, giving him pep talks and making him laugh, working her ass off at Pop’s and then running over to see how he’s coping with all this mess, sitting there in that stuffy courtroom every day and smiling at him whenever he looks back at her. But when she stops repacking the cooler to squat down in front of him, her concerned expression just reminds him that he’s got to stop her from trying to fight this. That he can’t let her ruin any more of her life worrying about him.

At the same time though, he can’t stop himself from reaching for her. Or holding her so tight he can feel her heart thudding against his. Or kissing her like his life depends on it; his mouth fuses with hers until they’re both breathing in rocky gasps, her hands clamped around his face, his pressing into the curve of her waist. When she stands suddenly, plucking her top off as she walks toward the blanket and discarding it with a backward look at him, he follows immediately.

No matter how positive he is that Veronica doesn’t need him or the insane amount of pain and grief he’s sure to cause her, that’s just how it is. How it’s always been, right from the start—even when he knows he shouldn’t, he takes one look at her and falls head over heels in love. And if it was bad at the beginning, it’s so, so much worse now. Because now he can’t tell himself it’s just him having a stupid crush on the new girl; now he knows what it is and how much it means to him, how much she means to him, and God, how is he ever going to find the courage to put an end to it like he knows he’s got to?

There’s not much of a chance to wonder, though. When he joins her, Veronica kisses him again, the smile she tries to give him not quite steady.

“Shirt,” she murmurs, fingers strumming at his sides. “Come on.”

He lifts his arms when she tugs at the hem, smiling involuntarily while he stands still and waits for
her to pull it over his head. She’s always kind of brusque when she’s wanting to ignore something, and tonight’s no different. The fire casts weird shadows over them that make it hard to see her face, but even so he can tell her mouth is set in a stubborn line. These past few months, she’s been adamant about everything—refusing to entertain even the idea that he’ll be found guilty, all but ordering him to think positively and insisting he not ‘borrow trouble in advance.’ But as much as he appreciates it, he’s not blind. He knows she dreads the same things as him, and that most of her upbeat attitude is for his sake. She has to be sick and tired of all the pretending, yet here she is again trying to act like this is just another night when really, what she needs to do is give up the fight and just let him go.

“Ronnie,” he says quietly, sitting down while she wiggles out of her skirt and practically flings it aside. “Listen, I—”

“Don’t, Archie.” Her tone is sharp, the stare she levels at him through a screen of hair almost angry. But then the flames roar higher behind them and the burst of brightness lights up her extra-shiny eyes, and he sees at once how hard she’s trying not to cry. “Whatever circle of hell is or isn’t going to happen on Tuesday—it’s not a part of tonight. All right?”

He nods slowly. “All right,” he says, swallowing over the weird lump in his throat.

“Good.”

She sinks down beside him with more speed than gracefulness, chin jutted out as she reaches up and around behind her to undo her bra. But it’s obvious she’s not as calm as she wants him to think; her fingers are clearly shaking and, four fumbling attempts later, she’s only managed to get hold of the bottom part of the band.

“Damn it!” she explodes finally, frustration edging her voice as she sits up on her knees, head twisting from side to side like she’s trying to see. “This is ridiculous. I can’t even get this stupid—ugh.”

Expelling a loud, wrathful sigh, she props her hands on her hips, and as he watches her glare up at the sky, he’s smacked right upside the head with another wave of love for her. When she reaches back again, he gets to his knees too and grips her shoulders to make her stop. In answer to her silent question, he lands a kiss just behind her ear, one palm sliding down until it rests at her hip.

“Let me,” he says, and Veronica nods, her hand closing over his.

He kisses her again, lower on her neck, and she draws in a breath that makes him shiver. She’s quiet—uncharacteristically so—but she tilts her head ever so slightly to the side while her fingers weave themselves between his, and he can feel her pulse thrumming under his lips as they scrape across her shoulder.

Working in tandem, they slide her straps off and he leans in to kiss her, his hand going out to steady her as she turns to meet him. And he wants to tell her he loves her, that he really truly doesn’t know what he’s going to do without her, that if he talked for a month straight about what having her with him has meant to him he wouldn’t be able to explain even half of it, but he just can’t. His throat is so tight it hurts, and he is not going to ruin what may be his last night with her by having a meltdown.

So he wraps his arms around her and hangs on, kissing her like there really is no tomorrow. He’s always been a little drunk on her, always found it easy to get lost in her kiss, but tonight, with a million awful outcomes possible, it’s on a whole new level. Yeah, maybe this is it for him, and maybe he doesn’t even deserve this much, but when it comes to the girl with the vice grip on his heart, he has trouble remembering that.
Because in a way, it’s a lot like his life is divided into two distinct sections: Before Veronica, a time when things were simple and boring but he forever felt like he didn’t know which end was up or where he fit into the world, and After Veronica, a time where nothing’s straightforward except how he feels about her.

And even that comes with its share of problems.

He loves her. Needs her. Wants to be with her, whether she’s making jaws drop in fancy dresses and high-heel shoes, or sweating it out behind the counter at Pop’s in the waitress uniform she defends in public as “cute” and “retro” but actually despises and refers to in private as “the Peggy Sue ensemble.” She’s the part of his life he never knew was missing until she showed up in town and made him realize it, the one he can tell anything to at any time, the one who understands that he sort of goes to pieces every now and then.

Most importantly—she’s the one who makes him feel safe, and the one he’d give anything to keep safe.

She won’t be, though a voice somewhere in the back of his head taunts. Not if she’s stuck with you.

“Archie?”

His eyes snap open. Her face is only inches away, a small frown squiggling her brows, and even though he’s seen that look a million times, his heart gives an extra little thump.

“Hmm?” He says it absently, loosening his grip a bit when he notices how tightly his hands are locked at the small of her back.

“What is it?” she says, thumb brushing over his cheek while she waits him out. But when he can’t find an answer, she sighs and pulls his head toward her, pressing soft lips against his forehead.


“You do?” he ventures, wondering if she’s become that good at reading him, or if he really is just that transparent and everyone else around him has always been clueless to notice.

“Of course.” A small, crooked smile twists up her mouth, and she bumps his nose playfully with hers. “You just…always wanted to make it in front of a roaring fire, right?”

In a split second he’s back in the Pembroke, tired and happy, lying on his stomach on a fluffy, itchy rug with Veronica and a blanket draped over him, and he chuckles. Reflexively, just like he did right before he blurted out the thing that, for a while, he was sure had cost him her. They’ve come so far since then, her and him, but one thing is very much the same.

Eyes on hers, he tucks his hands up under her thighs, hitches her up into his arms, and leans back. It’s not the softest landing in the world; he can feel a good-sized rock digging into his shoulder blade through the blanket and Veronica has to put her hands down to keep the two of them from knocking heads, but he doesn’t care. Reaching up, he scrapes a bunch of hair off her face so he can see her better.

“I love you, Ronnie,” he says distinctly.

Her smile is small. Small, a little sad, and it wobbles badly, but he memorizes it anyway because it belongs to her and for that reason alone, it’s beautiful and he loves it.

“I love you too,” she whispers. “Don’t you dare forget that, all right?”
She kisses him then, furiously, and he knows it’s because she’s out of words and on the brink of crying. So, for the moment, he ignores everything but her—the taste of her lips, the warmth of her skin, the way she’s wrapped around him ‘til he can barely breathe. And afterward, when she’s lying with her head on his shoulder, he finally rips off the Band-Aid and mentions the subject he’s been dreading. He hopes she’ll see where he’s coming from and agree, but of course she doesn’t and coolly announces her intention to visit him every chance she gets.

Which just about horrifies him.

“That’s exactly what I don’t want,” he tries, thinking he can maybe convince her sticking by him out of loyalty is a terrible idea if she understands what it means for her. “I don’t want you spending the rest of your high school waiting for me.”

“No, no, no, no, no.” Pushing herself up on an elbow, Veronica turns on him, hair swinging crazily around her face. “You are not breaking up with me tonight, Archie Andrews.”

“Ronnie, I—” he starts, touched by her fierceness but also frustrated at how stubborn she’s being, because does she not realize how much she’s going to miss if she insists on this?

“Archie,” she cuts in in her nonnegotiable voice. “I am not letting my dad take away the one thing that I love. It’s not happening.”

She stares at him for a second or two like she’s daring him to challenge her again, then lays back down as though not a word’s been spoken. It takes her a couple of tries to get resettled, her head sliding awkwardly around his shoulder, and he thinks again as she squirms to a more comfortable position of all that he’s going to miss out on if he ends up having to go away—school, friends, everything important that happens in her life from here on out—and like a switch has been pulled somewhere, his eyes fill.

“You know it’s weird, Ronnie,” he says suddenly, the quiet pressing down on him with almost suffocating force. “The thing that keeps me up most nights isn’t that I might get…shivved. It’s that I won’t be able to graduate with you guys.”

She doesn’t say anything right away, and he kicks himself mentally, embarrassed he even brought it up. It’s dumb, random, and definitely shouldn’t be his main worry, but the confession sort of popped out and now it’s just…there. Hovering over the two of them like some kind of giant, sappy balloon.

“Stupid, right?” he mutters, shifting a little so the tears have somewhere to go besides down his cheeks and onto Veronica, because wouldn’t that be a great way to wrap up this idiotic speech? Crying all over the person who’s worked hardest to cheer him up.

But then her head tilts upward, and he feels her looking at him for a long moment.

“I don’t think that’s stupid at all,” she says softly.

Archie’s throat tightens, and he gives her a light nudge with the arm she’s using as a pillow, encouraging her to scoot closer. Which she does, quickly, curling up beside him with her cheek on his chest. And he thinks vaguely as he puts an arm around her and his chin comes to rest in her hair that she smells like summer—her skin is a strangely hypnotic combination of wind, smoke, suntan lotion, lake water, and whatever perfume she put on to disguise what she referred to as Eau de Swimming Hole, and he can’t get enough of it. Her fingers move up and latch onto his, and he runs his thumb carefully over the smooth, polished nail, eyes fixed on the night sky he can’t even see all that well through the fricking tears.
Enjoy it while you can, man he thinks, kissing the top of her head. Enjoy it while you can.

Neither of them says a word for a long time, then, unexpectedly, Veronica shifts in his arms.

“What is it?” he says, craning his neck to see her.

“I was just thinking.” She rubs his forearm, planting a tiny kiss on the inside of his wrist. “All that talk we had about having fun, and seizing the day, and not borrowing trouble, yet here we are. Depressing ourselves by doing exactly that.”

“Yeah?” Archie takes her hand and squeezes it lightly, not sure where she’s going with this. “I mean, I’m open to suggestions Ronnie, believe me, but—what do you have in mind?”

“Well.” She pokes him in the side with her free hand, making him jump. “I know it’s late and we didn’t bring your guitar with us on this one-day excursion, but…” Snuggling into his side, she smiles up at him. “What do you say to an impromptu concert under the stars anyway?”

He should hesitate he thinks, fighting a smile at her exaggeratedly toothy grin. Talking in anything above a whisper feels wrong; the only noises around them now are the crackles of the almost-dead fire, a few annoying cricket choirs, and the occasional bout of wind that goes scudding through the trees and makes little waves lap at the shore. Plus they have to be up early; singing’s probably not the smartest plan in the world.

But also…it’s Veronica, it’s singing, and he probably won’t have a chance like this for a while. What the hell?

“Okay,” he says. Moving their interlocked hands toward her head, he picks a piece of hair off her forehead. “What should we start with?”

“Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star?” she suggests, laughing when he snorts. “Kidding, I promise. Um...okay, how about you choose something. Something not sad,” she adds, all jokiness vanishing from her tone. “Because that I can’t do. For the sake of my sanity, please go with something up-tempo.”

“All right. Something up-tempo, not sad, that we both know.” He squints at the sky for a minute or two, trying not to laugh when she begins playing with his earlobe to tease him, and silently marveling at how easily she can cheer him up. “Wait,” he says finally, lighting at last on a tune that’s not as totally depressing as everything his brain’s thought up so far. “I think I got one.”


“Uh….not quite.” He clears his throat, eyes closing as he takes a deep breath. “Got my first real six-string,” he starts, softly and a little self-consciously because his voice sounds so thin and weird in the open air. “Bought it at the five and dime…”

“Played it ‘til your fingers bled,” Veronica inserts without missing a beat, squeezing his hand as her clear voice raises the volume. “Was the summer of sixty-nine.”

“Me and some guys from school,” he continues, “had a band and we tried real hard—”

“Please, GOD,” an annoyed-sounding voice calls from somewhere in the shadowy distance. “Of all the overrated rock songs in all the world, do you two really have to perform that one? And now?”

Archie bursts out laughing, especially when he glances at Veronica to gauge her response and she
rolls her eyes at him, taking her hand back so it’s free to cup around her mouth.

“No!” she hollers, then raises her voice until she’s basically belting out the next line. “Jughead quit, Betty got married. Should’ve known you’d never get far.”

Warmth spreads through Archie when a faint Seriously? drifts back to them and his girlfriend’s only reaction is a my-work-is-done-here smirk. No, he still doesn’t know what’s going to happen, and yes, there’s every possibility that he’s going to lose the girl who can make the worst stuff in the world seem like a conquerable rock instead of a mountain. But even if that happens—at least he’ll have this.

At least he’ll have had her.

Reclaiming her hand, he smiles so hard into her face that it hurts. “Oh, when I look back now…”

Veronica giggles, her eyes soft as she reaches up to trace the edge of his jaw. “The summer seemed to last forever…”

“And if I had the choice…”

“Yeah, I’d always wanna be there…”

Something in his heart aches at her smile, and he can’t resist tugging on a piece of her hair. Using the end of the long, wavy strand to tickle her cheek so that she’s looking when he holds their joined hands up like a microphone and sings the final line of the first verse right to her:

“Those were the best days of my life.”

They make it through the rest of the song, even fake a decent guitar solo, but he guesses it’s his fault they both end it with leaky eyes. And that Veronica yanks his head down afterward for one, two, three more breath-snatching kisses.

“I love you,” she says again, almost glaring at him. “And we are going to weather this storm, all right? No matter what fate, circumstance, anyone or anything has to say about it, we will. I don’t care how long it takes, I don’t care what it costs—I’m not giving up on us because it’s inconvenient, or you think that it’s ‘in my best interest,’ or some other nonsense. It’s you, and it’s me, and that’s the way it’s going to stay. Understood?”

“Understood, Ronnie.”

“Good.”

She hugs him tightly, cool fingers skidding over his ribs while she falls asleep on his chest. And though it tickles almost unbearably and the arm he’s got around her goes numb and he keeps inhaling accidental mouthfuls of her hair, he’s a hundred percent sure he wouldn’t change a thing.

“Love you, Ronnie,” he whispers as he starts to drift off, kissing her one last time on the forehead.

He’s not sure if she hears him or not since she doesn’t stir, but it doesn’t matter.

She knows.

And the way he sees it—that’s really all that matters.
*Chapter named after The Danleers song by the same name because the kinda melancholy sound fits the mood.

*Pretty sure this is common knowledge, but the song A&V sing is “Summer of ‘69” by Bryan Adams. (Yes, I fully recognize that the Cheesiness is Strong with this fic moment, but no, I don’t care.) I’m shocked Riverdale hasn’t used this song yet (copyright issues, maybe?); I was actually caught off guard in 1x10 when they sang “Kids In America” instead, so of course I had to make it happen here. Besides, I headcanon that Archie and Ronnie sing together all the time, and I feel like Archie would pick that kind of song.

*I had to do something like this after I saw the season premiere, but I kind of depressed myself writing it, so I’m giving you guys a classic S1 moment on Monday (maybe sooner, but knowing my track record, probably not). No sense in spreading the depression around when the show’s doing that already, right? I mean, Archie. My poor baby. He is too sweet for prison, and that’s just all there is to it. And seeing Veronica and Fred sad and worried about him is no picnic, either.

*Okay. Three eps in, and I’m amazed how much A/V I’ve gotten. The 3x01 scenes were like very wonderful stabs to the heart that I loved, hated, and couldn’t get enough of. The Jailhouse Rock scene was absolutely one of my favorite A/V scenes to date (I REFUSE to apologize for how loud I squealed when that music kicked in because I knew, I just KNEW V was going to sing the “Number 47 said to Number 3” part, and she DID. And Archie’s FACE. And the “That’s my girl” moment? *clutches heart*). It was gorgeously campy, and I LOVED IT. Also: I’m both delighted and nervous that Riverdale introduced “The Count Of Monte Cristo” (yeah, I see what you did there, writers) to Archie’s storyline. The escape methods and ensuing plot twists mentioned in that book bode ill for my hotheaded baby boy, and like, if V’s Mercedes, is Reggie the Mondego? I need answers.

*So, um, the Gargoyle King…MAYBE he would be scarier if I hadn’t grown up in the Southwestern portion of the United States, where animal skeletons are (unfortunately) a socially acceptable form of home décor? Lol.

*The parent flashback episode preview: calling it now, it’s going to be one of my favorite episodes. I can feel it. I always love filler eps because they can basically go anywhere with the story, and this one looks legendarily weird. And speaking of parents: I slandered Mary Andrews a couple chapters ago, and I apologize. She talked with V on the way out of the courthouse, defended her baby boy to the best of her ability, and I officially love Mama A. again.

*Thanks for reading/commenting, and hope you guys are doing well!
Ten Minutes Ago I Met You

Chapter Summary

Archie Andrews meets Veronica Lodge. Veronica Lodge meets Archie Andrews. But it’s just a chance meeting in a burger joint, right?

Right?

Chapter Notes

(I really don’t think this needs to be specified, but this chapter takes place in 1x01<3)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Every year, right before school starts, he and Betty go to Pop’s.

Why, he’s not sure. They just do. It’s—an end-of-summer tradition.

That is, he’d like to think it’s a tradition. Really, it’s probably just habit. A thing they always do because it’s the thing they always do, just like how they never fail to talk over the summer and fill each other in on everything the other’s missed, and even their food orders barely change. It’s never occurred to him that they might be stuck in a little bit of a rut since he usually finds routine reliable and comfortable, but tonight, something’s different.

Tonight, sitting across from Betty and listening to her rave about her internship, Archie finds himself questioning it just a little. They’ve been friends for basically forever now, but he can’t help noticing that the older they get, the more they seem to have almost nothing in common except for shared experiences. And even that’s starting to change.

Right now, right this second for example, he has no clue what she’s talking about. Like, he knows the topic is the internship and the individual words make sense and all, but strung together it’s just a bunch of gibberish to him; she might as well be speaking in code. He doesn’t like to let on that he’s just doing a lot of nodding and agreeing though, because he doesn’t want to hurt her feelings. She’s clearly excited about everything that happened, and as her friend, the least he can do is hide how epically boring that kind of stuff sounds to him so he doesn’t dampen her enthusiasm, right?

Besides—he really is happy for her, and Betty’s a little funny about things like that. Ever since they were little kids, she’s had this idea that sharing everything from hobbies to interests to opinions is the major part of friendship—like, if the two of them aren’t involved in all the same type of activities all the time, she worries, usually out loud, and for a very long time, that they’re maybe starting to drift apart or something. And it’s not like Archie disagrees about the importance of similar interests in friendship, it’s just…he doesn’t think it’s that big a deal if he’d rather play multiple sports than join the Blue and Gold (God, he’d go insane if he had to spend all his time in a dark old room digging through musty books and questioning his spelling ‘til his eyes cross). Or if he’d rather watch sitcom reruns and Survivor instead of whatever weird tomb excavation or serial killer tracking show is playing on the History Channel. He’s not going to quit being friends with her because some of the
stuff she enjoys is legit less appealing to him than watching paint dry; no. That’s so stupid. She just
doesn’t seem to get that, and since he hates being the reason people he cares about get upset, he
always works hard to not look like he’s mentally checking out of the conversation whenever she’s
talking about one of the many, many interests he doesn’t share.

Kind of like how she pretends to be as interested in the music stuff as he is when he tells her.

That one actually does make him laugh, because her Amazing! is so fake he bets even the four-year-
old kids she usually uses it on could see through it. But he appreciates the attempt for what it is—
being nice—and lets it pass. Besides, now she’s doing that thing where she asks lots of questions
about stuff he’s still in the process of figuring out, and he needs all his energy just to keep himself
from panicking. And also to make her see that he’s not ready for her to accidentally announce this to
his dad and a lot of other people, because it’s still so new that even talking about it feels kind of
embarrassing.

But she seems to understand his need for secrecy this time and is off like lightning on something else.
The importance of friendship, he thinks. He can’t be positive though, because halfway through
whatever it is Betty’s saying, the bells at the front of the shop jingle and he glances up like always
to see who’s just entered.

And as he locks eyes with the girl—dark-haired, red-lipped, gorgeous—it’s like a giant record-
scratch goes off in his brain and he can’t focus on anything else.

Wow, he thinks stupidly, a rush of something he can’t possibly put a name to attacking him as she
moves across the floor and Betty’s voice fades to background noise. He feels…frozen. Flattened.
Like he’s stuck in one of those dreams where legs and feet don’t work right, except he’s not upset
about it because he’s fine just staring. This girl—she’s new in town; has to be. He’s beyond sure he’s
never laid eyes on her before because good God is she pretty, and—okay, he’s got to stop staring.
She’s looking straight back at him while she keeps heading in his direction, and now he’s just being
an idiot. He’s got to stop staring at her, got to look away, got to blink or breathe or something.

Yeah, that’s definitely not happening.

He knows he looks stunned—can feel it on his face—but there’s nothing he can do about it. Trying
to not stare at this girl is like trying to turn off a reflex or something. The weird part though is that he
gets the distinct impression that she knows he’s staring…and that she doesn’t much care. Which
Archie thinks is awesome. She hasn’t done anything except walk into a restaurant and look around,
yet somehow, everything about her radiates confidence. And it’s sort of magnetic.

No, not sort of. Who is he kidding? There is no sort-of about this girl.

Chewing something (hamburger? Fries? He doesn’t know what) mechanically, he watches as,
without once breaking stride, she strolls up to Pop Tate and tells him she’s picking up an order.
Snippets of the conversation register—two burgers, her name is Lodge, the order’s almost ready so
she’s going to have to wait—but it’s not until Pop walks away and the dazzling stranger turns in the
general direction of the booth that Archie sort of comes back to himself and cringes again at how
insanely goofy he must look sitting here with his eyes popping out and his jaw really close to
hanging open.

But instead of the creeped-out frown he expects, he gets a calm little blink that ties his insides in
knots.

“Hi,” the girl says, her voice bright and cheerful in a way that instantly makes Archie want to smile.
“Hi,” he replies.

The greeting’s automatic though he’s inwardly still trying to recover from the fact that she just actually initiated a conversation; he would never have the guts to do something like that to a stranger who was just sitting in a booth and staring at him. And maybe he looks as shell-shocked as he feels, too, because the girl opens her mouth for a second as if she’s about to say something, then seems to think better of it.

“How are the onion-rings here?” she asks, smiling a little as she asks the question.

To Archie’s extreme relief, he knows the answer to this one.

“So good,” he tells her with maybe a little more enthusiasm than necessary.

But it’s not like he’s calm enough to fix anything about his tone—whenever her eyes settle on him, it’s like the room gets hot and he gets shivery, and an annoying voice in the back of his head wonders if he’s really talking about the onion rings. Thankfully, though, the girl doesn’t seem to notice anything too weird about his response.

“Can we get some onion rings too, please?” she calls, raising her voice slightly to be heard across the diner.

Pop answers in the affirmative, she thanks him, and Archie’s heart thumps out a strange, staccato rhythm when she turns back to the booth. Toward him. He’s not sure what’s going on, not sure why he’s so eager to talk to her but also so nervous, and at this point, he just hopes she won’t think he’s a complete dork or anything.

Unless she likes dorks?

“Thanks,” the girl says. “My mom and I just moved here, so…”

Okay, so she’s not just passing through town on her way to somewhere else. He’s too distracted to figure out why, but that piece of information feels a lot like relief.

“From where?” he asks, wondering how long just is. A few hours ago? A day? No way it’s a week. He definitely would have noticed her before now. Probably would have done something stupid like walk face-first into a lamppost, but he would have noticed her.

“New York.”

Oh, Archie thinks, understanding it in an instant. That’s what this is. She seems different because she is different—unlike him or anyone else he knows, she’s a city kid stuck in a dead-end small town, and holy crap, this place and everyone in it has got to seem pretty pathetic to her, right?

“Wow,” he says, because that’s all he can come up with.

“Do you guys go to Riverdale?”

“We do,” Betty says loudly at the same time that Archie explains that they’re sophomores. “Both of us. Together.”

A little surprised, Archie glances across the table at his friend. She almost sounds annoyed, and what’s up with that? Usually, she’s about ten times more talkative than he is; if he had a dollar for every time she’s told him he’s not being friendly enough and should talk more, he’d never have to pay for another milkshake at Pop’s. Giving her a quick are-you-okay look—maybe she’s mad
because she got interrupted but, like, it’s Pop’s and there’re always interruptions, so why would that be cause for annoyance?—he turns back toward the girl.

“Me too,” she says, her voice shifting into a jokey timbre. “I’m filled with dread.”

He grins up at her, chuckling a little because he just can’t help it. Her smile’s warm and catchy, and he doesn’t seem to be very good at resisting the urge to smile back. “Why’s that?”

“Are you familiar with the works of Truman Capote?” she responds, frowning a little as she asks the question.

Truman Capote. Truman Capote.

Archie racks his brain. He thinks he’s heard the name before, is vaguely sure they’re a famous writer of some sort and that he’s been forced to read something they wrote, but other than that, he’s clueless.

He nods anyway, though. And it seems to be enough for the girl, because she smiles again and says something about how she’s ‘breakfast at Tiffany’s, but this place’—it’s a mystery whether she means Riverdale or Pop’s—is ‘strictly in cold blood.’ And he doesn’t understand the joke, but something about the way she tells it makes him wish he did and want to laugh like an idiot.

Which he does.

He knows, because he sounds weird and high-pitched even to himself, and Betty stares at him from across the table like he’s lost his mind. He more than half-expects the girl from New York to give him the same look, smile politely and move away—this time for good—but she doesn’t.

“Veronica Lodge,” she says.

“Archie,” he says, taking hold of the small hand she extends. “Andrews. Ahh, uh,” he adds, remembering the manners his parents have ingrained in him since he was little and that he’s not alone at the same time, “this is Betty Cooper.”

Betty nods, a funny smile on her face.

“Wait.” Veronica squints some as she looks at Betty. “Are you…?”

“Supposed to give you your tour tomorrow?” Betty fills in. “Yes.”

Veronica smiles again, this time almost warily, and Archie wonders suddenly if any of this is making her first day jitters better. Nobody’s ever super excited about school starting up again, and in addition to all that, Veronica’s got to deal with a move and a bunch of new-kid stuff. Archie’s grown up in Riverdale so he’s never really been in that position himself, but he thinks that if he were friendless in a town he thought was kind of lame, he’d be miserable.

“Do you want to join us?” he asks as soon as Betty finishes whatever she’s saying about mentors. “Hey, maybe we can…un-fill you with dread.”

Head tilting toward the door, Veronica’s lips tip up in a little smile. “My mom’s waiting for me.”

Oh.

Disappointment flickers through him, but he quickly pushes it away and nods like it’s all good. Because it is, isn’t it? After all, ten minutes ago, he didn’t know Veronica Lodge even existed. It’s
gotta be the dumbest thing ever to feel let down about her needing to go eat dinner with her mom instead of with him.

And Betty. With him and Betty.

Damn, he’s really got to remember he’s not the only person sitting at this table.

“But,” Veronica’s breezy voice remarks, breaking into his thoughts, “to be continued.”

She’s looking right at him when she says it, and thanks to the incredible force of her smile, Archie can’t repress his.

“Yeah,” he says half under his breath as she turns to go in a swirl of black cloth and heavy perfume.

Is he seeing things, or is there an extra flutter of eyelashes when she sends one last smile at him over her shoulder? He’s not sure; his brain is way too dizzy to make the call. His stomach is totally convinced, though—it turns another fancy somersault inside of him, and he watches her leave with a big, dumb grin stuck to his face.

Veronica Lodge from New York.

Wow, he thinks again, because he doesn’t have any words other than that. Just…wow.

Feeling a lot like he’s been through a crazy-intense windstorm, he makes eye contact with his best friend and realizes she’s still giving him a very strong are-you-serious stare from her side of the booth. Which means he definitely looks as stupid and out of it as he feels. Sheepishly, he raises his eyebrows and gives himself an internal kick for losing his train of thought so obviously.

“Uh,” he says, trying hard to remember what it was they were talking about just a few minutes ago. “What were you saying?”

“Never mind,” Betty replies.

He’s grateful she doesn’t bring it up the whole rest of the evening, and he doesn’t think about it at all after that. Not once.

Except right before bed, when he catches himself wondering if Veronica liked the onion rings or not. But that doesn’t count, because it’s just a passing thought. He’s not replaying the meeting or her smile in his head or anything. He’s not.

Okay, maybe he is. But only a little. And it’s not like it means anything anyway. He’s already in love with someone, and Veronica’s probably got tons of people chasing after her. Whatever he felt when she smiled at him—it’s got to be a fluke or something.

Doesn’t it?

~*~

“Well?”

Slumping against the door until it clicks shut, Veronica tosses back her hood with a sigh of relief. It’s no quieter inside her new home than out, but somehow, it feels like she’s reentered the realm of safety.

“Well, what?” she inquires.
Hermione points the remote at the TV and freezes Joan Crawford on it in an attitude of graceful cunning. “Well, what did you think of Pop’s? Enchanting? Antiquated? Dreary?”

“Oh. That.”

For some reason, Pop’s Chock’lit Shoppe and Archie Andrews, the redhead with the adorably toothy, infectious grin are linked in Veronica’s mind. Inextricably, as though together, they represent the soul of the town and its alleged peppiness so much that one cannot exist without the other. Pop’s is Archie, and Archie is Pop’s, and always the twain shall meet. So when she attempts to label her thoughts on one or either of those…

“I’m not entirely sure,” she says offhandedly, dropping her purse on the nearest available surface—the only end table topped with a smallish floral arrangement. “Not yet, anyway. For the time being, let’s just say I believe I find it both quaint and intriguing.”

“Ooh, intriguing. That sounds promising.” Patting a sofa cushion invitingly, her mother beckons her over. “Come on. Join me. I’m famished, and these glamorous Old Hollywood dinner parties aren’t making it any better.”

Veronica’s eyebrows rise as she moves over to the couch and takes in the extraordinary scene of thorough and deliberate relaxation before her. “Well. PJs, minimal makeup, plush blankets, and strong drink. At least one of us seems to be handling the move better than expected.”

“What?” Hermione says in mock defense, setting her wineglass down with a clink and folding her legs up under her. “I wanted to test the hominess of this place. See if it’s as livable as I remember.”

“You mean you wanted to christen it?” Handing over one of the white paper bags, Veronica drops down on the cushy surface and kicks her heels halfway across the room, relishing the successive dull thuds as they land. “Lodge-woman style, complete with satin sleepwear and pinot noir?”

“Perhaps.” There’s a crackle of paper, an investigative sniff, then a gratified sigh as the woman Veronica’s seen send back a latte for the express crime of not being soy and nonfat tears into her greasy meal-in-a-bag with the unhinged enthusiasm of a shopper on Black Friday. “Wait, Ronnie, are these onion rings? I don’t recall ordering any of those.”

“You didn’t,” Veronica answers, smiling to herself as her mind returns like a boomerang to the boy in the booth. Why she asked him of all people that question, she can’t say. The words just sort of flew out of her mouth when she glanced down to casually give him the subtle once-over and discovered him looking right at her, but she can’t find it in her to regret it. After all, it proved to be a decent conversation starter. “I did.”

“Really?”

She lifts a shoulder at the surprise in her mother’s voice and crunches industriously down on a fry. The flavor, she discovers, is amazing—the perfect combination of salt, potato, and oil, and she decides to take it as an omen. Riverdale may look like it belongs in the dictionary next to the phrase one-horse town, but it can at least lay claim to one glorious food product, and as far as she’s concerned, that’s a promising sort of sign.

“Yes,” she says. “They came highly recommended.”

Hermione laughs. “Naturally; so does everything at Pop’s. But by whom?”

“Oh,” Veronica says again, this time with studied carelessness. “Just some boy.”
“I see.” The tone is full of speculation now, and Veronica rolls her eyes as a finger prods gently at her arm. “This mysterious local wouldn’t happen to be yet another member of the God’s Gift To Women Brigade, would he?”

No, Veronica thinks, almost snorting at the idea. But then she remembers that eye-crinkling grin of his, and it strikes her that she’s not altogether sure what to make of Archie and his easygoing, semi-bashful charm. He’s sort of effortlessly hot, and that alone holds enough appeal to maybe plop him smack dab in the middle of the Lothario category.

The question is whether he’s aware of it or not.

“Possibly,” she responds after a couple more half-assed seconds of consideration. “But if he is, not in the usual sense. I received the distinct impression he speaks neither Mirror nor Girl very fluently, and that doesn’t really scream Womanizer, womanizer, you know?”

“So a natural heartthrob with no grasp of his own abilities, then?” her mother says dryly.

“Exactly.” His awkwardness had been the awkwardness of the modest and unassuming, and there was something so inherently appealing about it that Veronica had felt almost compelled to flirt. Just a little. Just to see how he and that cute smile of his would respond. “It was maybe a five minute talky-talk, yet the words honest as the day is long came to mind right away. I suspect he couldn’t formulate a passable pickup line to save his life.”

“You never know.” Resettling into a cross-legged position, Hermione raises an eyebrow as she takes such a mammoth bite of burger that Veronica genuinely contemplates asking who this imposter is and what she’s done with her mother. “Not everyone’s who they seem to be on the surface. Sometimes people surprise you.”

“Yes,” Veronica agrees, coughing pointedly as she lifts up her own burger with exaggerated, Emily Post levels of daintiness. “That…is true.”

Hermione laughs, the sound an extension of the frightening Absence of Elegance phenomenon since it’s muffled by food. “Cómela, smart-mouth. I dare you to judge me after you actually take a bite.”

Skeptically, Veronica obeys orders and finds to her amazement that the ringing endorsement isn’t hyperbole. Despite its decidedly pedestrian exterior, this burger is good. Which, reluctant as she is to admit it, is comforting. She’s dined at four-star, toast of New York City restaurants and cafes for the better part of her life, and she misses the energy of the city that never sleeps. Craves the excitement and bustle that changes so constantly she can’t help but appreciate the things that stay the same, like towering buildings, crowded streets, and feeling like a tiny bubble in a very large ocean of champagne. In Riverdale, it’s the opposite. Here sameness appears to be the watchword, and the stability of everything is so prevalent and oppressive she longs for the familiarity of an ever-shifting world. But this one, unexpectedly excellent dinner is like a gift: the meals created by those crystal goblet and pristine tablecloth places from her world have nothing on the paper-shrouded burger and fries combo before her now, and it’s gone a long way toward convincing her she just might be able to understand her mother’s soft spot for this postcard-looking hamlet.

“Verdict, Judge Ronnie?”

Her lips twitch and she shakes her head, resigned. “Somewhere a dead nutritionist rolls in their grave, but…you win, Mom. It’s delicious.”

The rest of the evening passes swiftly, with plenty of talking and plenty of movie watching until Hermione falls asleep mid fashion critique, her opinion of Hedy Lamarr’s gown left hanging.
Veronica considers waking her for a moment and teasing her about getting old and being unable to hold her liquor anymore, but she doesn’t have the heart to do it. Her mother’s sported a disheartening set of tight lines around her mouth for months now, and whatever Veronica personally thinks of this move and how much it feels like a retreat slash admission of guilt, at least it seems to have had a calming effect on someone. Picking up the chenille throw Hermione began the evening snuggled under, Veronica drapes it over her.

“Goodnight, Mom,” she says when the woman stirs. “Don’t get up, all right? I’m just going to bed.”

“Okay, mijita linda,” Hermione mumbles, kissing the air drowsily as Veronica bends down to peck her on the cheek. “You need any help picking a First Day outfit?”

“Already done,” Veronica answers, smiling even as she wonders when exactly she, the child, started feeling the need to protect her mother. “And not to prematurely toot my own horn, but it’s fabulous, and you’ll totally approve. As would Ms. Hepburn herself.”

“Good,” Hermione murmurs, slumping back into the depths of the throw pillows she’s hugging. “Can’t be too careful.”

Veronica wonders whether she’s talking about fashion or first impressions, but decides it doesn’t much matter. Patting her mother on the shoulder, she heads into the room recently designated her bedroom and stands for a while, hands on her hips, just taking in everything.

What she ought to do is go to sleep. Now. She starts school tomorrow, in a new school with new customs and complicated hierarchies that must be assessed in order to figure out the best way to break into the social scene that’s probably gone unquestioned since all her future classmates were in kindergarten. Going into the fray fresh, rested, and ready to sparkle—metaphorically, of course; sequins are not a viable option—is obviously the smartest course of action.

The trouble is that she can’t possibly go to sleep. Not immediately, and she knows that. The pre-first-day adrenaline’s already pumping through her veins, and she’s played calm, quippy, and resilient for so long now that she can’t ditch the disguise all at once. Like an actor who’s gone a smidge too deep into method, Spritely Veronica is a persona that seems to have taken command, and she has to remind herself that now she’s alone, now she doesn’t have to be strong for anyone, and now she can hate or fear everything if she feels like it.

Only—she’s not sure she does feel like it. She’s primarily observed things from behind the tinted glass of a car window, but so far, Riverdale appears to be (maybe) better than she expected. It looks every bit as dull and sleepy as she imagined, to be sure, but still. Smithers is clearly a softhearted darling of a doorman and she already knows he won’t squeal on her no matter how late she sneaks in. Pop’s was a pleasant surprise, and if the kids she met tonight are in any way representative of the rest of her classmates, she might actually enjoy herself. Betty seems sweet, if a little uptight and pastel, and Veronica thinks they could be friends.

Especially since she’s sworn off the crush-them-beneath-your-stilettos approach that’s been her go-to system of self-defense for as long as she can remember. Riverdale isn’t New York, and she seriously doubts high school here is anything like Spence. Even if she somehow ends up on the wrong side of whatever amateur A-listers run Riverdale High, she won’t need to crack open the arsenal of bitchiness a decade of New York prep schools have helped her accumulate. A few well-placed verbal bullets will undoubtedly suffice to frighten off the usual power-hungry teen despots, and honestly, she hopes she won’t even have to go there. The Lodge name has come under enough fire, and she intends to prove that whatever the world thinks of her father—of her family—Veronica Lodge is far more than the airheaded daughter of Hades himself.
(She flatters herself that she’s Aphrodite, at least.)

And speaking of the goddess of love…what is the story behind Betty and that gorgeous dinner pal of hers? The answer eluded her in the diner, and regrettably, it eludes her still. Were she forced to venture a guess, she’d say they’re not together; his demeanor was so extremely unboyfriend-like toward Betty that she was a little surprised when he made the introductions to find they didn’t share a last name. But the idea of friends is so far beyond Veronica’s comprehension that she’s determined to clear it all up tomorrow if she can figure out a way to bring the subject up without broadcasting her interest to the general public. Because while it could easily be one of those cases where two people know each other too well to ever be attracted to one another, Veronica can’t quite believe it. For one thing, she almost thought Betty resented the presence of another girl. And for another, while she likes to think her imagination is fertile, she simply doesn’t understand how anyone could possibly be content with nothing more than friendship from Archie Andrews.

From a purely aesthetic perspective, it’s unfathomable; the boy is Adonis-levels of attractive. What’s more, he’s sweet and smiley. Who lets that rare combination pass them by?

Certainly not Veronica Lodge.

Eyeing the outfit she busied herself preparing while her mother called in the order earlier, she chews thoughtfully at her lip. As ridiculous as it sounds, she’s experiencing the sudden urge to revise her fashion choices. Black A-line dresses do form the basis for a classic look that deserves far more modern recognition than it gets as it exudes sophisticated, vintage vibes without creating the impression that the wearer intends to stage a coup that upsets the entire social pecking order. But it’s also something of a safe, Don’t-Mind-Me choice, and Veronica personally doubts her ability to fly under the radar for long. What’ll it hurt to go ahead and do what’s she’s always done—dress according to who she is rather than how she anticipates everyone around her will dress? They’re all going to find out sooner or later that she’s not the type of girl to sit back, smile politely, and fret over everyone else’s opinions. Why bother pretending she is by dressing for acceptance rather than success?

Well, she thinks, a tad sardonically. *Might as well be potentially hung for a sheep as a lamb.*

Mind made up, she marches to the closet and flips briskly through the array of bright fabrics. It takes a good bit of rummaging and comparing shapes and patterns, but at length, she locates the ideal ensemble: a plaid print skirt and top she’s worn maybe once, and that feels infinitely Veronica…cute and fun, but with the unmistakable stamp of fashion and confidence that says she knows who she is and she does what she wants. And if it makes her a little easier for certain people who have offered to try and un-fill her with dread to spot in a crowd, so much the better. After all, her parting words to him were basically a promise, and Veronica Lodge always keeps her promises.

Particularly those promises made in fifties’ era diners to hunky redheads who almost seemed sorry to see her go.

Holding tomorrow’s cloth armor in front of her, Veronica purses her lips as she assesses the effect, straining to focus on nothing beyond her reflection. But it’s as useless an effort as trying to sleep. That smile she just can’t seem to forget is still floating around her mind, and it stirs the tiniest flurry of something she can’t quite identify in her chest every time she thinks about it. Half-disgusted with herself, she flops back onto her bed and stares thoughtfully up at the ceiling.

“To be continued,” she mutters.

He can’t be Betty’s boyfriend. Or anyone else’s, for that matter.
He just can’t be.

Chapter End Notes

*Chapter named after the song “Ten Minutes Ago” from the Rodgers and Hammerstein Cinderella because (1) I sappily believe “Ten minutes ago I saw you/I looked up when you came through the door/My head started reeling, you gave me the feeling/The room had no ceiling or floor,” etc. fits A&V perfectly. (2) I love it. (3) I have trouble naming things sometimes and I was listening to my Broadway playlist all last week, so something like this was kind of inevitable.

*Of all the Archie/Veronica scenes I love in Riverdale, this one remains one of my all-time favorites. The Notes section isn’t the place to write my embarrassingly fleshed-out essay on why I adore it so much (that’s for Tumblr), so suffice it to say, I seriously <3 the nod to the comics. The way Archie just STOPS when he sees Veronica? The way Veronica starts giving him semi-subtle well-aren’t-YOU-cute looks? It’s perfect.

*I’ve always enjoyed watching V try to figure out the whole Archie/Betty situation, and it’s my personal belief she asked Betty “Is he your boyfriend?” the next day because she just couldn’t arrive at any definite conclusion and needed to know. Because the territorial way Betty’s acting is at odds with how Archie’s acting…she reacts to Veronica in a kind of “Grrrr, go AWAY, you’re ruining my date” way, but Archie reacts exactly how you do when you’re hanging out with the BFFs and you see someone so hot it becomes impossible to function normally. Plus, people generally don’t introduce their significant others without prefacing the intro “This is my (girl/boy)friend.” Archie doesn’t do that, and though Betty looks grumpy, she doesn’t say “I’m his GIRLFRIEND” or anything in that vein, so yeah. That had to confuse V even more.

*There is a part of me that has always wondered if Hermione asked any questions about the onion rings V added to the order and what V told her if she did, so…that was kind of the inspiration for the Veronica portion. Besides that, I don’t know about anyone else, but I’ve been missing the Veronica/Hermione interactions. I don’t always LIKE Hermione (she’s a little too flight-over-fight for my taste), but I do feel like she tries to be a good mom, and I headcanon that she and V went on a classic movie marathon after moving to Riverdale. So in this chap, the movie Hermione’s watching when V walks in is “The Women.”

*Thanks for reading/commenting! <3 I updated in kind of a hurry on Friday and didn’t have time to check/reply to comments from the last chapter(s), so I’ll be taking care of that later tonight (I’m going to see The Nutcracker and the Four Realms with friends and I have like a 45 min window to work out and shower before I have to meet them for dinner). Hope everyone had a great weekend and is ready for the insanity that 3x04 appears to be promising, and here’s hoping my idle curiosity as to WHAT happened between Hermione, Fred, and Hiram finally gets explained!
Chapter Summary

Oddly formatted, experimentalish drabble-type thing based around the promo for 3x07 and Archie & Veronica’s responses to tough situations throughout seasons 1-3.

Fair warning: I enjoyed writing this because I never (N E V E R) use second person POV and that was a fun challenge—plus I love to analyze—but upon proofreading it, I realized that what was an interesting character analysis to me is actually one of the more depressing things I’ve ever written. (Oops.)

So if you’re already having a rough day due to 3x06’s trauma (not gonna lie, "You were it for me" about did me in; please excuse any and all babbling in these notes because I’m still recovering) and/or don’t care for heavy, personalized angst fics, maybe skip this one? Won’t hurt my feelings, and I promise the next update will be cuter and longer, if only because I feel like we’ll all need it.

Chapter Notes

(Thank you @monica-posh/veronicathemafiaprincess for rubber-stamping my unhealthy inclination to post fanfic sadness on top of show sadness <3)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

xoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxo

“What To Do When Tragedy Strikes”
~Excerpted from The Ice Queen’s Guide To Sorrow-Drowning, And Other Farcically True Tales by Veronica Lodge

xoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxo

Rule #1: No One Sees You Cry*

Not your friends who want to sympathize. Not your parents or anyone else who wants to rejoice. Not the indifferent stranger passing through town that you’ll never see again. No one.

Nadie.

Personne.

It’s none of their business, and it will only redden your eyes, stuff your nose, and give you a headache. Public tears are fine for the laywomen, but to you they are anathema. Whatever you feel, you don’t let on. However much it hurts, you suck it up. You smile. You act like it never happened.
You laugh, and joke, and flirt incessantly, and let them think you’re the coldest bitch in the whole entire world, because maybe you are. Maybe you’ve always been. And maybe you don’t care one bit that you are, because maybe you don’t care one bit about anything or anyone anymore.

(Or, alternative theory: maybe you do care. Too much. Maybe that’s why you need rules about heartlessness in the first place…to remind you what happens whenever you aren’t. To remind you the price of caring may be more than you can afford. But you’re not going to admit that. Ever. You’re going to stay strong and save face even if it kills you.)

*How are you doing since…?* the concerned ones—Bettrys, for sure, Josies, maybe, Cheryls, who knows—will probably ask you. *Oh, I’m sorry. Are you okay? Do you want to talk about it?*

Try not to hate them for it. It’s what they do, and most of the time, it just means they care. They don’t understand that you want to forget and that this is your way of forgetting, because it’s not what they would do were they in your Blahniks. So don’t bother explaining why you’re not dissolving into bitter, heartbroken tears at every opportunity. Just smile. Smallishly, like it hurts a little but you’ll be all right someday in the very near future, and then tell them you’re hanging in there. You’re not, of course, you’re ruptured and angry, but who cares if it’s a lie? It’ll get them to lay off for a bit, and maybe one day it’ll even be true.

*Important addendum to Rule Number One: you can give into tears if you must.* Just not for long, and try to make sure you’re on your own when they come. Because if a slutty, heartless, (formerly) rich bitch cries when there’s no one around to see her, did it ever really happen?

**Rule #2: Party Girls Don’t Get Hurt**

There’s work. There’s school. There’re alternatives to staying home and wallowing in misery while the rest of the world moves on about its business. So what if you put on your sexiest little black dress and reddest lipstick? So what if you seek out the nearest din of teenage iniquity and gamble the hours away? So what if you drink a few drinks, and flirt a few flirts, and so what if they talk about you because you dance in the dark with a hot boy (or two) you don’t love and maybe don’t even like? It’s your choice, not theirs. Just like it’s your heartbreak, not theirs. They get to stand, and point, and scoff, and judge, and suggest better ways of doing things from the outside; they don’t have to keep calm and carry on all day and then crawl into bed at night feeling like some sort of hollowed-out shell. You do. *You.*

But don’t think about that. Not if you can help it.

This isn’t about heartbreak. This is about fun. Or work. Or whatever seizes hold of your mind enough to force out all thoughts not pertaining to the task at hand. You’re not sad. You’re not lonely. What you are is busy. Busy and focused, a girl on a mission, and woe to the imbecile who stumbles into your path and slows you down! Nobody can keep up with you, and you wouldn’t have it any other way. Flirting, and networking, and staying on top of everything education-related is where you live.

Because as long as you’re the life of the party, the unflappable entrepreneur, the dedicated student, there’s no room for anything else. You don’t have time to worry about why one or both of your parents are whispering behind closed doors. You don’t have time to wonder if every move you’re making is playing exactly into someone else’s hand. And, most importantly of all, you don’t have time to think about the impact one impulsive, ridiculous boy—a redhead, say—has even in absentia
on your life.

You are, in a word, invincible. But only so long as you keep moving. The second you stop working, dancing, drinking, or flirting, the hurt will catch up with you, and it will cripple you.

That’s why you can’t stop. Or at any rate, why you won’t.

Rule #3: Dwelling On Heartbreak Only Works For Poets

Do not, under any circumstances, allow yourself to linger in the quagmire of memory. However appealing it may seem, it will only slurp you down and suffocate you. You can’t go back and live in the past; don’t even bother trying. Missing him until you ache with it won’t bring him back to you. Neither will getting hung up on his smile, his kiss, that naively unwavering kindness of his that you find yourself craving more and more with each passing day. He’s taken himself out of your life because he’s stupid enough to think that will better it, and as much as you despise the idea, you’re going to have to accept it and move on.

So move on, already.

Don’t worry about him. Don’t trace the heart-shaped edges of the silver locket he gave you with what he apparently wants you to think is a big, fat lie engraved—*engraved!*—on the back of it, and definitely don’t wear said locket. Don’t think about him every time you see a strawberry milkshake or a pile of onion rings, or walk into Pop’s. Don’t keep his picture in your room. Don’t sing his songs. Don’t pretend the new set of lips you’re kissing in an effort to dull your pain belong to him. Fate has spoken, Archie Andrews. The one you love who shall remain nameless has removed themselves from the story of your life, and you’re not supposed to mind, care, or otherwise give one solitary damn.

You’re *supposed* to feel nothing. To move on, and quickly, to one of the plentiful other fishes in the sea. (Better fishes. Hotter fishes. Because that’s all that matters, right? Finding someone hot, not someone who sees and loves you for exactly who you are.) He’s not worth you feeling like you’ve lost an actual piece of your heart—he’s just a boy. And you are *not* just a girl made of sugar, spice, and everything nice who melts at the first sign of trouble. Your designated role is that of the remorseless femme fatale, and your sole purpose in life is to look fabulous and lead others astray, like a modern-day siren in Yves Saint Laurent.

You’re not allowed to be miserable.

You are not free to shatter.

Boys are supposed to be interchangeable to you, and you are supposed to embrace that concept with wide-open arms. It’s what everyone expects of you anyway, no matter how hard you’ve striven to show that that’s not true, so don’t feel sad about putting it behind you. Don’t feel guilty when someone else wants you and you let them do whatever. All you’re doing is being exactly who everyone’s always thought you are.

Well, everyone except him. But he no longer counts, because *he’s not here*, is he?

So remember: write it down. Carve it in stone. Tattoo it on your wrist if you have to, but whatever the hell you do…*do not* miss him.
Because even if you do, you shouldn’t.

“Heartbreak For Dummies: Three Doable Options”

~Excerpted from When The Road Of Life Is Dark, You Don’t Have A Map, And You’re Kind Of Bad At Reading Signs by Archie Andrews

Option #1: Stop Fighting It

Sometimes, life sucks. That’s kind of just the way it is, the way it’s always been. The way it’ll always be. But that doesn’t mean you have to be okay with that, right? That doesn’t mean you have to just sit quietly and do nothing; you can help, right?

Except—oh, wait. What happens whenever you try to help?

Nothing.

Nothing except bad things. All you ever do is make your problems worse than they were to begin with, but do you learn? No. Of course not. Because you’re a dumbass. You don’t know when to speak up, you don’t know when to shut up, and somehow, you manage to just turn everything into a bigger mess. Dad and Mom are having all kinds of issues because of you. The girl you still think of as your girlfriend even though you ended things wrecked half her life trying to take care of you. Your friends probably have triple the trouble they would if they’d never met you. People are dead because of you. And yeah, sure, you hate it with everything in you, but does that fix anything?

No.

So maybe it’s time you quit trying to make things better. Maybe it’s time you quit resisting and start coasting your way through life. After all, it’s who you are anyway, isn’t it? Why bother fighting your way through the tough parts? Just do what people are always saying you do and give in. Be exactly who they expect you to be. Don’t argue…go with the flow. Don’t fool with saying what you feel. No one’s going to take you seriously anyway; the only one who ever thought to listen to you when you felt angry and alone and upset and like the only person in the world who’s ever screwed-up isn’t here now to talk you out of it, make you laugh, and lean her head on your shoulder, and it’s your fault she isn’t. Yours and yours only.

You can’t even get angry and resentful about it, because it’s what was probably always going to happen anyway. She’s out of your league. You’ve known that since the second you met her. That’s why it got under your skin so much when her dad told you exactly that. You’ve always been afraid that one way or another you’ll end up doing something stupid and hurting her. Why shouldn’t you break things off? This way, at least there’s a chance she’ll hate you so much that she moves on and
never looks back. Right now, even, she’s probably replacing you with someone else. Someone smarter. Someone better. Someone who’s hopefully not as big a train wreck as you.

And that’s good. That’s how it should be. That’s how you want it to be.

Or…it’s how you should want it to be. Which is like, basically the same thing, isn’t it?

Option #2: It’s Not A Lie If You Believe It

Now that you look at it, this really isn’t as bad as it feels. Everyone you love is better off without you hanging around to screw up their lives. You don’t even deserve to call half those people your loved ones, anyway. Leaving town is the right decision. They’ll miss you for a little while but they’ll be safer, and eventually, they’ll forget all about you and move on and be happier. And really, so will you. It just hurts right now because it’s new. And because you’re kind of an idiot who’s too attached to family and friends anyway. Normal guys don’t miss their parents when they’re not around; they hate their families—or at least think they’re crazy—and want to be free of them, right? And isn’t it weird to love your childhood friends so much you’d do all kinds of dumb crap just because they asked you to help? Shouldn’t you be annoyed that the girl you lost your heart to is loud and flirty and self-assured and won’t listen at all when you tell her she needs to keep as far away from you as possible for her own sake?

Yeah.

That’s right, it’s weird, and you definitely should.

You don’t need family or friends. You can do this alone. Any problems you’re having are just because you’re not used to living in a place you haven’t known backward and forward since you were a kid. This is like, part of growing up—learning to stand on your own two feet. This is…exciting. Cool. A step you had to take. And hey, if it comes down to it, you really don’t miss everyone and everything that badly. You’ll be all right, and at some point, you’ll probably forget the parts of your old life enough to be totally content with where you’re at. All you have to do is keep chugging along and stuff. Once you focus on adjusting to all the strangeness, you’ll be happy again. For sure. And not pretend happy, either. Real happy.

(Not that you’re not happy. You are.)

Definitely.

Option #3: Do, Don’t Think

It’s a question you get a lot…Dude, what the hell are you thinking? The situations change all the time, but the answer never does. Because to be honest, you don’t have a clue what you’re thinking. Actually, you’re not even thinking to begin with. That’s kind of the point. Thinking is what you do when you’re worried about the potential consequences. You aren’t worried. Consequences? Ha! Who gives a damn about consequences? Not you. You’re too busy—busy ignoring what might happen, busy having fun. Do whatever you tell yourself, just don’t think about it. Because if you think about it before you do it, you might not do it at all.
And you need to do it.

If you don’t, the sadness will take over like it always does, and you can’t have that. Not again. It’s too dangerous. Saying you’re sick of feeling sad doesn’t even come close to explaining what you mean, but—you are sick of feeling sad. You hate it. It’s cold and miserable and lonely, and once the two-ton blob of sadness is there, it just won’t leave you alone. But there’s an escape: while you’re doing and not thinking, the sadness can’t touch you. For a little bit at least, you can feel other things—happy, wild, bad, free; it’s like nothing can or ever will get you down, and it’s awesome. There’s only here and there’s only now, and you’re not going to think about anything else! This is the moment you tell yourself, and you’re gonna live in it! For better or for worse!

Sometimes, you live in it by drinking that extra drink you know you shouldn’t. Other times, you live in it by dancing on a piece of crap table whether you’re sure it’ll hold you or not. Most of the time, you live in it by acting like an idiot and laughing your head off when anyone tells you you’re acting like an idiot. (Because what, you don’t already know that? You’ve always known you’re an idiot. You’ve always known you don’t make very good choices. The only thing that’s different now is that you’ve temporarily decided you don’t care and that it doesn’t matter anyway.) Every now and then though, you get real stupid and you live in the moment with other people. You let them come close, and you let them kiss you. Maybe you even kiss them back, hoping like crazy that it’ll feel the way you want it to feel.

It never has felt the way you hope it’ll feel (except that one time, when you go for it in a dark closet with a girl who’s barely more than a stranger, and that other time, when you go for it on a couch in a trashed-out room with the same girl who is now way more than a friend and who looks at you like you’re not as big an idiot as you’re pretty sure you are), but you do it anyway.

Why, you don’t know. You’ll probably never know. Even if you could, you’re not sure you care to find out. It just is what it is, and what it is is something that feels better. Not good, just...better. Better than feeling sad. Better than feeling alone. Better than feeling nothing.

But most of all, it feels better than missing her.

Chapter End Notes

"Party Girls Don't Get Hurt" is a reference to "Chandelier" by Sia, and "It's Not A Lie If You Believe It" is one of my favorite atrociously-amoral quotes from Seinfeld.

*The idea for this one started back around 1x10 and has been seriously rolling around in my head since midway through S2, so I’m gonna hop on an imaginary soapbox for a sec. I know people like to rag on Archie for doing stupid things (and he does do stupid things; I’m not saying he doesn’t), but in my opinion, 99.9% of his recklessness is due to who he is and how he processes emotion. He’s naturally a very feeling guy, so when he experiences grief/pain/anger/love etc., he feels it on such a deep level that he kind of explodes into actions that aren’t necessarily the best response to a situation (partying/drunken-dialing in 1x10, lashing out at V then crying in 2x01, forming the Red Circle, letting B kiss him, punching Nick, etc.). He’s also a naturally cheerful guy, so when he gets swamped by stuff that makes him feel terrible, he reactively does whatever
he can to feel better. And while that’s not a GREAT response (I personally can’t imagine living life like this, yikes; feeling everything deeply must be exhausting), it’s no different than trying to avoid your problems with a nap, or too much food, or several bottles of wine. Everyone’s got their go-to method(s) of self-destruction, and it seems to me that Archie’s is anything and everything that will give him a feeling other than ‘sad.’ That’s why he gets so much worse when he’s not with Veronica; besides Fred, she’s consistently the one who says “Calm down, you’re not a terrible person. No, don’t do that stupid thing. Here, let’s just have fun instead of freaking out over things we have no control over,” and he needs that to rein him in.

*In Veronica’s case, it’s almost the exact opposite: where Archie basically turns on all the emotions at once and doesn’t care where they land him, Veronica tries to turn everything off or at least channel it into something beneficial. (In 1x06 her stress about her parents makes her react strongly to the Val switch and join the Pussycats, in 1x07 she deliberately parties the night away to gain something from her mother, in 1x10 she’s so done with everything that she refuses to take any crap from Cheryl, in 2x08 she ends her relationship but waits until Archie can’t see her to cry, in 2x19 she successfully stuffs all emotions to save Archie, etc.) No, we don’t see her cry very often, but here’s the thing—and this is my soapbox of soapboxes—not everyone responds to life’s every setback with tears. (Seriously, do NOT get me started on how incredibly irritating it is to us less-emotionally-demonstrative girls to be told “you know, you can/should cry. Why don’t you just cry? Have a good cry, and you’ll feel better.”) Just because Veronica doesn’t break down sobbing every. Single. Time she’s dealt a giant emotional blow doesn’t mean she hasn’t been hurt by it. In my opinion, what she’s doing is reacting to the hurt in the way that works best for her, and a lot of the time, that way tends to be becoming colder, harder, and more ruthless. That’s why she works so well with Archie…he gives her someone besides herself to lean on, and she’s finally able to take a break.

*Now that that rant is over…3x04 was amazing despite the annoyingness of High School Alice Cooper (who post 3x06 me officially hates again). I’ve never really cared one way or another about any parent ship on RD, but 3x04 made me love Sierra McCoy & Tom Keller. I mean, he brought her food in detention, their families didn’t want them together because they were too “different,” that “I’ll wait for you” + the forehead kiss, the fact that she calls him TOMMY?? They were just SO STINKING CUTE. And that lil family meeting at Pops with Kev and Josie? <3 <3 <3

*REGGIE. I’ve loved Charles Melton’s version of this character since he appeared onscreen checking himself out in a mirror, and I’m excited to see what they’ll do with him. Yes, he can be a jackass (and no, I will never seriously ship him with Veronica while Archie and Josie exist), but to me, the guy’s likeable and jeeze, he HAD. A. BLACK. EYE. From his FATHER. How’m I supposed to hate him?

*3x05 was one of the best eps of this show to date, and actually faked me out more than once, WHICH NEVER HAPPENS TO ME. Plus the A/V locker room scene, whew.

3x06: It’s too fresh. I can’t. My little BABIES. I don’t understand why I always say I want angst and then I’m given wonderful angst and I get all annoyed. You’d think I’d learn, right? Also…KEVIN, MY DARLING, ILYSM. He is always mah boy, but this ep, he was REALLY mah boy. And the A/V/K was everything I’ve ever wanted. I need more of it.

*FINALLY, thanks for reading/commenting! Sorry this is depressing (and that I haven’t finished replying to comments like I said I would a while ago). Again, I swear the next chapter will be dumb and fluffy :)


I Could Love You For The Rest Of My Life

Chapter Summary

The less-angsty sequel to “Night And Day” and the equally-cute sibling of “In Another Life” (aka, Chapters 9 & 6 of this fic, respectively). You don’t *need* to read/reread Ch. 6 for this to make sense, but it may help to read/reread Ch. 9 first since that’s what the plot of this one is structured around :)

Takes place in the 2x01-2x02 range. End of chapter notes are kind of long because I'm wordy and it happens sometimes (and by 'sometimes' I mean 'a lot of times'), so here's the important part: thanks for reading/commenting, and have a great weekend! <3

Chapter Notes

Inspired by a combination of prompts I got ages ago…one from XxXTLxX & one from killthemalldaenerys :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tap.

Tap-Tap.

Heart in his throat, Archie raps yet again at the unyielding door. He has to talk to her. Has to. If he knocks forever, then oh well. He knocks forever. All he cares about right now is seeing her, because he needs to. No matter how bad his timing may be. So when the door opens a crack, he sticks a foot in the doorway to keep it open. And, almost immediately, a clunky blue heel appears from nowhere and stomps on his foot until he’s forced to finally yank it out of the way.

“No,” says the prim voice that’s been telling him to leave for what feels like forever. “I’m sorry, I really am, but you are not coming in.”

“But it’ll only take a minute!” he yells, gritting his teeth through the pain and grabbing at the handle to keep from being locked out in addition to shut out. “Not even that long—thirty seconds. Just thirty seconds! How is that going to ruin anything?”

“Arch, for the last time, you can’t see the bride before the wedding! It’s bad luck!”

“Betty, seriously—” Smothering a groan, Archie stops himself just shy of throwing his entire body weight against the door like some kind of human battering ram. How his so-called friend’s managed to hold him back this long is a mystery, but he doesn’t really care about the answer right now since his aggravation at her and how she’s blocking his entrance is too high. “Just let me talk to her,
okay?"

“No!"

Betty’s impossible strength suddenly makes sense when Josie’s ticked-off voice joins the fray, and this time the lock actually does click into place.

“We’re sworn to secrecy on the dress,” she calls, probably through the keyhole. “And if you don’t haul your tuxedoed butt right straight back to male HQ, we’re going to turn Cheryl loose on you. Whatever it is you have to tell V can wait until you’re putting a ring on her finger, so thank you very much Mr. Bridegroom, and good day!”

“But that’ll be too late,” Archie argues, wishing for what seems like the millionth time in twelve hours that the girls weren’t so locked into this whole no-groom-seeing-the-bride thing. He’s nervous and keyed-up enough as is, he hasn’t seen Veronica since the rehearsal dinner last night, and what little sleep he did get was pretty much ruined by the nightmare he had of Veronica calling him up an hour before the ceremony and telling him she’d made a gigantic mistake and wouldn’t be marrying him after all because he was an idiot and she was way too good for him and honestly, she didn’t know what the hell she’d been smoking for the last ten years to make her actually think she liked him. “I need to talk to her now.”

“Tough,” Josie says in a tone that makes it very clear he’s getting nowhere. “She’s having her hair and makeup done.”

“And even if she wasn’t, you can’t,” Betty adds. “Sorry, but we have our orders.”

“Guys, come on,” he pleads again, hoping against hope that maybe this time they’ll crack. “It’s really important; I swear.”

“No,” Josie repeats, sounding fed up. “And for crying out loud if it’s about the stupid bow tie again, you have Kevin! Get him to check it.”

“I already did, and it’s not that,” Archie informs her, sighing as he slumps against the door. “It’s—oh, you know what? Just forget it.”

“What?” Betty sounds anxious, like she’s bracing for the worst. “What is it? Please don’t say someone swallowed or lost the ring. You’re all way too old for that kind of crap, Vegas included.”

“No. No one lost the ring.” He tries not to be insulted by that, because really? Reggie’s already been informed that death will come to anyone who even pretends that happens, and anyway, his dad is there to keep everyone in check. “It’s—”

“What?” Cheryl’s loud voice chimes in, and Archie sighs all over again because now they really are going nowhere except in circles. “Chop-chop, man of the hour. You’ve got a lot of nerve brazenly squandering valuable makeup and bridesmaid-bonding time like this, and yours truly will not tolerate it. You got something to say, you’d better say it now and say it fast.”

Right. Sure. Because he definitely came looking for Veronica so he could tell everyone who isn’t her why he’s so freaked out.

“It’s my hair, okay?” he blurts finally, reddening a little at Betty and Josie’s simultaneous snorts of laughter but still unwilling to explain the real worry to them. “Kevin approved it and stuff before he went to take care of something with the photographer, but Reggie kind of put me in a headlock after that, my dad says he doesn’t know what’s good or bad hair these days, and Jughead says it’s fine, so—”
“Oh, dear God,” Cheryl interrupts. A thump that sounds like she’s pushed someone out of the way comes from the other side of the door, and almost instantly, the lock clicks open. “Why didn’t you say so in the first place? Cousin of mine, this is serious. Stop lounging around and go fetch Veronica. Post-haste. Her groom’s just had his ‘do rubber-stamped by none other than Jughead Jones. If that doesn’t constitute an emergency on the direst possible scale, I don’t know what does.”

“Cheryl.” Betty’s voice is now an annoyed grunt that comes from somewhere near the floor, identifying her as the source of the thump. “She’s getting her hair and makeup done.”

“Oh, right. Of course.” The lock snaps back into place right as Archie reaches for the handle. “Scratch that, Tuxedo Junction. I’m afraid you’ll just have to call your lovely bride-to-be and describe the state of your lustrous locks to her.”

“Or, you can snap a pic and send it to her,” Josie puts in. “You know, like a normal slightly-desperate groomzilla would?”

“Fine.”

Muttering to himself, Archie steps away from the door and slumps against the wall. A few minutes of hunting through his pockets later, he remembers that he left his phone in the groom’s prep-room, so he treks back through the maze of halls to get it. But his dad’s mysteriously absent when he gets there, and since Jughead and Reggie won’t stop laughing at him and asking why he has to call Veronica now, he ends up outside on a bench, knee jumping nervously as he holds the phone to his ear and listens while it rings. And rings. And rings.

And then when someone finally does pick up, it’s not Veronica, it’s Betty—who starts yet another long lecture on why he should never, ever disturb the bride—so he’s forced to call Cheryl and beg her to lend her phone to Veronica.

By that point, he’s so convinced his nightmare is starting to come true, that he almost collapses with relief when Veronica’s brisk voice finally greets him.

“Hello, Wedding Central. This is the bride speaking; how may I help you?”

“Hey,” he says, suddenly at a loss for words. “Listen, Ronnie, can I…talk to you for a minute?”

Her chuckle fills the line. “Is that not exactly what we’re doing?”

“No, I mean face to face.” She doesn’t respond immediately, so he hurries to explain. “I won’t look or anything, I promise. I just…need to ask you something. Like, in person?”

Veronica sighs. “Well…”

“Please?”

He holds his breath while she deliberates for what feels like an hour.

“All right,” she says at length. “Come around to the back window, and as soon as you round the corner, shut your eyes and tell me. I’ll direct you the rest of the way.”

“Okay.”

He hurries to comply, shuffling carefully across what feels like acres of lawn while she guides him
with a lot of left…now more right…no, to your left again until her voice is finally close enough for him to hear it without the tinny phone sound.

“All right,” she announces from somewhere slightly above him. “You’re just about within arm’s reach. But no peeking, understand, because I did not go to all this trouble for you to be anything other than utterly dumbfounded when you see me walk down that aisle.”

He smiles in spite of himself, the cheery lilt in her tone already easing the tightness that’s been living in his chest. “My eyes are definitely closed, Ronnie. Am I stepping on anything?”

“Just a few flowers that looked mostly deceased to begin with, so who cares?” she answers, her cool hand catching his as it gropes wildly for the windowsill. “Hey, right here, Marco Polo. Now, what’s wrong? Tie strangulation? Boutonniere anxiety? Stage fright at the thought of all those misty eyes watching your gorgeous self prance down the aisle?”

Grateful that she doesn’t seem at all irritated, he squeezes her hand. “No. I just…needed to make sure you’re not having second thoughts or anything.”

She huffs out a laugh. “What, you mean about sit-down over buffet? I think it may be a little late for that.”

“No.” His finger blindly traces the edge of her engagement ring, an awful queasiness flooding his stomach as he gets ready to explain himself. “I meant about the wedding. About…me.”


“No! No, not even a little bit!” he corrects hastily, wondering how in the world she could possibly think that. “I just—I don’t know, I mean, last night I had this dream where you basically woke up the day of the wedding and realized you’d made a huge mistake agreeing to marry me, and, like, I had to make sure you weren’t just going through with this because—”

“Oh my God.” Veronica’s giggle, the one he loves more than anything because it means she’s so happy she just can’t contain it, bubbles out suddenly and fills the air. “Is that what that ruckus by the door was all about? You needed to see me to find out whether I’ve been deluding you and myself this whole time?”

“Well…” He weighs that statement. Realizes there’s no way to make his fear sound any better. “Yeah. To be honest Ronnie, it kind of scared me.”

“Archie.” Her other hand goes to his cheek, and he leans automatically into her cool palm. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but has anyone ever told you you’re a Grade A idiot?”

“Yeah,” he answers. “A lot of people have, actually. That’s kind of why I was worried.”

“Needlessly.”

“What?”

“You were worried needlessly,” she explains, the soft pad of her thumb sweeping across his face. “I don’t stick with anyone I don’t care about or for, and if you don’t know how I feel about you by now, well, I guess I’ll just have to start being so convincing that even your worries will have to get the message, won’t I?”

The tension drains out of him almost immediately, her words replacing it with a secure kind of warmth that makes him feel so energized he’s half-convinced he could jump the nearest tree in one
“Could you maybe start now?” he suggests, taking care to make sure his eyelids stay pressed together while he raises his eyebrows. “I mean, since we’re here and all.”

Veronica laughs again, the sound bright and sparkling. There’s a stiff rustle, a whiff of perfume he’d recognize anywhere, then her hands on either side of his face as the world’s silkiest pair of lips press against his in a hot, dizzying, strawberry-flavored kiss. For three, four, five seconds, it’s all he can do to stay on his feet and keep his eyes shut while she reminds him how incredibly lucky he is. Then she pulls back an inch or so, and he can breathe again, though not evenly.

“No chocolate?” he mumbles inanely, now that his tongue’s free.

Her giggle sounds again. “Count your blessings, Archiekins,” she whispers, landing another quick kiss on the corner of his mouth. “I’ve yet to have my heavy-duty, lipstick-that-will-probably-survive-the-apocalypse applied, so for now you get the only flavor of lip balm I had on hand.”

He shrugs, grinning dumbly from ear to ear. “Doesn’t matter.” At this point in his life, he’s consumed so many different colors and flavors of Veronica Lodge’s lip products that he’s beyond used to it, and besides, it’s not like the benefits don’t majorly outweigh the crayon taste of most of them. “I’d like shrimp flavored chapstick if you wore it.”

“I know you would.” This time, the kiss goes on his nose and she heaves a noisy sigh. “All right. I hate to break this up, but you’ve got to get back to the boys, and I’ve got to finish getting my bridal blush on. Both literally and figuratively. See you at the end of the aisle?”

He nods, fully aware that the grin is in creepy-clown-at-a-kid’s-birthday-party mode now. “See you, Ronnie.”

“Oh, and wait! One more thing.”

He frowns, but before he can ask, a hand combs lightly through his hair.

“There,” she says, her voice teasing. “Your hair now looks amazing, and you may tell Reggie for me that if he touches it one more time before the ceremony, even the likelihood of causing damage to my shiny new manicure won’t stop me from killing him.”

“Will do, babe.”

In record time, he makes it from the windowsill back to the room where all the groomsmen are holed up, though how exactly he manages that feat eludes him. Everything sort of drones on around him, and his next conscious thought is that he needs to lay off the stupid grinning as he, his dad, and the guys make the long trek down an aisle that’s either grass or wood (he’s not sure which) toward a platform. Then it’s just a bunch of slow music, fancy decorations he doesn’t know the names of, Mom-ish smiles from his mom, Veronica’s mom, Betty, and Josie, one winking smirk from Cheryl, and a growing conviction that his dad is trying really hard not to cry while Jughead and Kevin tell Reggie in really loud whispers to quit whatever he’s doing back there (probably trying to check out Josie). Everything’s too bright and his shoes pinch, but he barely even notices any of that because suddenly she’s there, stunning as always, walking down the long path on her dad’s arm. And even though Mr. Lodge looks totally annoyed about everything, Archie doesn’t care because it’s Veronica, and she’s smiling at him with the kind of look in her eyes that makes him feel like an awkward kid tripping and falling over the edge of a cliff.

She’s wearing some kind of fluffy white dress that he thinks is probably gorgeous, but he doesn’t
really notice anything about it because it’s Veronica, and she always outshines anything she wears about as much as the fricking sun outshines like, a birthday candle or something. Her smile is soft, and she’s so beautiful it yanks the breath right out of his body until all he can do is stare like he’s always stared and wonder why the hell this girl ever agreed to date him in the first place. With every step she takes toward him, his heart pounds; when she drops one eyelid in a wink, he laughs like a dork right there in front of everyone.

Then her fingers interlock with his, and they’re saying all this stuff he used to think was stupid and sappy but now makes him want to grin his head off, and then finally, finally, they’re telling him he can kiss her. And he sort of knows people are cheering and whooping all around him, but he’s too busy kissing Veronica, too busy taking off every bit of that lipstick she left him to go put on earlier, to make sense of the loud bells clanging around them or of who’s poking him in the back…

“Ow!”

Heart actually pounding, Archie jolts awake to discover that he’s sitting at a desk in the middle of what looks an awful lot like his English classroom.

*Oh*, he thinks, looking around him wildly as the swarm of people migrates toward the door. *Right.* Thanks to what he can only guess is the end of class, no one seems to have noticed that he just slept through everything with an elbow propped in front of his face. Well, no one minus Reggie, who apparently kicked the back of his seat to wake him up and is now shaking with silent laughter-spasms about the whole thing, and no one minus Veronica, who’s standing over Archie with one hand on his arm and telling Reggie to get lost before she makes him.

“You all right?” she asks, yawning out the question as Archie gathers his unused notebook and pencil and stands.

“Yeah, sure.” Still a little out of it, he gives her a quick smile. “I mean, I don’t remember anything past Cheryl saying her report was on *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, but hey, at least I got a good nap.”

Actually, a great nap.

A *really* great nap.

Not that he can actually say that. They’ve come pretty far, pretty quick in their relationship and he definitely feels like he can tell her more stuff than anyone except maybe his dad, but still. Instinct tells him he’d better keep this one to himself. Veronica’s pretty cool about the crazy stuff he’s always spitting out by accident, but even she would probably balk at this kind of confession.

Plus he’s just barely gotten the chance to date her; he doesn’t want this to be the thing that finally scares her away. Especially since, in the space of one week, she’s already had a lot thrown at her thanks to him. Like, he’s already almost ruined things by yelling at her for no reason other than he was upset—and that *after* she went back to the house with him from the hospital, humored his insane gotta-walk-the-dog-now move, and tried everything she could to distract him from the fact that his dad was bleeding out in front of him a few hours before. And considering that *everything* included stripping naked and climbing into the shower with him which he wholeheartedly appreciated both then and now (it was amazing to just feel and not think, to go back to how great everything had been right before the world blew up in his face), he feels like he owes her at least one second of non-insanity.

Also, he’s basically the reason she’s been yawning her head off all day in class—he and his late-night visit that had her camped out on ice cold steps with him until sunrise. If he tops all that weird, clingy crap off with the story of how in his dreams, they get married and she’s as completely into him...
as he is to her—yikes. She’d think he’s certifiable, and he wouldn’t blame her a bit.

“No!” she says, her concerned voice snatching him out of his drowsy fog. “I meant your poor spine.” She touches his lower back gently, tongue clicking in disapproval. “Reggie gave it a whale of a kick. I was a little afraid he was going to knock your head sideways.”

“Oh. Nah, I’m fine,” he tells her, looping an arm temporarily around her shoulders so he can steer her into the hall and away from the door she starts to sleepily totter into. “It just scared me awake is all.”

“Okay.” She leans her head against him while they walk, sighing loudly as she slides one hand into his and wraps the other around his forearm. “Then in that case, mind if I sleepwalk and talk for a sec?”

“Sure,” he answers, feeling the dumb grin start up again when she leans her cheek more fully into the sleeve of his letter jacket, eyes closing. “Go ahead.”

“Thanks,” she says, humming a little. “You’ve no idea how hard it was to not nod off during Dilton’s fascinatingly dispirited review of The Raven.”

Archie laughs, maneuvering them carefully through the usual throng of jabbering, jostling teens. “It was that boring?”

“It was. By the time he reached slide number three, I think we were all ready to quoth ‘Nevermore.’” She sighs again, staggering into him when someone bumps her. “Also, just so you know, you’re scheduled to make your presentation on Monday.”

“Great,” he says, trying to remember what the hell he even signed up for. “I…haven’t done anything.”

“It’s fine, neither have I.” The hand around his forearm squeezes twice. “But, never fear. We can get together and knock them out this weekend. If today’s at all indicative of the quality expected, they don’t have to be masterpieces of literary criticism. I’d venture to guess slightly more in-depth than a Netflix movie description would suffice. Assuming your PowerPoint at least semi-rocks, that is.”

Archie smiles, his worry somehow dissolving under nothing more than the sleepy sarcasm of the small girl beside him.

“What did I even sign up for?” he asks, unable to resist the temptation to test how far her superpowers go.

“At the moment, I couldn’t tell you if my life depended on it,” she returns, her flat tone making him chortle. “But I’m sure I wrote it down somewhere for the specific purpose of busting it out and dazzling you with it if and when you forgot, so don’t even think about trying to suggest that I’m losing my bossy girlfriend touch.”

“Girlfriend?” he repeats, the question tumbling out despite his best efforts to stop it.

She snorts. “Well, I can rack my tired brain for another term if you like, but we are a little past ‘fling,’ ‘one night stand,’ and ‘friends with benefits’ at this point, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, no; for sure. I’m definitely cool with that.” He can’t possibly restrain his grin now and just lets it go. “I guess I just…wasn’t sure you thought of us like that yet, you know?”

“Archie.” Her eyes are still shut, but he doesn’t doubt for a second that they’re rolling behind her
lids. “Let me be the first to assure you that you’ve already been afforded many privileges that only someone I rank at boyfriend level could ever hope to achieve. For instance, not to massively inflate your ego or anything, but I don’t worry like this over just anyone. In Veronica Lodge World, we fuss loudest and longest at those who are most important to us, and that’s just all there is to it.”

A warm, funny little buzz starts up in his chest, and before he’s even aware it’s coming, he bursts out laughing. Loud enough to startle a couple people nearby, and long and heartily enough to actually get rid of most of that heavy, guilty feeling he’s been drowning in a lot lately. What he’s laughing at, he’s not sure. He just feels like it when he’s with her, and as weird as that maybe sounds, he kinda loves it. It’s nice. She’s nice.

Except she’s also unapologetically not-nice, and he kinda loves that too.

Still chuckling, he pulls her in closer, bumping their sides into each other. “Thank you, Ronnie. I’ll try to remember that.”

Next to him, Veronica’s sigh gets mixed with a groan. “Oh my God, how. HOW are you this chipper? It’s positively satanic.”

“I slept through English, remember?” he jokes, bending down to kiss the top of her head. “You want to, you can try it in History.”

“If only,” she grumbles, whimpering a little. “You saw how many cups of coffee I drank today, and the first one of them was a damn Cubano. I’m so caffeinated right now that even though I’m tired, I can’t sleep. It’s like being the exact opposite of Sleeping Beauty—I’m cursed with some sort of eternal waking stupor. Probably for the next hundred years, or at any rate, that’s what it feels like.”

“Sorry about that,” he says, lowering his voice so none of the pushy crowd that fills the hall can hear. “I should’ve left last night and let you get some rest.”

“Oh, hush,” she interrupts, sounding irritable, but ducking under his arm and hugging him so fiercely that he actually sidesteps into her. “We’ve waded through that batch of nonsense once already, and I’m too tired to go over it again when I can’t scold coherently. Don’t even bother trying to argue.”

He grins, knees weakening as usual when she pulls his head down and kisses him firmly on the mouth, right in the middle of the packed hallway. It’s not for long, and it tastes more like a funky blend of coffee and strawberry than anything else, but not one bit of him cares. When her lips release his and she starts to step back, he can’t resist catching her around the waist and diving in for a second kiss, this one strong enough to send them staggering awkwardly into the nearest locker with a small crash that brings a wolf-whistle from someone nearby. And it occurs to him—vaguely, in between a lot of soft, slow kisses that make him feel like he’s walking on air or something—that maybe he ought to be embarrassed.

(He’s not.)

When they come up for air, Veronica clears her throat, eyebrows raised.

“That wasn’t arguing,” he says quickly, running his thumb around the edge of her mouth since he’s seriously messed up her lipstick this time. “I swear.”

“Oh, good,” she returns, her tone casual though her face looks a little pinker than usual. “I think I prefer the idea of that being your agreement much better. As arguments go, it’s a little too persuasive for my liking.”

“Wait, really?” he teases, leaning in like he’s going to do it again.
“No.”

“No?”

She smirks playfully. “Okay, maybe. But only a little.”

Archie grins, bending to kiss her cheek. “I’ll take it.”

“Uh-huh.” Expression wry, she tugs lightly on his jacket. “Come on, Lover Boy. Sooner we get to class, sooner we get to go to your house and appropriate the couch for official naptime. Assuming you’re not sick of sitting and snoozing next to me, of course.”

“Never.” He laughs when he says it so she doesn’t think he’s serious, but he means it with everything in him. “I’ll be happy to sit with you, Ronnie. Anywhere and anytime you want. Whether or not I’m snoozing.”

She doesn’t say anything more, but she does slide a hand into his and give it a strong squeeze. Together, they meander into the classroom, take their usual seats near each other, and then spend most of the lecture exchanging eye-rolls as boring fact after boring fact about life in colonial America is droned at them. By the time class is dismissed, Veronica’s yawning so badly it’s making him smile, and he takes her books from her automatically.

“So. I texted Smithers during that vital segment on cheese-making,” she says, tucking her arm through his again. “He’s agreed to drive us to Casa de Andrews, and he’ll come pick me up whenever I’m ready, so no worries about transport.”

Archie nods, holding the door open for her as they exit into the snappy air. “Can you stay for dinner?”

“Yes, and thank you.” Growling under her breath, she presses her face into his shoulder. “At the moment, I’m semi-avoiding my father, but I’m not wild about it actually appearing as such. This gives me a fine excuse for skipping dinner at the Pembrooke.”

He nods again, wondering if she’s gotten herself in trouble with her parents because of him. Before he can ask though, the long, shiny black limousine pulls up, and she’s dragging him toward it with what he guesses is probably her last burst of energy for the day; the second they’re inside, she flops against him and releases a huge sigh.

“Coffee finally wear off?” he teases gently, a grin tugging at his mouth as he wraps an arm around her—then freezes guiltily when he catches a raised eyebrow that may or may not be a warning from Mr. Smithers in the rearview mirror.

“No, no. I’m just shamelessly taking advantage of your brawny shoulders,” she answers without missing a beat, scooting closer and smiling up at him regardless of the polite cough that comes from the front of the car “Now that I’m no longer trapped at a desk, why not?”

“Miss Veronica?”

Veronica laughs. “It’s okay, Smithers. Archie’s not going to manhandle me, and I promise to refrain from all but the most chaste forms of groping in your presence so you have nothing to feel remorseful about not-reporting to Daddy, all right?”

“Ronnie,” Archie hisses, choking on a laugh that wants to sneak out even as his face reddens.

“If you say so,” the man says as calmly as though they’re discussing the weather. “But out of
deference to your mother, if I witness anything untoward, I’ll be obliged to stop this car at once and insist Mr. Andrews find his own way home.”

“Uh, no sir. That won’t be a problem,” Archie says hastily, putting on what he hopes looks like the smile of the most mannerly person on earth. “I’ll…behave, I guess.”

“You guess?” Veronica murmurs, walking her fingers teasingly up his shoulder to poke at his ear. “That’s intriguing.”

He cuts his eyes over toward the driver’s seat to remind her they’re not alone, but he can’t help grinning anyway, and when the car makes a turn he knows can’t be made without the road getting full attention, he sneaks in a quick kiss.

“Don’t stress Archiekins, he thinks you’re all right,” she whispers, patting him on the chest. “I had to walk right past him in the lobby this morning when I snuck back upstairs, and he pretended he didn’t see me. If he honestly thought you were the roguish rake of Riverdale High or something, he’d have sounded the alarm and flung holy water at you ages ago.”

He laughs. Harder than the joke actually deserves, his head bumping against the leather behind him, and she joins in even though she insists he’s delirious and making a fuss over nothing. By the time they pull up in front of his house they’re still chuckling, too weak to do anything except lean against each other and laugh, and only Smithers’ dry announcement that they’ve arrived drags them out of it.

“So,” Veronica says, her hand squeezing his once the limo pulls away and they start toward the house. “About earlier.”

Confused, Archie glances down at her as they climb the steps together. “What about earlier?” he asks, unlocking the door and motioning for her to go in.

“You know, Morpheus.” She throws a squint-eyed look at him over her shoulder. “Earlier. School. You didn’t have any nightmares or anything while you were sleeping through all those procrastinated presentations, did you?”

“What? No!” He flushes all over again, bottling up a laugh that wants to break free when he considers how entirely opposite his dream was from a nightmare. “I promise.”

“Okay.” She lets him pull her coat off, but raises an eyebrow when she turns back around, hands atop her hips. “For the record though, if you do get plagued by evil dreams, I’d better be immediately informed. I don’t want you worrying yourself into a frenzy, all right?”

“All right, Ronnie.” He kisses her slowly, smiling when he feels her relax against him. “And thank you.”

“For?” she mumbles, laughing a little when he guides her to the couch. “Aside from my on-point lectures, I’m hardly exciting company right now. And I’m willing to bet it won’t improve anytime in the near future.”

That’s true, he guesses.

But it’s also not.

Though she’s yawning her way through the conversation, her sleepy sentences are still more than enough to keep him enthralled. And now that they’re alone, now that she doesn’t have to be on and alert, she’s not nearly as forceful or self-contained; she actually lets him pull her into his lap when they take a seat, smiles at him every time he glances at her to see if she’s asleep yet, and stretches up
periodically to kiss him on the mouth, jaw, chin, or cheek—wherever she can reach. When she finally seems to doze off, her head lolling against his shoulder and her breath tickling his neck, it’s maybe the first time since that shot rang out in Pop’s that Archie fully believes he can face whatever the future holds.

And if that future has a giant place reserved for Veronica Lodge like he thinks it does—well, he might even say he’s looking forward to it.

“Archie?” Veronica murmurs, lips fluttering against his neck while she squashes in closer.

“Yeah?” he says, resting his chin gently on the top of her head and enjoying how small and cute she is when she’s too tired to know what she’s doing.

She shifts slightly in his arms, snuggling into his chest. “Don’t let me drool on you.”

“I won’t,” he promises—knowing full well he won’t keep it; there’s nothing on earth that’ll induce him to make her lose more sleep because of him.

“Liar,” she mumbles, making him grin. “Stop it, already.”

“Stop what?”

“Being so you.”

His nose wrinkles as he tries to make sense of that. “What?”

Veronica sighs, sliding her arms up ‘til they’re draped over his shoulders. “Being so you,” she repeats, planting tiny little kisses on his neck until he can barely think straight. “You know…cute. Sweet. Other things.”

“Thanks, Ronnie, but I’m really not that sweet,” he protests, warming under the praise—and all the kissing—but feeling way too guilty to accept it.

“No?” She nips lightly at his earlobe, making him shiver, then laugh. “Change my mind.”

“I can’t,” he says, angling his head so their lips meet. “You’re too sleepy for me to change your mind right now.”

She smiles against his mouth. “Not helping your Not-Sweet case, Archiekins.”

“Okay, here.” He laughs again, this time kissing her so hard she hums approvingly. “Better?” he teases, knowing he’s wearing a dumb grin but not caring.

“I don’t know.” Her eyes blink open, big and brown and twinkly as she links her fingers together behind his head. “I’m too sleepy, remember?” she murmurs, leaning back and tugging him with her until they land awkwardly on the pillows. “Maybe you’d better try and convince me again.”

He grins, lowering his mouth to hers. “If you insist, Ronnie.”

She smirks up at him, palms skating down the front of his t-shirt. “I do.”

He forgets to worry after that, though it occurs to him as he tastes strawberry for the umpteenth time in three hours that he’d probably better double check and make sure he’s not still dreaming. He doesn’t think he can stand to wake up from this one.
*Chapter titled after a line from the song “Hello” by Allie X because it reminds me so much of A&V <3

*V calling Archie “Morpheus” was intended to reference the Greek god of dreams, NOT the Matrix character, but I didn’t realize that might not be clear until right before posting and didn't know how to work it into the story

*I’ve been reluctant to post this fic for a while since I try to keep this collection as canon-compliant as possible and it seemed maybe a little TOO fluffily AU to have Archie dreaming/daydreaming about V that soon into their relationship, but after 3x06 aired...HA, IT’S BASICALLY CANON THAT THE BOY’S THAT CHEESY, SO NO RAGREGTS. My cup runneth over, and just when I thought I couldn’t love that first meeting in the diner more. I’m not kidding; I am GOING to write the embarrassingly long A/V Tumblr essay at some point.

*So. 3x07. I didn’t love it how I love 2x07 because the stories didn’t intersect as smoothly (Hiram felt like the one unifying factor), but I did enjoy it. I hope the show does these funkily-formatted eps every season; they’re awesome and the potential is huge...black and white film eps, stories told in reverse eps, etc. Imagine a Halloween-themed ep where everyone ends up at the same ‘haunted house’ they all swore they weren’t going to visit, but for totally different reasons? I’d pay money to see that. (Ok, maybe not. But I’ll write the fic myself if I have to, so close enough.)

*Archie: I’m sure everyone else probably hates him, but I was pretty proud of my darling dunderhead in 3x07. Did he make stupid choices? Yup. Of course he did. But the stupid choices didn’t surprise me...anyone who knows him could’ve seen them coming; it was the two good choices he made (saying “I still love someone” when he realized kissing a random girl just SEEMED like what he needed at that moment, listening to Jug at a critical juncture and walking away) that caught me off guard. What DID surprise and disappoint me was how JUGHEAD, a character I expect to exercise some semblance of logic at all times since he prides himself on that, LEFT ARCHIE ALONE after making a big deal about how he (1) thought Archie shouldn’t be left alone because he keeps getting kidnapped, etc. (2) had a bad feeling about the farm (3) thought Archie was already being dumb. That’s like proclaiming yourself the designated driver and then bailing on your drunk friend because you’re tired of barhopping and want to go home; Jug, I expect better from you. But, he did come in clutch with the “Will VERONICA ever forgive you?” so <3 you, bro

*Veronica: My girl. Seriously, all I’ve got is MY GIRL, MY GIRL, MY GIRL. I’m sure I’m supposed to disapprove of stack-the-deck-tactics, but I can’t because I personally subscribe to the Hiram Lodge theory: in many high-stakes circumstances, it DOESN’T matter how you win...all that matters is being the last (wo)man standing. It sounds cynical, but it’s the truth: if you expect to win when playing with cheaters, you HAVE to cheat just to level the playing field. I love that V’s shrewd enough to get that and to not automatically reject the advice because it comes from someone she’s mad at. That being said, as much as I want to think Hiram helped her because at the end of the
day she’s family…he did exactly what I’d do if I wanted to regain a pinch of someone’s trust right before screwing them over. At this point, I’ll only be surprised if Hiram’s revealed to have been using the WORST means ever for very good reasons.

*I’m not saying I HATE Ethel; I’m just saying that if she were on fire, I’d consider roasting marshmallows. I haven’t forgotten how she went after V in S1&2, and now I’m just very over her. Also, Alice is low-key dead to me. If you’re that concerned about your child’s SAFETY, woman, send her to Hawaii or something, not to Pop Rock-dispensing nuns! (I never said this if the pop rocks turn out to be lifesaving.)

*Reggie and THOSE PANTS, WHEW. Lol, I love/hate this boy, and it’s so awkward. I’ll never ship A or V with anyone besides each other, but neither will I die if Riverdale does what I think they’re doing and makes another nod to the V/R relationship in the comics. The show’s made it very clear A&V prefer each other above all others, which is the way it’s pretty much always been in what, 50+ years of comic history? Plus, if the show *must* do a love ‘triangle,’ I’ll take A/V/R over A/V/B any day of the week; at least watching V try to substitute R for A will be less boring than watching A try to substitute B for V. (Ideally though, my babies get back together with no A/V/R drama and I get to see Reggie make a fool of himself trying to impress Josie while Josie pretends to be indifferent because no one understands how much I need this to happen.)

*Thanks as always for reading/commenting! Good luck to those gearing up for finals, and here’s hoping everyone has a great weekend!
All I Want For Christmas

Chapter Summary

Archie, Veronica, and the story of the necklace. Set in 2x09, “Silent Night, Deadly Night.”

*It’s no longer the holiday season and I don’t love how this turned out (actually, I kind of hate it), but I refuse to post anything sad right now because I’m 99.5% sure A&V are getting back together and then breaking up tonight (because drama! Because angst! Because they apparently haven’t been tortured enough this season!). Please excuse its randomness. I’m sure I had a plan in mind when I wrote it back in the summer, but I couldn’t for the life of me tell what I was going for when I went over it today :P

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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“I don’t want a lot for Christmas

There is just one thing I need”

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Yes. He should do it.

No. Is he crazy?

(No. But also maybe.)

He thinks about it for a long time, tossing and turning until most of the covers are in a wad on the floor. If he goes ahead and gives her a present, it might screw things up all over again, and he definitely doesn’t want that. On the other hand, where’s the harm? The money’s already been spent, and she gave him something she bought before…well, before, and anyway, it’s not like he’s made of money. Which she knows. If he doesn’t go out and find something else, like a book, or a gift card, or a fancy mug, she’ll understand, right?

God, he hopes so.

The sun isn’t quite over the treetops when he grabs a hoodie and his running shoes and slips out the front door, Veronica’s gift in his pocket. He figures no one at the Pembrooke will be up yet, but on the off chance they are and he has to explain why he’s hanging around super early on Christmas Eve morning, he wants it to seem as casual as possible. No big deal, just out on a run. Like always.
Figured I’d drop this by for Veronica.

There’s nothing weird about that, is there?

He thinks not. Unfortunately for him, though, he’s apparently the only one who thinks that.

“For Miss Lodge?” Andre says, weighing the package somewhat suspiciously in his hand and leveling a stare at Archie that makes him feel like he’s been caught in the act of stealing something. “Is there any particular reason you’ve been unable to offer this in person?”

“No. No, I only wanted—” He hesitates, trying to come up with a better way to say Things have been kind of a mess since we broke up, I thought this might be easier because even he can tell the Lodge’s bodyguard could seriously not care less. “Could you just see that she gets this, please?” he finishes finally.

“Archie?”

Great.

He tenses, embarrassment mounting as Veronica’s mom appears, her fancy outfit suggesting she’s about to do some last-minute shopping. “Hey, Mrs. Lodge.”

The woman waves Andre out of the way with a flick of the wrist, her expression polite but not unfriendly as she comes to the doorway. “Did you need to speak to Veronica? Because you know, I don’t believe she’s up yet, but I can call her—”

“Oh! No.” His eyes dart toward the elevator in spite of himself; he’s not mentally prepared at this moment to see Veronica, but he can’t help wishing she’d turn up all the same, and the feeling’s pretty nerve-wracking. “No, I was just…out jogging, and I figured since I was kind of in the area and everything, I’d drop off her gift.”

“I see.” Taking the little box from Andre, Mrs. Lodge glances from it to Archie, eyebrows raised. “And do you often go jogging bearing pre-wrapped bundles of Yuletide joy?”

Crap.

“Oh…” He can feel his whole face turning red, and laughs uneasily. “Not usually, no.”

The woman studies him for a long moment, eyes narrowed like his mom’s whenever she’s decided to just sit back and let him incriminate himself, and he gets a strong feeling that she knows he did his best to memorize his cover story on the way over.

“I didn’t know we were exchanging gifts,” he blurts out, the silence getting to him. “At school the other day, she gave me one. I kind of owe her.”

“Well,” Veronica’s mom says finally, hitching the purse she’s carrying up to her shoulder. “If you’re certain you’d rather not wait around and present it to her yourself—”

He shakes his head, accidentally grinning a little when he thinks how incredibly grouchy Veronica will be if she’s woken up at this hour on a non-school day. “It’s really not important enough to drag her out of bed, Mrs. Lodge. Especially at this hour.”

“An excellent point,” she comments, a slight smile twisting free. “All right, then. I’ll make sure this finds its way under the tree and let you get back to your…jogging.”
“Thank you,” he tells her as gratefully as he knows how. But halfway down the steps, a new thought strikes him and he halts in place.

“Something else?” Mrs. Lodge says from behind him.

He feels a little weird having this kind of conversation with her, but nods anyway. “Could you maybe not let her see it right off? I mean, it is supposed to be for Christmas and, no offense, but I know from some of the stuff she’s said that she probably has a pretty good idea about most of what you and Mr. Lodge have gotten her. I think it’d be nice if she were at least a little surprised.”

She smiles, though he’s not quite sure how to respond to it since it’s one of those smiles that makes him feel like he’s about as hard to see through as cling wrap. “Of course. I’ll simply tuck it away until after she’s performed her final inspection, and she’ll be none the wiser.”

“Thanks again, Mrs. Lodge,” he says. “And Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you too, Archie.”

He leaves before he starts questioning the odd parting look she gives him. There’re enough worries on his mind, and besides—the longer he hangs around, the bigger the chance that Veronica will turn up and demand to know what he’s doing here and what he brought. And…he’s just not brave enough to watch her open it. Because if she likes it, he’s guaranteed to read too much into it. And if she doesn’t like it, he’ll read too much into that, too.

*Please let her like it.*

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“I don’t need expensive things

They don’t matter to me.”

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perfectly normal gesture of friendship, their gazes locked and her courage evaporated. The events of the preceding weeks still hung heavy between them, and he just seemed so tired, so vulnerable when his eyes fell on hers, that she feared the consequences of such a move. So she said nothing, and when they all parted ways, she forwent the hug she desperately wanted to give him in favor of squeezing the sleeve of his jacket and bidding him some half-serious, half-joking farewell.

And then she laid awake all night haunted by the expression on his face and the flurry of emotions it stirred in her. The fact that he stopped by with a gift he absolutely didn’t have to bring her…well. She can’t explain it; she just knows it affects her the same startling, flabbergasting way every sweet thing he does affects her, and that she has to open this mystery package right now.

Other presents forgotten, she pads quickly across the room and wastes no time in tearing through the cheap paper. And when she cracks open the box and the gift is finally laid bare, there’s no stopping her smile. Or the mistiness she feels. Because if ever there were a gift that shouted *Archie Andrews picked me out*, it’s this one. The boy knows nothing about jewelry and cares probably less, but it’s Baccarat crystal clear that he tried his utmost to overcome both of those obstacles on this one.

Small, silver, a little plainer and clunkier than anything she would choose for herself, the heart-shaped locket is nonetheless beautiful to her. The words *A&V Forever*, dull-etched into the shiny surface, simultaneously catch her eye and pierce her soul, because beyond the adorability of the sentiment, she knows he has to have been planning this for a while. Customized engravings don’t just happen overnight, especially not in a town the size of Riverdale (as she of all people ought to know), and the fact that he’d even think to attempt something like this—it’s ridiculous of her, sure, but it makes her feel special.

Besides…it’s not like she’s immune to the symbolism here. This heart is made of metal and maybe one millionth the size of the last one he tried to give her, but the principle is the same, and for a second or two she just sits there—warmed, happy, vision liquidizing as she traces a finger over the edges of the pictures.

A locket. Shaped like a heart. That’s what he got her. Complete with sentimental inscription and lovers’ likenesses, as though they’re living in the days of lace handkerchiefs, dance cards, and tender serenades beneath flower-laden bowers.

All of which is just so Archie, she thinks, a foolish little smile tickling at the corners of her mouth while her eyes linger on the left-hand photo. Every single thing he does, from recklessly seeking out his father’s shooter, to tying his hideously battered old sneakers, to making a special gift-delivering trip to the home of the girl who broke up with him because she couldn’t figure out how to say three relatively simple words in return, bears the unmistakable stamp of his earnestness. And to someone who’s grown up taking hidden agendas and relentless pursuit of control in stride, that straightforward streak of pure-heartedness is attractive. Almost appallingly so. The way he cares about her and the way that caring seems to infiltrate every niche of her being…well. It’s unlike anything she’s ever experienced, like everything she’s ever mocked, and she sees with epiphanic clarity exactly what she needs to do.

“Veronica?” her mother’s voice asks, barging into her miniature reverie. “Mija, aren’t you going to finish opening your presents? There’s practically a mountain over there with your name on it.”

“Oh, not to worry, Mom. I haven’t forgotten.” Squeezing the locket closed in her fist, she raises it briefly to her lips then stands quickly. “But just FYI,” she adds, fastening the little trinket around her neck as, smile growing, she reaches up to touch it, “I’m definitely going to need to borrow the car after we finish up with Santa’s Workshop here. Assuming of course that that’s not too presumptuous a request for your one and only daughter to make on this, a day of peace, goodwill, and giving?”
“Of course not, mija,” her father responds, brows drawn together suspiciously. “But why is it necessary for you to run this particular errand yourself? Can’t Andre simply pick up or deliver whatever it is you need?”

“No. He really can’t.” Pausing on her way back to the tree to kiss each of her confused parents on the cheek, she laughs out loud at their baffled expressions. “Believe you me when I say this is definitely one of those enterprises best handled in person.”

Her father noncommittally eyes the newest piece of jewelry dangling near her throat for a moment, looks grim, then shrugs. “Well I suppose in that case, it’s fine. Provided you’re not encroaching on anyone’s family time for too long, seeing as how this is a holiday and it would be incalculably rude to show up unannounced and—”

“Hiram.”

Veronica flashes a grateful smile at her mother who, though she doesn’t look entirely pleased with the way things are going, at least seems willing to not actively interfere. “You have my word that if my presence is unwanted, I’ll be back in record-breaking time, Daddy.”

She’s so giddily on-edge now, her usual Christmas morning excitement both amplifying and catalyzing the buzz of wild emotions that have been brewing in her for months now, that she’s sorely tempted to ask if either of her parents knows a good place to find mistletoe. But sense reasserts itself in the nick of time, and she settles down demurely enough, managing to blast through the rest of the present-opening ritual while exhibiting the requisite amount of delight.

Still, her eagerness to be gone rises with every passing second; when her father retreats to his study to take a Very Important Call that’s no doubt from yet another Feliz Navidad-spewing Mafioso type, she excuses herself to her room and dresses swiftly.

“How long do you think you’ll be?” Hermione inquires, showing up wineglass in hand as Veronica attempts to pry a sprig of fake mistletoe loose from one of the garlands on her way out. “Presuming of course that you have any intention of returning tonight.”

“Mom.”

“What?” her mother says mildly. “It’s a legitimate question, Ronnie. Your father and I would like to know when or if we should expect our daughter for Christmas dinner.”

Rolling her eyes, Veronica gives the stubborn piece of plastic another sharp twist. “Well, if Daddy’s truly that concerned, tell him whenever he bothers to get off the phone with Don Corleone that he needn’t fret on my account. I’m going to talk to Archie, not proposition him, and I fully expect to be back by eight.”

“Eight?” the woman repeats, eyebrow crooking.

“Yes, eight.” The mistletoe finally snaps loose, and she tucks it into her purse with a sigh of relief. “What, is that not acceptable?”

Hermione lifts a shoulder. “No, it’s fine. But if you insist on sending Andre away once you arrive and you end up needing to leave sooner than expected, I’d prefer you not walk back alone.”

E lecting to ignore the broad hint that she’s making a terrible mistake, Veronica releases a chuckle. “Haven’t you heard, Mom? The Black Hood is officially no more, and the streets of Riverdale—well, the Northside streets, anyway—are once again pedestrian-friendly.”
“Yes, well. All the same…” Her mother touches her gently on the shoulder, something odd in her expression. “Exercise caution, mijita. Overconfidence in anything—or anyone—is a gross miscalculation, and I’d hate to see you fall victim to it.”

Veronica heaves a sigh. “Respectfully, Mom, I’m not walking into this blindly, it’s not an impulse decision, and I’ve done my share of thinking on this particular subject. I know the risks, and I’m prepared to take them.”

“Very well, then.” Leaning in, Hermione gives her a swift peck on the cheek that smells of Chanel, white wine, and whatever experimental brand of legal-only-in-Sweden face powder it is she’s wearing these days. “Ojalá, everything works out in your favor.”

Despite the skepticism pervading her mother’s tone, Veronica has to smile. “I couldn’t agree more.”

The air stings her cheeks when she steps out onto the sidewalk in front of the Andrews’ house, but she hardly notices and bids Andre a no-room-for-argument goodbye, pretending to totter up the steps until she hears the car pull away. Then it’s just her and her nerves, as she looks about her for a good place to hang the introductory piece of her admission.

A hook she thinks probably used to hold wind chimes or something of that ilk presents itself almost miraculously, but it’s annoyingly apparent that she’s never going to reach it without a major boost of some sort. The porch railing she dismisses at once since, even if she could manage to climb up there and balance in heels, there’s no way she’ll be able to reach the hook without leaning way over, and besides, she is not about to put her holiday lingerie on display for whichever of Archie’s neighbors may happen to be watching. So, finally, she chooses a piece of wicker furniture that seems tall and sturdy enough to get the job done, and climbs up on it, stretching until it feels like her shoulder is about to separate from the rest of her body.

It occurs to her, as she balances on one tiptoe while trying to hook the little loop of ribbon, that if anyone opens the front door at this particular moment, she’s going to be monumentally embarrassed. And probably plunge both heels straight through the wicker. But thankfully, the ribbon catches before anything like that happens, and she’s able to step down, push the thing back in place, and take a few deep, hair-fluffing and dress-straightening breaths before she pulls out her phone. Knocking is undoubtedly the most direct route, but the possibility that Archie’s father might answer is too strong and she just hasn’t the fortitude for it. So, fingers trembling a little, she taps out a quick Meet me outside? and hits send.

Now all that remains is to wait.

Please let this go right.

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“All that I want, it can’t be found
Underneath the Christmas tree”

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In the old days, waking up insanely early on Christmas morning was a tradition that Archie always took full advantage of—bringing Vegas with him into his parents’ room to lick people awake if they tried to sleep through anything, flipping the lights on and yelling *Merry Christmas* while his mom and dad groaned, covered their eyes, and took turns blaming each other’s side of the family for his excitement.

But now, it’s sort of reversed. He’s the one trying to hide under the pillows while his dad barges into his room at five o’clock in the morning turning on lights, singing random snatches of Christmas carols, and actually telling Vegas to ‘find Archie, find Archie, boy!’ like it’s an emergency or something, and he’s the one yawning his head off and staggering downstairs in a sleepy stupor.

His dad teases him about it, making all the usual corny *What, did you stay up too late trying to catch Santa again?* jokes, but even that can’t keep his eyes open. He eventually falls asleep on the couch, head cocked at an angle that gives him a terrible crick in the neck when he wakes around noon to the smell of pancakes, but in a way, it’s nice. Even though his mom’s missing, the day feels like all his past Christmases, down to Dad ordering him upstairs to change into real clothes instead of pajamas and Mrs. Cooper calling in the middle of their super-late breakfast to tell them that Vegas’ early morning barking could be heard clear over there, and if they ‘didn’t muzzle him until pm hours next year,’ she would get him sent to the dog pound once and for all.

And then midway through the afternoon, his mom calls and it’s basically perfect…he tells her the tame version of everything that’s happened, she tells him she loves and misses him, and with Dad hanging over his shoulder and the three of them all laughing and talking, it’s like the best version of old times.

Still, though.

As great as it is, it’s not quite *right*. Like he’s happy, yeah, but in a weird way, the day feels the same to him as when he’s working an algebra problem and makes a mistake halfway through solving for stupid X…he doesn’t know what the hell the answer is, but he knows in his gut that something, somewhere, is wrong, and it bugs him.

It’s just his luck, he guesses, that he remembers what’s been worrying him right after he hands the house phone over to his dad and his cell goes off in his pocket.

*Meet me outside?* the message reads, and his stomach jumps.

It’s from Veronica, and that alone is enough to make him beeline for the door, heart thumping like the biggest metronome ever. Although he didn’t see her yesterday when he swung by the Pembrooke, and although he spent a lot of time afterward telling himself he was making a big deal out of a thing that was no deal at all, it weighed on him. Because the truth is that when he first bought that present, it was with Veronica his *girlfriend* in mind, not Veronica his *friend*, and now that he’s gone ahead and given it to her anyway, it scares him that it might’ve been the wrong call. Maybe he should’ve gone out and bought her something else instead…earrings, or just a regular bracelet, or one of those movies she really liked, or yeah, a coffee mug or a book like he’d considered earlier. Anything that didn’t say how he felt about her quite as plainly as that heart did.

Not that listing all the things he *could’ve* done is in any way helpful. She’s seen the gift, and there’s no going back now. Hopefully she’s not mad at him for crossing any lines?

Holding his breath a little, he opens the door and steps out onto the porch. Veronica’s standing with her back to him, but she starts to turn as he pulls the door shut, and *damn*, she looks beautiful. How in the world is he supposed to play it cool around her when just seeing her has him feeling like he’s been hit by a truck?
“Hey,” he says, feeling the smile he just can’t seem to control around her start up the second their eyes meet. “Merry Christmas.”

Veronica’s answering smile is small, but so bright it almost hurts.

“Look up,” she instructs.

He does, tilting his head back to see one of the last things he expected: a bunch of green leaves and white berries tied with a ribbon dangling from the old lamp’s point, and…wait. Is that what he thinks it is?

“Mistletoe alert,” she says right as his brain identifies the object and immediately decides to start short-circuiting because no way is he lucky enough after everything that’s happened to be standing under mistletoe with her; no way is he lucky enough that she’s actually pointing it out. “Hung by moi. Now we have no choice but to kiss.”

No choice but to kiss?

Holy crap.

Blood roars in his ears, and he holds himself very stiff and careful as he steps closer and her soft little hands cup the back of his neck. There’s something in her eyes he’s never seen before, something almost shy, and his pulse pounds like crazy when she draws his head down. This is definitely too good to be true, and oh God, if she’s kissing him because she feels sorry for him or because it’s Christmas or something, he might actually throw up. Or cry, neither of which is great, so he just sort of stands there when the kiss ends, heart thudding and lips on fire while he stares down at her trying to understand what—if anything—this all means to her.

“Archie,” she says after a second or two of silence that’s got him this close to panicking, reaching up to rest a hand against the side of his face. “You’re so good.”

He’s not; not even a little bit, but okay? That’s awesome? It’s nice to know that she thinks so?

“It’s like you’re filled with it.”

The warm palm drops away from his cheek and makes the cold more noticeable than ever, but he can’t care. Veronica’s looking at him the way he’s daydreamed about her looking at him for really long time now, and her voice is so serious that a lot of vague hopes skyrocket and he feels himself starting to smile like an idiot.

“And…” Her gaze is unwavering and it’s mesmerizing. “I know that I need goodness in my life. I need you in my life.”

Him? He holds still while his mind spins out of control, too afraid to move, blink, breathe, anything for fear of jinxing whatever’s happening. She needs him in her life? Like as a friend, or like she does feel something for him after all? Something that’s a little bit more than like?

“In other words…” Her fingertips flutter against the base of his neck, and just like that, he’s caught between staring into her eyes and staring at her lips; does she have any idea how much he wants to kiss her when she looks at him like that? He doubts it. “I love you too, Archie Andrews.”

Right away, it’s like he’s been clubbed over the head. Except he’s thrilled by it—dazed and so stupidly happy he can’t contain it for another second, this time he’s the one to lean in. The nervousness he was feeling just a few seconds ago is as gone like it never existed, and it takes what’s left of his breath away when her fingers tighten on his hair and she sighs into his mouth.
She loves him.

Loves, not *likes*.

She doesn’t just kinda like him, kinda like hanging out with him…she *loves* him.

He’s so happy he thinks he just might pass out, and when she finally breaks the kiss and leans against him, panting softly, he can’t stop himself from hugging her so tight to his chest that he takes her off her feet for a second or two. It feels like forever since he’s held her, and he’s not too interested in stopping anytime soon.

Which is probably a good thing, he thinks dizzily. Because judging by the way she’s holding onto him, they definitely seem to be on the same page.

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“I just want you here tonight

Holding onto me so tight”

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What she says when the door behind her opens and she turns to find him right there—smiling and adorably Christmasey in the bright green edition of one of those basic shirts he seems to have an endless supply of—she’s not quite sure. Her skin feels hot all over despite the wind’s icy bite, and it’s like her words are bound and determined to abscond without her approval. But he’s still smiling as he moves across the porch toward her, still looking at her with that befuddled brand of artlessness that unravels her every time, and before she has time to reconsider and psych herself out of what she’s here to say, she’s spouting some nonsense about mistletoe and drawing his head down for a kiss. Then, like the truth she hasn’t known how to express has finally been unlocked inside her, she’s telling him everything:

*You’re so good.* (He is. No one will ever dispute and deny it so passionately as he, but he *is.*)

*I need you in my life.* (It’s true. He’ll never believe this either, but he’s like a light…incapable of going out or even guttering; a lantern-ish personality who brightens her world to the point that when he’s not there, everything feels shadowed.)

*I love you too.* (Of course she does. How could she not?)

As speeches go, it’s nothing like the polished declaration she envisioned—more of a clumsy, off-the-cuff little confession that leaves her feeling more gauchely exposed than she’s ever been in her life.

But if Archie notices, he doesn’t seem to care. When he leans in and his lips land on hers, it’s like the pieces of everything fall into place, and it’s all she can do to remember to breathe when the hand he’s got on her waist slides all the way around and drags her to him…by the time they part enough to gain some oxygen not exhaled by the other, she’s winded, punch-drunk (kiss-drunk?), and tingling all
over.

And it’s wonderful.

Her skin’s on fire, the wind is glacial, her legs feel like they could give out under her at any second, and she wouldn’t have it any other way.

“By the bye,” she murmurs once she trusts herself to speak, fingers squeezing gently around his face. “Thank you for the gift. I love it.”

“You do? Really?”

His voice is breathy, as faint and unsteady as she feels, and she opens her eyes dreamily to see that adorable grin of his on full display.

“Yes, really,” she answers, tossing her hair back so the locket’s free to shine, and laughing because she’s too giddy to manage anything else. “See for yourself.”

He does, but there’s scarcely time to appreciate the happy, modest little smile he gives her because already, he’s bending down again. This kiss and the legion that follow it positively smolder against her lips until she’s half-expecting one or both of them to combust into flames, and it makes her giggle. Even though she still can’t fill her lungs properly.

“So you believe me, then?” she murmurs, sneaking a syllable or two in every time there’s space for talking.

“Uh-huh.” He doesn’t let go of her, though. Or change pace; his mouth works against hers like he’s afraid to stop for even a second, and it’s intoxicating. “Totally.”

How long they stand there taking advantage of the mistletoe, she has no idea. But after a bit, she becomes aware of a faint buzzing sound, and Archie leans back with a frustrated grumble and mutters something about it being his phone. So they take a break, and she watches as he pulls his phone out of his pocket, frowns at the screen, then answers.

“Yeah?” he says, and Veronica observes with mild curiosity how a wave of bright pink washes over his face in response to whatever’s being said on the other end of the line. “Uh, yeah, no. I was just about to, only we were—I mean, yes. Maybe. Bye, okay?”

“What was that about?” she asks as he tucks the phone back into his pocket. “Are you needed somewhere? Should I take this as my cue to leave?”

“No! No,” he insists, the grin turning sheepish. “That was…my dad, actually.”

“You dad?” Now it’s her turn to frown, because why on earth is his dad calling? He’s not alone on Christmas, is he? “Did he have to go out of town or something?”

“No, he’s inside,” Archie explains, laughing a little as he scratches awkwardly at his ear. “He uh, said to invite you in before you freeze to death.”

“Oh!” Immediately, her mind jumps to her father’s ill-meant, but nonetheless valid point about encroaching on others’ family time. “Um…no, that’s okay. I don’t want to intrude on any plans you and your dad—” she begins.

“What? No way, Ronnie.” Grasping her hand, he starts toward the door and tugs her after him, his palm warm and rough against hers. “You’re not intruding on anything. Our plans are literally just
sitting around and watching movies, and we do that every year.”

“Are you sure?” she asks, peering around his back for any contradictory signs as she follows him into the house.

“He’s sure,” another voice puts in, and Veronica’s cheeks heat as Archie’s father steps out from the kitchen wearing the sort of understanding smile that makes her feel like he knows what was just going on out on his porch as well as if he’d spied through the peephole. “Merry Christmas, Veronica.”

“Merry Christmas, Mr. Andrews,” she returns, promptly and a tad self-consciously since a part of her feels odd about hanging onto her boyfriend in front of his dad. “I’m sorry for dragging Archie away. And for interrupting family time.”

“Oh, not at all. Days like today, it’s the more the merrier.” Hands stuffed in his pockets, the man tilts his head toward the living room. “You kids go on in and pick your seats for the feature presentation. I’ll…go get us all some hot chocolate.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Archie says before she can turn down the wholly-unnecessary offer, pulling her with him as he moves to follow instructions. “Appreciate it.”

“He does know he doesn’t have to do the whole Martha Stewart bit, right?” Veronica whispers, glancing guiltily over her shoulder as Fred disappears into the kitchen. “I know I’ve never exactly been shy about broadcasting my affinity for high-quality food service, but this is so not what I usually have in mind; I mean, I’m not even a guest, I’m basically a gatecrasher and he’s offering to make and deliver refreshments to me.”

“Yeah, no.” Eyes sparkling, smile heavy in his voice, Archie hooks an arm around her waist and gives her a quick spin that makes her clutch him for balance as they step into the living room. “That’s just his way of saying he’s going to give us some space for a little bit.”

“Wait.” Her face wrinkles while he guides her toward the couch and she processes this bit of news. “Seriously? Your dad does that?”

“Well.” He dips his head, laughing a little. “Not always. A lot of times, he like, does this thing where he hangs around really obviously. But with you…I don’t know; he’s kind of cool with you, I think.”

“Wow.” She tries to conceal her gratification as she plunks down beside him, but it’s hard. Somehow, the knowledge that Fred Andrews doesn’t a hundred percent hate the idea of her dating his son feels like one of the greatest compliments she’s ever received. “That’s—honestly kind of unbelievable.”

Archie’s smile softens.

“Not really,” he says, sliding an arm back around her. “He’s the one who told me not to freak out when you didn’t want—I mean, when you weren’t ready to…you know. Say it. I just didn’t listen because I was too much of an idiot to—”

“Hey,” she interrupts, embarrassment walloping her as she puts a finger to his lips to stem the tide of contrition. “Before you stampede any farther down the path of self-flagellation Archie, you should know—it was never about me not wanting to say it. I just…had to overcome some particularly nasty demons before I could feel right about it.”

His brows clump together in a knot of adorable, kidlike confusion. “What?”
She smiles. “Let’s just say that when it comes to verbally expressing my deepest sentiments, I’m severely amateurish. As a rule, I prefer to talk nonsense rather than substance, so I do. Almost exclusively.”

“Why’s that?” he asks, thumb brushing against her hip while he smiles back.

“Because.” Unable to help herself, she leans in and plants a quick kiss on his lips. “Being earnest, and serious, and basically everything that’s the complete and total opposite of flippant all the time feels a lot like walking onto a battlefield wearing no armor and a massive target. And I’m not stupid.”

He grins, reaching out to twirl a piece of her hair around one finger. “Translation, Ronnie?”

“Right, well…” She lifts a shoulder, blushing in spite of her best efforts to seem calm. “I just…”

Her voice trails off while she struggles internally for the best way to express it. He gives her a few seconds, then raises his eyebrows in a silent question that makes her huff out a laugh.

“In essence,” she says, eyes flitting guiltily away from his, “I was afraid. I couldn’t for the life of me say those three little words back to you because I’ve never actually said them to anyone before, and I wasn’t sure then if what I felt—what I feel…”

The hand in her hair stills, then travels suddenly to rest along the side of her face and part of her neck, and she closes her eyes for a breath or two as his touch seeps into her skin.

“Yeah?” he says, his voice just above a whisper.

“I just couldn’t say it to you hoping I’d got it right,” she finishes, leaning into his palm so automatically she doesn’t know she’s doing it until after the fact. “I had to be sure I meant it.”

“But now you are?” he says quietly, thumb gliding over her cheek. “Sure, I mean? You’re not just saying it because—”

“No, Archie.” She covers his hand with her own, fingers slipping in between his and squeezing hard. “Not going to lie, I’m a relationship greenhorn and I can’t promise I’ll handle everything—or even anything—the way I ought, but…I am serious about this. About you.”

He grins, wide and blinding, and it drags a giggle from her because it’s almost unbelievable how much she’s missed seeing him like this.

Bringing her other hand up to frame his face, she pulls his head toward her, laughing again as their smiles collide. Both of them are less cautious now, their mouths eager and their kisses chaotic, and it’s a solid minute before Veronica’s buzzing ears pick up the sounds of overly-loud spoon-stirrings from the hall and it registers that the noise is intended to serve as a polite cough. So, reluctantly, she pushes on his chest to signal the need for a pause.

“Your dad,” she whispers in answer to his questioning frown. “I think he’s trying to knock without knocking.”

Archie nods, eyes crinkling at the corners. “Hey, Dad?” he calls. “Uh…you need help carrying anything?”

“What? No way.” Fred appears so rapidly from around the corner that it’s laughable, a steaming, supersized mug in each hand. “I may be getting on in years, son, but I think I can still manage to lift a couple of drinks on my own, thank you.”
Archie laughs, accepting both the mug and the playful cuff that follows with characteristic good humor. And suddenly, as she watches the two of them joking back and forth, Veronica feels like the biggest outsider of all time. The relationship the Andrewses have with each other is something special, and it seems wrong somehow that she’s here too, a glaring obstacle to their holiday fun. But right as she’s considering inventing an excuse to save them from their own Too-Damn-Niceness, Fred hands her one of the mugs—a tacky, garish thing with an uber-jolly Santa Claus playing baseball on it—and wishes her a merry Christmas with a smile so welcoming she almost tears up on the spot.

“Ronnie?” Archie says, the arm he’s got draped around her shoulders tightening as his dad heads back to the kitchen for the third and final cup. “Are you all right?”

“Of course.” She nestles closer into his side and takes a quick sip to hide her foolishness. The taste of the thing is remarkably unremarkable; chocolate syrup dripped into hot milk and topped with stale, store-brand marshmallows no doubt, yet somehow, she fully believes it’s the best hot cocoa she’s ever drunk. “I’m just…admiring your family’s particular methods of celebrating.”

He laughs, the sound bright and happy though she’s willing to bet he has no idea what she means. “Okay, thanks and that’s cool, but…why?”

Smiling, she lifts her mug and clinks it briskly against his. “Oh,” she answers, thinking with something akin to disgust of the massive pile of gifts that’s always under her family’s tree. “Just because.”

The time passes all too quickly after that. Archie and Fred’s movie tradition turns out to be more complicated than expected as it apparently requires watching every Christmas-themed film known to humankind. Snacks are also obligatory, and they unreservedly involve Veronica in the whole experience—appealing to her to settle the debate when they can’t agree which movie to open with, warning her to not lower her mug or snacks lest the dog consider it fair game and attack, and so on. There’s laughter, too much quoting, loud sing-alongs whenever a carol debuts, and a strange, all-encompassing abundance of something unspoken she loves even though she can’t for the life of her put a name to it. Archie’s arm is a blanket around her shoulders, his side her own personal space heater, and his struggles to drink his cocoa and graze on junk food while also not disturbing her are so comical that she takes to feeding him caramel corn as though he’s Vegas.

Fred, for his part, pretends to be so engrossed in the accounts of snowless Vermont inns, bullied reindeer, and lime green curmudgeons attempting to ruin an entire village’s holiday that he doesn’t notice any of the slow, chocolate-flavored kisses being exchanged at every turn. Then the sixth movie—It’s A Wonderful Life—wraps, and while they’re all sitting around enjoying the comfortable tranquility of a happy ending, Fred makes a clumsy to-do about how he really ought to take Vegas for a walk (but no one has to accompany him) until Archie’s all but begging his dad to shut up and leave.

Which is both mortifying and endearing.

“Thank you again for letting me hang out here, Mr. Andrews,” Veronica says to change the subject, smothering a laugh as the man rambles awkwardly on about how he can use some fresh air and exercise before dinner while his son grows ever-stiffer with embarrassment beside her. “I truly appreciate it.”

“Oh, it’s our pleasure, Veronica.” Sidestepping the dog’s energetic gambols around his feet, Fred clips the leash onto the collar and starts toward the door. “Right Arch?”

“Yeah.” Archie squirms again, and she raises an eyebrows teasingly just to see him redden some
more. “Right, Dad.”

“Okay, so, we’ll be back in about a half hour,” Fred says, hovering somewhat uncertainly in the doorway. “Maybe a little longer. You guys…”

“Uh-huh, yeah, we got it, Dad,” Archie says, laughing though his discomfort is as obvious as his parent’s. “Thanks. See you in a little while.”


Veronica has to chuckle when the door shuts quickly in the distance.

“Your father truly is a gem amongst the rubble,” she remarks. “But subtle hints? Clearly not his forte.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

The couch creaks under his weight as he shifts toward her, and Veronica’s chuckle turns into a full-blown laugh when she glances up to find the single-silliest smile she thinks she’s ever seen on his face.

“What?” he says half-defensively, half-playfully as he scoots in, thumb tapping against her knee.

“Nothing,” she answers, swinging a leg over his lap. Rising up onto her knees so their faces are level, she beams at him like an idiot while her hands ruffle luxuriously through his thick hair until it’s in wild peaks all over his head. “It’s just nice to be like this again with you. I tried telling myself we were friends and it was all good, but…I missed my Archiekins.”

If she thought his grin was wide and ridiculous before, it’s nothing compared to what it is now as, face flushed and eyes glowing, his hands wander from her waist to her hips.

“Me too,” he says like he’s been waiting to say it for a while, grip crushing as he pulls her down on him. “I missed you so much, Ronnie. At school, when we were doing the presents…”

“Mhmm?” she prompts, fingers weaving themselves into his hair.

“I could barely stand it.” He kisses her slowly, driving the quip she was on the verge of making right out of her head. “I couldn’t even hold your hand because that just made it worse.”

Eyes closing as his lips trek warmly across her throat, she wraps her arms around him tight, exhilaration flowing through her when he murmurs her name like she’s his last hope on earth.

“Merry Christmas, lover,” she breathes into his ear, happiness bubbling over in a laugh. “You by any chance in the mood for a more frivolous gift than the last one I gave you?”

His answering laugh vibrates against her skin as he twists to kiss her on the cheek. “Merry Christmas, Ronnie. And yes. Always.”

“You know I still have that gift card Josie gave me?” she murmurs, drawing a finger down the little dip in his chin.

“Yeah?” He grins, scooping her up without warning and starting for the stairs.

“Uh-huh.” Her attempt to smirk falls sentimentally flat, but it’s impossible to care with him smiling at her like that. “I was thinking of redeeming it in a few days. Care to accompany me?”
“It’s a date.”

<>::<>

“I just want to keep on waiting
Underneath the mistletoe”

<>::<>

“Fred?”

The voice is sharp. Incredulous even, and it’s accompanied by a terrifying and all-too familiar click of heels on concrete that tell Fred the nosiest of all his neighbors is headed his way at a pretty impressive clip.

“Fred?”

Alice,” he says evenly, resigning himself to an interrogation as he looks up from giving Vegas a belly-rub. “Is something the matter?”

“Oh, don’t give me that,” she snaps, folding her arms as she comes to a stop in front of him. “What in God’s name are you doing sitting on your own front steps at this hour? You look like a vagrant, plus it’s freezing. And why is there an artificial piece of parasitic growth hanging from the porch light?”

He follows the direction of her chin-jerk, tamping down a grin when he realizes she means the mistletoe.

“Veronica,” he explains. “She swung by to pay Archie a visit. It’s been a little while since that happened, so Vegas and I thought we’d make ourselves scare for a bit.”

“I see.” Toe tapping, her mouth hardens into a thin line of disapproval. “So not only are you aware that your son is in there with the Godfather’s daughter doing heaven knows what, you’re actually facilitating his descent into wanton debauchery?”

Fred chuckles. “Cut ‘em some slack, Alice. They’re just kids.”

“And your point would be?”

This time the grin straggles fully out. “Well, if you think back real hard to the time of the dinosaur, you may recall going through the pre-adult phase yourself. And what it was like.”

She harrumphs loudly, scowl deepening. “Believe it or not Fred, I do recall. Which is why I strongly advise that you get yourself back in there and do some damage control before things get irrevocably out of hand and I’m forced to live fifty feet away from some—adolescent version of the Love Shack.”

Turning on her heel, she departs as suddenly as she arrived, and he shakes his head as he calls a Merry Christmas after her. The distant slam of a door is the only reply though, so he gives himself permission to laugh and then hangs out on the steps for another five minutes. And when he does enter, he makes as much noise rattling the knob, scraping his boots, and talking to the dog as
humanly possible, just so no one’s surprised by his return.

“In here, Dad,” Archie calls from the kitchen above the sound of running water. “I’m about to walk Ronnie home.”

Okay, Fred thinks, heaving a sigh of relief as he hangs up the leash, so it should be all good now. Everything’s done, and now they can all play dumb.

But when he rounds the corner, he gets a look at the two turtledoves washing and drying coffee mugs together at the sink, and it takes every shred of control he’s got to not about-face and break into guffaws. Veronica may look about the same, though her hair’s fixed differently now and she’s minus an awful lot of makeup, but Archie’s wearing an inside-out shirt, some lipstick-looking smears around his neck, and the goofiest grin ever. Playing dumb may be easier said than done.

“Hey, Arch?” he ventures.

“Yeah?”

There’s no indication that the kid knows what this is about, and Fred briefly considers not bringing it up at all, if only to save everyone some embarrassment. But then he thinks better of it. After all, a little awkwardness now isn’t as bad as causing Hiram Lodge to pop several blood vessels later when he gets a gander at the state of the boy escorting his daughter home.

Clearing his throat, he nods toward his son. “Your shirt’s on wrong-side out, pal.”

Both teens freeze in place. The glances they exchange across the kitchen are self-conscious and guilty, and though Fred’s desire to laugh is strong, he feels sorry enough for them to be merciful.

“Might want to fix that ‘fore you go,” he says mildly, going to the fridge so he can pretend to look for food.

“Yeah,” Archie says, whipping his shirt off and yanking it back on correctly in record time. “Uh, thanks, Dad.”

“Not a problem.”

He holds it together until they leave, even waving them off from the door as an obviously-embarrassed Veronica bids him goodbye and then practically drags a semi-embarrassed, mostly too-deliriously-happy-to-care Archie down the steps after her, but it’s hard. He’s still laughing when the phone rings, and when it turns out to be Mary again, this time calling to see whether he gave her number to Alice Cooper or if the woman just dug it up somehow for the sake of tattling, the joke is too good to not pass on.

“So you think it’s pretty serious, then?” Mary says, chuckles finally subsiding.

Fred smiles, getting a little misty-eyed in spite of himself when he thinks of the beatified expression on Archie’s face every time the girl beside him laughed at something in the movies. “Let’s put it this way, ma’am: your son apparently hauled his butt all the way to a real jewelry store, picked out a necklace, and had it personalized. All on his own.”

“Wow.”

“Exactly. Veronica showed up wearing it, and I now have a piece of fake mistletoe hanging from my porchlight that that five foot nothing kid somehow climbed all the way up there and attached.”
Mary’s humor-tinged sigh fills the line. “Oh for the days when that move sounded like a cute, romantic gesture and not a broken hip and personal injury lawsuit waiting to happen.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

They talk for a while, laughing and sharing stories until a bunch of loud knocks forces him to hang up and he goes to find Archie loitering on the front stoop.

“Forgot to grab your keys?” Fred inquires, holding the door open.

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

The kid’s grin is still so loopy as he yanks an arm out of his jacket on the way in that Fred has no doubt the question was more heard than understood.

“Did you have a good walk?” he asks, snagging the coat midair when Archie flips it toward the rack and shows exactly zero recognition of the fact that it’s about a mile off-target and about to hit the floor.

“Yeah. Yeah, it was…” The grin grows wider than ever, and Fred rolls his eyes when Mr. Love-Drunk nearly trips over the dog on his way to the kitchen. “Amazing.”

“Not so amazing you had to uh, explain any wardrobe malfunctions to Veronica’s parents though, right?” he asks as he follows, the teasing he’s been keeping in all day finally poking its head out.

“Dad,” Archie protests, propping his elbows on the counter so he can cover his face. “No.”

“Hey, just making sure.” Laughing, he gives his son a light clap on the back as he moves past him to legitimately check the refrigerator. “You hungry Romeo, or is food like, too mundane for a time like this?”

“Dad. Seriously.”

Fred lifts his eyebrows, lips twitching. “Seriously yes, or seriously no? ‘Cause I’m just saying, I spy with my little eye a whole package of bacon. And I’m not sure, but I think there’re enough eggs in here to scramble. If you’re gonna be running back and forth between here and the Pembrooke from now on, you should probably start looking at more stick-to-your-ribs type foods.”

“Oh my God,” Archie groans, but then a laugh breaks out and he grins sheepishly through his fingers. “Okay, fine. Honestly, I could eat a fricking house and bacon and eggs sound great.”

“Thought so. Get the skillet out, will you?”

He stays quiet for a bit, not wanting to fish for information too soon, while Archie’s grinning self jumps all over the place like a grasshopper on Red Bull. But eventually, his dad-curiosity gets the better of him, and he glances away from the sloppy puddle of yellow he’s swirling around the pan.

“So,” he says at last. “Not to state the obvious here, but I couldn’t help noticing that you and Veronica seem to have figured everything out?”

“Yeah.” The kid fiddles with a small chip in the countertop, smile huge. “When she came over, she…”

“Brought mistletoe,” Fred supplies, nodding. “I noticed that, too.”

“Yeah, and…”
“And?”

Archie’s grin is so wide it just about splits his face. “And she kinda told me she loves me.”

Oho.

So that’s where the inside-out shirt and all the floating-on-cloud-nine business, came from, isn’t it?

“That’s great, son,” he says, voice softening though he tries his best to not sound like some kind of mushy old fogey who’s two seconds away from embarrassing them both with a bunch of touchy-feely stuff. “I’m really happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

They go quiet at the same time, Archie red-faced and smiley at the counter, Fred hovering over the stove like cooking eggs is the most complicated job in the world. (It’s not. Parenthood unquestionably sits at the head of that list.) But it’s a comfortable sort of quiet, and anyway, it only lasts two minutes, tops—pretty soon they’re both scarfing down dinner, leaning on the counter because they can and tossing occasional bites of food to Vegas.

And somewhere around two a.m., when Fred and Vegas are dozing off in front of the TV and Archie’s wide awake and texting like his life depends on it, Fred takes a long, covert look at his son. There’s a daffy smile on the kid’s face that’s floodlit by his phone screen, and it’s not hard to figure out that as soon as it’s reasonably close to daylight on the twenty-sixth, he’ll be on his way to visit the source of that smile.

Which means, Fred thinks, shaking his head, someone had better remind him that a little thing called sleep exists.

“Hey, Arch?” he mumbles.

“Yeah?” says the texter in an absentminded tone of voice.

“If you’re planning to go see Veronica any time before three in the afternoon, you might want to let her get some shuteye.”

“Oh! Yeah. Right; thanks, Dad.”

Fred pretends he doesn’t hear the footsteps going upstairs a good two hours later. Just like he also pretends he doesn’t hear them coming back down and going out the front door a few minutes after the clock strikes eight. After all, he thinks, wincing as the door bangs shut—you’re only young once.

And probably, that’s a good thing.

Chapter End Notes
*Chapter title and section breaks quote two of my favorite Christmas songs, both titled “All I Want For Christmas Is You” (one by Mariah Carey, and one by Vince Vance and the Valiants).

*Sorry I didn’t get this up in December like I was supposed to! Hope everyone had a good set of holidays, and that no one (NO ONE!) ate as terribly as I did. There was a four-day stretch starting around Christmas Eve where I ate tamales for every meal, and I’m high-key still ashamed of myself and wondering how I’m alive.

*I know I said a while ago that I’d be posting some new stuff, and that’s still true. I haven’t forgotten. I’m just gauging what to release when with how the show’s going, because after last episode and the official introduction of V&R, I’m kind of nervous. I theoretically know I can’t possibly make an A/V/R triangle happen just by thinking about it, but that one fic I wrote where A&V break up in their junior year and Reggie’s lurking in the wings kind of haunts me now, lol.

*Speaking of Reggie: I don’t know how I feel about this business. I’ve loved the way A&V’s relationship has been written so far in the show, and frankly, I don’t mind seeing them do the we’re-not-together-anymore-but-We’re-Still-Friends thing because PLEASE, they’ve been checking each other out and keeping track of each other’s beeswax since day one. But I wish Riverdale hadn’t decided Reggie’s character needed to undergo a 180 turn to be put with V. It’s like they’re trying to make him into Archie Lite™ so it doesn’t seem completely insane for V to be into him, and it’s SO. BORING. He is not Archie, never will be, and honestly, HE SHOULDN’T HAVE TO BE. Yeah he’s a jerk and dumb as a post sometimes, but his character is hella entertaining in its own right, and it’s like he’s had all the life drained out of him with this Right Hand Man storyline. There was a much, much better way to go about introducing a V/R angle, but I’m afraid I might speak it into existence by explaining what it is, and I just want my little babies back together again as soon as possible, so nope, not going there. Especially since I still have no idea what I’m going to do if the Archie/Josie rumors turn out to be true and I have to watch V (who belongs with A) dating R (who belongs with J; FIGHT ME, he does) while A dates J. (Honestly, if I’m subjected to that level of Midsummer Night’s Dream ship torture, a one-shot I wrote like a year and a half-ago that I thought would never see the light of day WILL see the light of day.)

**Random note: If you have any songs that remind you of A&V, please recommend them to me! The playlist I write to is like 18hrs long now, but I’m always looking for more, because why not? (Also, I’ve listened to “Ruin My Life,” Heart And Soul,” “If You Want Me” and “Temporary Bliss” so many times I’m starting to be concerned about myself.)

**Thanks as always for reading/commenting! Hope everyone survives the ep, and I’m going to make a serious effort to come back and answer comments later tonight because I haven’t in a while. <3
Who's To Blame When Nobody's Wrong?

Chapter Summary

Sort of a character analysis, sort of a song fic. Mostly just snippets of Archie and Veronica moments spanning from 3x01-3x12 because even though there's been a lot of angst and drama, there have also been some really sweet, really awesome scenes too. Or, alternatively: Archie, Veronica, and nine stages of their complicated S3 love story.

LONG chapter told from A&V’s alternating POV and formatted similarly to Ch. 18 “Motives,” because when I play around with analyzing situations/character motivations, my brain likes to assign themes to everything, and song lyrics are the best way for me to come up with a theme. (Also, I wrote most of the first 2-3 sections several months ago, and this is the easiest way to join old scenes to the newer scenes.)

**End of chapter notes are kind of a mess because I haven't updated in forever, had a lot to say, went over the character limit, and got so annoyed I deleted a giant chunk to make it fit. If a reference or something doesn't make sense, ask me and I'll do what I can to clear it up!

Chapter Notes

[[NOTE: I want to get better about updates and checking comments but, without going into excessive detail, the last couple months were a bit rough from a personal standpoint and updates just weren’t going to happen. On a more-serious-than-I-usually-like-to-go-here note, especially in light of the news about Luke Perry, please, PLEASE remember to hug and spend time with your loved ones while you can. Not to sound like a hallmark card, but it’s the time you DIDN’T spend with people you love that you’ll regret most <3 ]]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Stage 1: Loss

“Heaven only knows how much I love you
Heaven only knows how much I care
And even if the sky fell from above you
From the second he’s taken from her, it feels like a fight. One she’s locked into and desperately fears that she’s slowly, steadily losing.

*I love you, Veronica.*

He says it right out loud. In front of God and everyone, over his shoulder, as he’s hauled off in cuffs like the criminal he absolutely is not, and instead of assuaging the anguish, it’s like the words break something inside her. Something she wants and tries to repair, but can’t. Not without him there to help her. He’s the one with all the hope and kindness, not her, and does he even realize what he’s done? Screw his guilt and his big, stupid heart, *this isn’t his debt to pay.*

It’s her father’s.

And it’s her fault for letting that man within ten feet of Archie in the first place. This kind of thing isn’t supposed to happen; not to anyone, but least of all to him—the boy who’ll do anything, however insane, to help the people he loves. The boy who watched his father get shot right in front of him, cried in her arms about it, and did everything in his power to protect his entire world from anything like that happening ever again. The boy who has so much to offer, but can’t see it because he’s so busy being convinced he’s nothing special.

*I’m a mess, Veronica. I keep wrecking things. I don’t deserve you.*

The worst of it all is that he honestly believes it’s true. He can see good in everyone—everyone, even her father; that’s why he’s in this plight now—but he can’t see it in himself, and he’s the best person she knows.

Because she’s fully aware he doesn’t want her to, she tries *not* to think about him twenty-four/seven, but it’s just not possible. No matter what she’s doing, he’s always right there—stuck in the back of her brain like some stubborn, adorable burr, and before long, it begins to take a toll on her. Veronica Lodge isn’t one to wish on stars or believe in fairytales, but even so, she can’t help hoping that some magic will somehow come her way.

It doesn’t even have to be a lot of magic, just—a sprinkle of pixie dust, perhaps. One small, minuscule half-miracle that’ll bring Archie back to her, so she doesn’t have to lie awake night after night worrying about what’s happening to him in that hellhole. She knows he’s been hurt at least once; he smiles at her when she visits and acts like it’s all good and she doesn’t push the matter since he obviously doesn’t want to talk about it, but the reality of it haunts her. She wants him safe, she wants him happy, but if she can’t have that, she at least wants him to know she cares. That he’s not alone.

So, she steps up her game. Enlisting Reggie’s help for the extremely tedious activity of athletic footwear shopping (she has to promise him a standing job once the speakeasy opens, but that’s a small price to pay since he has enough clout at Riverdale High to guarantee that his presence will secure her a decent crowd of regulars), bargaining with Cheryl to give Archie and the other residents of Junior League Alcatraz an experience they won’t soon forget—it’s all part of a plan. A plan meant to bring as much home to Archie as possible given the circumstances.
But when the so-called riot breaks out and the plan explodes into a million miserable pieces, she doesn’t know what to do. She’s not even aware that she’s screaming until Cheryl and Josie drag her away from the fence; all she’s conscious of is a waking nightmare where Archie gets beaten to a pulp right before her eyes and she just stands there, powerless to stop it, powerless to even attempt to hurt his assailants right back. There he is, in pain because of her, and here she is, unable to do one damn thing about it. Never, not in her whole entire life, has she felt so weak. Or hated her father more.

She doesn’t cry, though. Not once; not even though Cheryl and Josie give her the chance to, staying quiet and looking tactfully away during the ride back, because she refuses to give her father the satisfaction of turning up at the Pembrooke with swollen, telltale eyes. Eyes that tell him he’s won; that all he or anyone has to do to gain leverage over her in the future is threaten someone she loves.

Instead, she nurses her anger as productively as she knows how. Cheryl’s fake ID suggestion proves an effective countermeasure to the sadistic machinations of Hiram Lodge, but only initially. Soon it’s not just Veronica who can’t get in to see Archie; neither Fred, nor Jughead, nor Reggie is allowed to visit, and even Monica Posh and her stupid blonde wig can’t get past the gates. She tells herself it’s nothing, nothing more than a spite move meant to goad her into doing something foolish, and throws herself headlong into work. But even her nightly exhaustion and entrepreneurial headaches can’t neutralize the growing fear she feels for her boyfriend.

Or lessen how much she misses him. At the most inopportune moments, she’ll get hung up on the most trivial memories—the way he smiles when she teases him, the way he throws his head back and laughs at the worst jokes, the way he stares at her when she’s debuting a new outfit like he’s not sure whether he should stand rooted to the spot in awe, or back her into the nearest wall and kiss her until neither of them remembers their own name. And it’s awful, because it hurts. On a level she’s never experienced, on a level she didn’t know existed; how could she? The raw pain gnawing at her heart is like some manic, out-of-control beast she never knew she had to guard against, and it’s hard to keep going, to not just break down and succumb to it. But she loves him, so she won’t. She’ll stay strong. She won’t give up. She’ll keep fighting.

She hopes.

It’s not, after all, like heartache or the world fights fair.

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Stage 2: Survival

“Only you can make all this world seem right
Only you can make the darkness bright
Only you and you alone can thrill me like you do
And fill my heart with love for only you”

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He told her not to wait for him, he told her to stay away, and he told he’s fine.

She didn’t listen.

To anything.

And he’s a little upset at her for it, for painting a target on herself because of him time and time again, but when it comes right down to it, he’s not really that surprised. She’s never listened to him about stuff like this, and it’s maybe a lot of why he loves her. No one can stress him out in five seconds flat like she can, but no one can make him want to laugh and feel like he can fricking take flight with one wink like she can, either.

“Nice to meet you, Monica,” he says, grinning at the crazy fake blonde across from him until it hurts. “You look really…”

“Sexy?” she supplies smoothly, this time lifting both eyebrows. “Why thank you, Mr. Andrews.”

“I was going to say different, but…” He sits down and God, if he weren’t dead sure there’s a guard watching his every move from behind him, he’d a million percent risk reaching out to grab her hand. “Yeah. That too. Definitely.”

“Oh, save it.” She smiles at him, eyes soft, and crap he could kiss her breathless right now. “I was going for Marilyn, but the only wigs they have in this town are sad and cheap, and my mirror unfortunately informs me I landed a lot closer to post head-shaving Britney than I wanted.”

“Well, either way,” he says. “I think you look great in any hair color, Ronnie.”

Her smile falters, and he can tell by the little half-lean in she does that she’s having trouble observing the visiting rules, too.

“How are you?” she asks in a low voice. “And don’t say I’m good unless it’s actually true, please.”

He hesitates. Is he good? Compared to how he could be doing, yeah. He thinks so.

“I’m a little bruised,” he admits. “But nothing too bad.”

“You sure?” Veronica’s eyes roam anxiously over his face, though he smiles at her as reassuringly as he knows how. “After what happened, I was afraid—”

“I’m sure, Ronnie.” He hates the concern he reads in her face, hates that he’s the one who put it there, but what the hell can he do to wipe it off while he’s stuck in here? “Don’t worry about me, okay?”

“Too late for that, Archiekins.” In a lightning-fast move, she kisses the tip of one finger and blows it toward him. “You’re always going to be on my worry list. Probably near the top, if I’m being honest.”

He chuckles right along with her, but the idea nags at him. And later, when the warden comes by his cell and he finds out what replacing Mad Dog actually means, Veronica and his dad are his first fears. They both visit him on the regular, so they’re sure as hell going to notice when he doesn’t turn up.

They’re also sure not going to like whatever story the warden comes up with to explain why he’s not
there, and that kind of scares him. Because while he’s pretty sure his dad won’t do anything too off-the-wall, his girlfriend isn’t super careful about her own safety when she’s worried and pissed, and he really doesn’t want her sticking her neck out when there’s no way he can be there to help protect her.

In a way though, he’s relieved she’s not around to see everything that comes next. He *has* to fight and he *has* to win; it’s not really a choice. But what it takes to win is horrible, and when he’s laid out flat on his bunk at the end of another bloody night, he doesn’t feel the thrill of victory so much as he feels numbly satisfied that he did his job. And the more he fights, the easier it gets to tell himself that he’s just doing what he has to in order to survive. And that makes him kinda sick, because he wouldn’t have considered that any excuse at all six weeks ago.

At night now, he’s sometimes too sore and tired to do anything except try to fall asleep. That’s all right with him though, because usually, while he’s tossing and turning on the two-inch piece of foam they call a mattress, he can steer his dreams toward her. But even that comes at a cost: it sucks so much when he wakes up and remembers where he is and how he won’t be seeing Veronica or anyone else he loves anytime soon, that after a while, he starts trying to quit.

The problem is that he just…can’t. The dreams won’t stay away.

Whenever he closes his eyes and tries to forget the dark and the lonely long enough so he can just fall asleep, all he can see is her. Sometimes, she looks smiling and beautiful and he can sort of fool himself into thinking he hears her voice in the empty air of his cell. Other times, it’s her tough face he sees—the one she puts on when she’s hurt or scared and won’t admit it because letting anyone hurt or scare her makes her mad. Worst of all though, he sometimes sees her crying, and that one almost kills him because Veronica hates crying and mostly only does it when she thinks no one’s going to see her. With him not there to remind everyone she’s human too, will anyone even notice when she’s sad?

He thinks they probably won’t, and it eats away at him. So many times now, he’s seen it—people admire Veronica, they think she’s cool and they want to be friends with her, but when it comes right down to it, they all think she’s kind of heartless. Even she does. It hurts like crazy thinking she might go through that *again*. Alone.

And eventually the worry creeps into the daytime, then, finally, into his fights. So much so that he loses focus in the middle of an intense bout with a kid a full head taller and a good forty pounds heavier, and takes an unneeded right cross to the ribs that almost knocks the wind out of him. After that, he makes a deal with himself—*no more thinking about Veronica*. He even gets to be pretty good about it—planning the escape, sparring when he’s not planning, concentrating on each fight so he’s braced for each punch he takes.

Then, while he’s icing his hands after a match, a door creaks open behind him and not thinking about her becomes impossible.

Just like always.
Stage 3: Stimulus

“Anyone who’s ever been in love’ll tell you that

This is no time for a chat

Haven’t your lips longed for my touch?

Don’t say how much; show me”

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The aroma of the building is best described as *dank*, the atmosphere *seedy*. Her nose wrinkles on association with both, and she wonders briefly if Elio’s trying to irritate her by introducing her to whatever feral goings-on are taking place here. But he assures her he’s brought her to the Ghost of Gross Gymnasiums Past for a reason, so she reluctantly agrees to humor this whole thing a bit longer and after what seems like forever, he calls her attention to the main event.

And the main event is him. *Her* him.

Archie.

She doesn’t need the bag—the *bag*, the brutes actually have the nerve to cover his head and parade him into the ring like he’s some kind of animal—removed to reveal his identity. Elio seems amused by her reaction, but she’s not kidding. She’s traced those abs so often she could draw them from memory if need be, and she’s not the slightest bit self-conscious about that.

Her instinct is to go to him immediately, to let him know she’s here, that he’s not in isolation, but sense and Elio intervene in time and remind her that that sort of move isn’t prudent just now. So she spends the agonizingly-long bout gripping the rail until her wrists ache and remembering to breathe only when her lungs start to sting. Fury surges through her every time he takes a punch, and more than once, Elio has to cough a warning when Archie knocks his opponent back a few steps and her relief sneaks out in the form of an involuntary cheer.

“I want to see him,” she announces, eyes glued to the makeshift arena as the fighters dance around it. “How do I see him? And do not tell me I can’t. If you have any intention of getting out of here without the entire place making your acquaintance, you’d better not hinder me.”

Elio sighs like he’s got a headache. “You get to see him same way you get anything that’s supposed to be against the rules, I’d imagine.”

*Bribes.*

She nods, hands clenching around the rail as a fist bounces off Archie’s shoulder and the crowd roars approval.

“Help me find someone,” she says, and they both know it’s not a request.

Elio converses quietly with a few people as the match ends with the only combatant she cares about standing tall, then waves her over and introduces her to a guard he says will take her where she wants to go. The guard, in his turn, leads her down a long, dark hallway to a nondescript door and
points her inside with a casualness that makes her shudder. Because honestly, if they let her in to see their champion prizefighter this easily, who else might they have allowed to do the same?

Hand trembling, she reaches for the door handle. The room she pushes into is musty and full of a watery, disorienting light, but she barely notices because there he is. Perched on a table with his back to her, hunched over like he’s feeling every blow he absorbed in that match, and oh if he’s hurt, Elio’s just going to have to deal with the scene she’ll cause.

“Archie?” she says, her voice soft.

When he turns, blind shock playing across his face, her breath stalls for the duration of the point-two seconds it takes him to figure out it’s her. Then he’s saying her name and she can breathe again. He’s up and heading toward her while she yanks off the wig and goes to meet him, and he engulfs her in a hug so wonderful it makes her ache. There’s not much chance to savor their first kisses in ages though, because he’s so confused as to how she’s there that he breaks away to ask her, and she cuts the second lip-lock short once she gets the chance to look, really look at him, and sees the array of healed cuts and yellowing bruises all over his skin.

“My God,” she murmurs, unable to tear her gaze from the angry marks on his face. “What have they done to you?”

“Ronnie.”

The hand he brings up to cradle her face is rougher and more calloused than she remembers, but the thumb skidding across her cheek is gentle as always, and now she’s having trouble breathing again. The way he’s looking at her—soft like he loves her, hungry like he wants her, desperate like he needs her…it’s enough to make her forget everything except how close he is, and a burning shiver runs down her spine.

“I don’t wanna talk right now,” he whispers, and that’s all it takes, really.

His kiss hits like shockwaves, the impact rolling over and through her even as he hauls her up into his arms and crashes her back into the lockers. The heat radiating off him leaches into her body with every passing second, from the hands under her thighs to the lips tangling with hers, and God, it’s wonderful when he presses so close all she can feel is him and the cool wall of metal digging into her back; she can’t get enough of it. Her breath is spent long before they’re done, and when he finally sets her down, his mouth still landing kisses everywhere he can reach while she grips his biceps just to stay on her feet, it’s like breaking the surface of a turbulent ocean.

“So you missed me, too?” she pants, resting her forehead against his chest.

He huffs out a laugh. “You have no idea,” he mumbles. His hands lock firmly at the small of her back, and her smile unfurls as he drops a kiss atop her head.

“I don’t know,” she quips. “I may have an inkling.”

While they dress, she outlines the basis of her half-formed plan, forcing herself to maintain focus whenever he touches her and she feels herself wanting to flout the ticking clock and drag him down on this disgusting floor for round whatever. But it’s a struggle, and on her way out, even though her wig’s not on and she can hear a door opening at the far end of the hall, she can’t help cracking. Winding her arms around his neck, she brings his head down one last time and kisses him so thoroughly they both whimper a little.

“I have to go,” she tells him, lips faltering against his as she tries to catch her breath.
He nods, thumb sweeping across her cheekbone. “I know.”

“Stay safe,” she reminds him. “And be ready, okay?”

“I will.” The arm around her back tightens once more before releasing, and she thinks she could cry when he takes the wig out of her hand and plops it on her head with a crooked little smile. “But you be careful, Ronnie.”

“Who, me?” She touches the side of his face, heart constricting when he turns into the movement and kisses her palm. “I’m the soul of caution.”

“I mean it.” Cupping her face, he kisses her softly. “I’m not worth you getting hurt.”

“Sorry Rocky,” she says, squeezing his hand as she clears her throat. “I decide who’s worth my getting hurt, not you.”

“Veronica…” he sighs.

“No.” She puts a finger to his lips regardless of the footsteps she can hear just outside the door. “I love you, Archie. That means I do what I must to help you. End of story, all right?”

“All right.” He smiles at her with a trust she can only pray she deserves.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Stage 4: Fear} \\
\text{“Someone told me long ago} \\
\text{There’s a calm before the storm; I know} \\
\text{It’s been coming for some time”}
\end{align*}
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How he makes it out isn’t real clear—he just knows that he does. And that it hurts.

A lot.

There’s a sharp, throbbing pain in his side from the place he got stabbed, scrapes every-damn-where from all the slipping and falling he does in the tunnel, and about fifty thousand pounds of muddy sewage all over him by the time Betty finally gets that grate open and he tumbles into daylight. The trip to the getaway car feels like a giant slice of hell, because he can barely limp along and Ronnie’s maybe half his size and tripping on her dress even without him leaning on her. She tries to make him put his arm around her so she can support some of his weight, but their pace is too slow that way and he has to talk her into just helping him balance.
By the time they reach the clearing and everyone starts piling into Reggie’s car, he barely knows what’s happening. He lands on some kind of cushion and thinks vaguely as he grabs at the pain in his side that he’d better not get any of the crap all over him on the seats; Reggie’ll go ballistic.

Veronica falls or is pushed into the backseat with him, her small hand locked over his as they both keep pressure on his wound, and her calm voice tells him to take deep breaths and just hang on a little longer while Josie screams at Reggie from the passenger seat to hurry and Reggie screams right back that he is, dammit.

Next thing he knows, he’s in some shadowy hideaway. Jughead rushes over to hug him which is weird, and he’d laugh if he didn’t feel so much like yelling. Random people—Jughead, Sweet Pea, Fangs, he thinks—are hauling him over to some kind of bed. Everything’s a blur of anxious faces, questions, and alcohol stinging his side while Veronica and Cheryl’s loud voices order everyone to shut up and keep the hell back so Toni has room to work. After that, there’s not much to do except lie there and feel guilty that they’re all tangled up in this mess because of him. He’s patched together, woozy from whatever pain meds Toni gave him, and he wishes sleepy when Veronica squeezes his hand and says she’ll be back later that there was a way to fix all this.

But the trouble is, there just doesn’t seem to be a way. There’s just everyone he cares about sticking their necks out for him over and over and over again, and no matter what they say, it’s not okay.

Being hunted isn’t fun; he hates feeling scared and helpless and on-edge all the time, but it’s better than his family and friends being hunted too. What he needs to do is some of the work so if he goes down, he doesn’t take anyone else with him.

He suggests as much to Ronnie, but of course she rejects that idea right off—insisting he’s in danger, that it doesn’t matter that him hiding out is putting her and everyone else in harm’s way, so he lets the issue drop. Temporarily. Because after everything that’s happened, he just doesn’t have it in him to fight her on this. Especially not when he already knows it’s such a waste of time. She’s way too stubborn to cave and so is he; besides that, he hasn’t had her to himself in what feels like fricking forever. Arguing over his safety is not how he wants to spend the couple of hours he’s got with her before she has to head off to school, so when she kisses him back down onto the super-crappy mattress, he closes his eyes and lets himself go. The only cure for missing her is her, after all, and he’s still got that sick, twisted feeling in his stomach that he’s living on borrowed time. That he’s not allowed to be this happy just being with her after everything he’s done, so he’d probably better seize the damn day while he still can…

Veronica sighs into his mouth. “Will you stop it, already?” she mumbles, nestling closer.

“Stop what?”

She traces a finger over his lips, eyes warm as they flick up to meet his. “The guilt trip, O Galahad. Not every danger that someone ends up in is your fault.”

“Maybe not, but Ronnie—” he starts.

“Hey.” The finger presses into his lips, momentarily silencing him. “I love you, but I have to get out of here and visit the hallowed halls of learning soon. Are you going to lie here and laud caution, or help me gain an afterglow so obvious that I’ll look suspicious when I waltz into Riverdale High?”

He sighs, reaching out to scrape some hair off her face. “When you put it that way, definitely the first.”

“Oh, too bad.” She taps him on the chest, eyes twinkling. “That was a trick question. PSA Archie, listening to speeches entitled Please Be Careful isn’t really a Veronica Lodge specialty.”
“Yeah, I’ve noticed,” he says, trying to sound stern. Success is impossible though, because she’s pouting at him and now he’s fighting a halfhearted smile.

“Again,” she drawls playfully, pinching his chin between her thumb and forefinger and giving it a gentle shake, “not your burden to shoulder, Lover Boy.”

“You sure about that?”

He’s teasing. Just…not entirely. The truth is that it scares him when he thinks of all the trouble Veronica’s bringing on herself by trying to be there for him, so the question winds up sounding a lot less like a joke than he hoped it would and she gives him a look.

“Yes,” she says, her voice bright as she scoots toward him. “I am, actually.” Running a hand down his arm, she slides her fingers in between his and smiles up at him. “I’ve had a lot of time to reflect on it lately, and I just don’t see myself dating a guy who worries about me as much as I worry about him. Too many cooks in the kitchen, and all that.”

Archie squeezes her hand automatically, smile jarring loose. “You know you can’t make me not worry about you, Ronnie.”

“I know.” She wiggles closer, her smile fading into a smirk that makes him chuckle, because he knows that look so well his pulse speeds up on reflex.

“So?” he says, hooking a hand behind her knee to guide her leg over him and away from that damn brand on his hip.

Her giggle echoes off their tin-can surroundings as she reaches up to take his face in both hands. “So you can’t stop me from trying now, can you?”

No, he can’t.

No more than he can stop himself from thinking as he pulls her the rest of the way to him that he could probably drown in her kiss, in the absolutely insane feeling that’s being with her.

“You know I love you, right?” he whispers, the need to be sure suddenly overwhelming.

She laughs. “Does the devil wear Prada?”

He blinks at her, unsure what he’s supposed to say, and she laughs again.

“That means yes, Archiekins,” she murmurs, snuggling into him and planting a soft, shivery kiss on his neck. “Definitively.”

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**Stage 5: Cauterize**

“I don’t wanna miss you, I don’t wanna wish you
Always were around every time I’m without you”
So that’s it, then. He’s gone. Out of Riverdale, out of her life, just…gone. Like he never existed, except for the ache in her chest where she thinks the heart she never wanted to give him in the first place used to beat.

_I hope you know how much I love you._

She doesn’t.

Or at any rate, she doesn’t _want_ to. Not anymore. Loving him is as natural as breathing and losing him is a knife to the lungs; how exactly is she supposed to be okay?

For a long while after the phone slips from her grasp, she cries in Kevin’s arms. Normally, she’d never let herself be seen like this, but she’s too hurt and angry—at her father, at Archie, at herself for being stupid enough to fall in love with a boy like him, what the _hell_ was she thinking—to even consider camouflaging the extent of this wound. By the time she finally sits up with a throbbing head, wet face, swollen eyes, and a lot of leftover hiccupping sobs, it feels like she’s a whole other person. Veronica Cecilia Lodge: former human, current machine. Please hold all questions, comments, and concerns until the end of the ride when maybe Ms. Lodge will care enough to answer them.

“V?” Kevin says in a cautious voice, his hand warm on her shoulder as he gives it a gentle squeeze.

“I’m fine now,” she tells him before he can ask for any specifics. “Thank you, Kev.”

It’s partially an expression of gratitude, partially a warning to drop the subject, but luckily, he seems to understand. Face drawn with sympathy, he traps her in a quick, bracing hug, and then that’s the end of it. She dries her eyes, heaves to, and pours herself into work. No one asks how she’s doing, either because Kevin’s warned them not to, or because her chronic case of RBF does the warning for her. Whatever the answer, she doesn’t care. She’s just glad they’re letting her mend in peace rather than prodding at her emotional bruises.

All except Reggie, that is.

She doesn’t know when it begins, but at some point she realizes her strapping young bartender keeps shoehorning Archie’s name into their conversations, and it’s like the knowledge forms a host of tension knots in the back of her brain. Does he not get that she’s trying to forget here? Must she really spell every single thing out for him?

Eventually though, the namedrop stops bothering her. (Mostly.) Eventually, she stops hoping he’ll call. Life falls into an Archie-less rhythm where she wakes up, goes to work, goes to school, goes to bed, and essentially solves problems from morning ‘til night, and if it’s monotonous to the point that she could scream, at least there’s not this agonizing ball of worry eating away at her every time she falls asleep wondering if her idiot ex is taking care of himself.

Like he damn well better be.

God, she hates that she still loves him.

It’s not like she actually wants to. Not now. And yes, maybe it’s cowardly of her to crave romantic
immunity, but at this moment in time, love doesn’t seem like what makes the world go round or all she needs. It feels like a disease, and one that she can only hope isn’t terminal to boot. For her own sake, she has to stop missing him. He’s off on some personal odyssey, she’s in Ithaca, and frankly, she’s sick and tired of faux weaving burial shrouds day in and day out while she waits for someone who common sense says is never coming back.

So finally, she breaks down and fully accepts a reality she’d give anything to change: Archie is gone. He left when he could’ve stayed, and though her head understands the wild rationale behind his decision, her heart resents him so strongly for making it in the first place that sometimes, she can barely see straight. She can fight that resentment along with everything else she’s currently fighting, or she can take the easy way out and compartmentalize.

In a moment of weakness, she makes the practical choice: compartmentalization. Determinedly donning a bright new smile, she packs away all memories of Archie Andrews and everything she loves—no, loved—about him, and she quits pretending she doesn’t see Reggie’s overt attempts at flirtation.

No, more than that.

She flirts back and even makes out with him a bit, because why not? He’s fun, indisputably easy on the eyes, and not a bad sort beneath all the Asshole Jock trappings he’s probably spent the greater part of his life cultivating out of some misguided, Cro-Magnon belief that that’s just what bros do.

Also…he’s there.

A part of her despises herself for even entertaining the concept both before and after they kiss, but it’s not as though she can help it. Reggie is there, and being with him is alluringly uncomplicated—he fits neatly into her life, is more than willing to leave the thinking and shot-calling to her, and doesn’t feel a pressing need to protect everyone and everything from every perceived threat. He won’t scare the hell out of her on a daily basis or make her feel small and breakable by seeing more than she wants the world to see, and he is, in short, the romantic equivalent of a hedge-bet. Maybe she won’t take the house or win as big as she could’ve with someone else, but at least with him, she’s guaranteed to not lose.

So she thinks, anyway.

She’s at Le Bonne Nuit, deep in the ledgers with decimal points and subtotals swimming before her eyes, when the sky to her not-so brave new world suddenly falls in on her. A soft Veronica? issues forth from somewhere behind her, and she turns to find him standing there. Archie.

Without conscious thought or permission, her heart gives one great, jubilant bound, and in a flash she’s up and running toward him. His arms lock tight around her, strong and solid as ever, and she breathes him in with a relief so desperate she temporarily forgets all the resentment she’s nurtured toward him and just hangs on because he’s alive, he’s here, he’s holding her the way she’s ached to be held for so long now, and nothing else matters. But then reality sinks in—he left, he never once called to say he was safe, she’s furious with him, they’re technically broken up, his hair looks hideous—and she remembers it does matter.

Kind of.

Maybe.

Because when she walks away he follows, and she can feel his gaze burning holes into her skin. She folds her arms, limits eye contact to disguise her suddenly-imminent onslaught of tears, but it’s no
use. The feelings she worked so hard to will away keep welling up inside, and when he apologizes and mentions her never speaking to him again, instinct takes the wheel.

“Don’t be crazy, Archie,” she tells him, holding out a hand. “I’m just so happy that you’re home.”

He’s close now, so close that the space between them feels charged, and her breath catches in her throat when she tilts her head up to see the look—the soft beginnings of a smile, the hungry spark in his eyes—that undoes her every time.

“And safe,” she adds faintly.

Standing here with him in the dim glow of the speakeasy, it’s as if all her senses are heightened, and she leans in when he does. But though she’s something of an authority on the taste and feel of Archie Andrews’ kiss, though she’s well-aware of the indescribable effect he’s had on her since their gazes first locked, she’s still unprepared for the heat that floods her body when their lips make contact. And, pulse stuttering, limbs atremble, she responds to his kiss with a kind of feverish energy. All the missing him she’s done since that stupid phone call, all the bottled-up need for the person who’s somehow become as indispensable to her life as sunlight to sunflowers…it erupts within her like a river bursting through ice at the beginning of spring, and she eagerly succumbs to the tempest of emotions because it’s him. He’s home. It’s the once-upon-a-time magic she barely dared wish for back when he was first taken from her, the miracle she couldn’t believe might happen, and she can’t contain her happiness.

But the trouble is that this is Riverdale. Here non-Grimm fairytales don’t exist, the only dreams that come true are the nightmares, and without fail, happiness exacts an exorbitant price.

The second Reggie turns up at her locker and she remembers—a abruptly, ashamedly, because oh God, she forgot all about him after deciding she’d answer his text later when she actually felt like dealing with it—that she’s inadvertently trapped herself in a crazy cobweb, she’s stricken. Neither Archie nor Reggie deserves dishonesty from her, but how can she admit the truth to either, let alone both of them, when the truth’s so hideous and complicated?

Because hideous and complicated truth one: she enjoys Reggie. He’s hot, he’s fun, and there’s nothing he and his issues can throw at her that she hasn’t handled a million times before. For lack of a better description, he’s easy. Almost banally so.

Hideous and complicated truth number two: she loves Archie. With everything in her, whether he’s driving her crazy with reckless heroics, trying not to cry in front of her, or melting her into schmaltzy, sentimental goo with one big smile.

But the Archie Andrews who returned to Riverdale isn’t the Archie Andrews who left it, and she already knows she has a questionable habit of clinging to things out of stubborn loyalty. Is she really as hopelessly in love with him as her heart says she is, or is she just ignoring sense and refusing to let him go? Is it fair to go on acting like she’s not terrified this new version of him can’t love her, or vice versa? Should she be upfront about that kiss for fear he might take lengthy silence as an indication that it meant more to her than it did, or should she leave it in the past like she’d like to? And if she leaves it in the past, is that in any way fair to Reggie?

She isn’t sure, but it ends up not mattering anyway. The decision’s made for her when Reggie lets the information slip, and all she can feel is ill when she gets the Hey, don’t kill me but just a heads-up: Archie knows and he might be pissed at us, so maybe lay low? call. She makes it to the Andrews house without breaking down. Even manages a decent greeting to Fred, who lets her in on his way out for same late grocery shopping. But the instant she sets foot in Archie’s room, the weight of it all finally hits her, and she sinks down on the bed to wait for him as the tears start raining.
This she thinks morosely, the silence accusing her. This is what she’s been dreading since the moment she first heard him say he loved her. This is why she never wanted to love him, why she tried so hard to forget him. This is why she tried to move on.

But no.

Of all the non-gin-serving joints in all the towns in all the world, he had to walk into hers and reveal that she’d buried her feelings in the shallowest of graves, and now it really is time.

The piper must always be paid.

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Stage 6: Apogee

“Can we press rewind? Sing to me one last time

Send chills down my spine

Like when we met”

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The instant he gets to the top of the stairs, he spots her. She’s on his bed, sort of hunched over with her chin plopped in her hands, and it hits him as he walks in and she looks up that she’s crying.

“Ronnie?”

He hustles to go sit beside her, worry skyrocketing when she wheezes out a little half-sob. Veronica rarely cries, and the handful of times he’s been there when it happens, she’s always been able to shut it off quickly and act like she’s fine. The fact that she can’t seem to do that now is scaring him.

“Hey,” he says, rubbing her back gently so if nothing else, she at least knows he’s listening.

But then she mentions Reggie, and right away, his stomach starts churning. If this is why she’s in tears, if it’s because she thinks he’s jackass enough to be mad at her even though he was the one who took off…no. He can’t stand it. Whatever happened between her and Reggie while he was gone, he doesn’t want or need to know; not even remotely. It’s none of his business and anyway, the very idea of Veronica with someone else is enough to make him want to hurl.

Only…the stuff she’s saying. That his leaving made her angry, that she got tired of missing him—it pinches a nerve he really wishes it didn’t. Way deep down, if he’s honest with himself, a part of him has always thought that Veronica loving him is probably a little too good to be true. He’s always had this secret fear that one day, his luck is just going to run out and she’ll start looking at him like he’s
nothing to her. Maybe this is one day. Maybe tonight is where all his nightmares start coming true.

“And now that I’m back?” he croaks out when she pauses.

She doesn’t answer right away, but her head gives a tiny, barely noticeable shake and he feels physically sick.

“Oh God, Archie,” she whispers. “This is the worst time to be doing this…”

“Then let’s not,” he breaks in.

He sounds crazy, he knows it because he can see the confusion in her face when she turns toward him, but there’s no help for that. Not when it’s like there’s something stuck in his throat and no way to get out whatever it is he’s trying to say.

“Let’s finish this conversation tomorrow,” he says, trying to keep the shakiness out of his voice. “But tonight…can we be together?”

Her eyes flick up to meet his, and it makes his chest ache. He’s not trying to change her mind or hold her down or anything; he really isn’t. This is just him needing her—the way he always has, the way he always will—and not knowing how in the hell to tell her that.

“Will you stay with me?” he asks, hoping she understands because at this point, there’s nothing else he can do.

For what seems like ages, Veronica just sits there. Looking at him. They’re close enough that he can count all the tears caught in her eyelashes, and he feels so empty seeing her like this. The last thing he wants is to hurt her of all people, yet it seems like no matter what he does, he ends up being the one who makes her cry. But then she nods, a small, sad smile on her face, and he doesn’t care anymore how desperate he’s coming across.

He just wants to be with her.

His eyes close on reflex as he leans in. He takes a breath and kind of holds it. She’s always been able to knock him out with just one kiss; probably always will be. But right now, in the dark of his room with everything hanging over them, it’s worse than ever. Because as long as she’s here with him and as long as he can kiss her like he’s wanted to every day since he met her, he can keep pretending everything’s fine, that he hasn’t screwed it all up. That he hasn’t lost her.

Please he thinks, hand finding its way to her waist as damp, salt-tasting lips press hard against his. He doesn’t even know what it is he’s asking, it’s just…please. Please, Ronnie. Please, don’t hate me. Please, don’t go. Please, I’m sorry.

Please, I love you.

She moves closer, knees clenched at his sides, and when she breaks the kiss long enough to settle onto his lap, he stares soundlessly up at her—just like always, she takes his breath away, and just like always, all he wants is for her to keep right on doing it. Her hand rests on the side of his face, soft and warm and familiar, and it takes him a second to figure out what’s going on when she sits back without warning. Is she leaving? Is this just too much, too soon after everything that’s happened? Did he do something wrong?

But then he searches out her eyes and catches something in them that gives him a twinge of hope—she’s sad and hurting, and maybe she doesn’t love him anymore, but she doesn’t hate him. She’s not totally indifferent. She still cares, at least a little, and that’s not nothing. He will take it.
Heart beating faster, he reaches for the hem of his shirt a split second after she reaches for hers, and together they tug their tops off and toss them who knows where. As many times as he’s been here though, staring up at her with a sort of overpowering awareness of her body on his, he’s still awestruck. Veronica has a way of looking at him that makes him feel like it’s all right that he is the way he is—that she knows he’s a dumbass mess who never says or does the right thing at the right time, but that she likes him anyway, and the lump in his throat gets bigger as he realizes this might be the last time she ever looks at him like that.

So, quickly, before his fear has time to take root, he tilts his head up to kiss her again. She responds by leaning him back onto the bed, her lips tear-smeared and shaky as they move against his, and the whole thing feels so good it might as well be a dream. His back hits the mattress. Her skin prickles with goosebumps beneath his hands as he tugs her close. Breath faltering, he rolls onto his side and just holds on, losing sense of everything except her when she tightens the leg she’s got thrown over him and he feels her shiver against him.

_I love you._

It’s the thought that plays in the background of every kiss. His hand curves automatically around the edges of her small face, his mouth opens to hers, he hears it clear as anything…_I love you, Ronnie. I love you and I’m sorry._

He wishes he could trust himself to talk, but it’s too risky. Lying here with her, her body pressed so close that he can actually feel her heart drumming on his, the world feels okay again. _He_ feels okay again; more like the idiot who was lucky enough to have Veronica Lodge love him and less like the idiot who was dumb enough to make her cry. He’s sure to ruin whatever’s left for them if he tries to voice what he’s feeling, and he wants so much for it to stay like this forever—no problems or broken hearts, no issues of any kind. Just him and just her.

But it just can’t.

Eventually, her fingers curl hard into his forearm and she makes a sound that’s so close to a sob all he can do is crush her to his chest and kiss her until she’s panting raggedly against his mouth.

“Archie.”

He doesn’t hear the regret in her voice so much as he feels it in the harsh breaths hitting his skin, but it makes his blood run cold anyway. Whatever she’s about to say, he knows he doesn’t want to hear it—that he probably can’t handle it. So he shakes his head and goes to kiss her again, this time working his lips down her jawline toward her throat.

“It’s okay,” he mumbles, planting a kiss just under her ear. “I promise, Ronnie.”

She stills beneath him, one hand frozen right over the scar on his chest, and he’s so afraid she’s going to argue that he risks pulling back and opening his eyes to smile down at her. But after a long stare that feels like it goes right through him, she heaves a sigh and her arms slide up to loop around his neck.

“Okay,” she says, drawing him to her with a gentleness that makes his eyelids sting and leaning her cheek against his. “Okay.”

He tells himself he doesn’t feel the tears running down her face, but it’s a lie and he knows it. So he wraps her close and loves her like he always will, and when she slips out of bed sometime early in the morning, he just lies there—pretending to be asleep, wishing he dared beg her to stay.
Please, Ronnie his heart pleads silently while his ears pick up the familiar rustle of skirts and clomp of heels as she tries to get dressed in the near-dark. Please.

But wishing’s no use. She doesn’t tell him goodbye, nor does she tell him she loves him. She just bends down and kisses him on the cheek—very softly, like they’re going to see each other later so there’s no point in waking him up.

He thinks it’s the normalcy of it all that might actually be worse than anything.

Please, Ronnie.

Stage 7: Detachment

“I don’t wanna try and work it out ‘cause it causes too much grief
It’s gonna tear you up and spit you out
Love is a silent thief”

The news comes via one brutally curt message from her mother (Hospital, now. Your father’s been shot) and when Veronica turns her phone on and sees it, her blood practically curdles.

Hiram Lodge isn’t a good man. She knows that. He’s manipulative, corrupt, vindictive, and she’s hated him at times for doing the things he does. But at the end of the day, he’s not just some villain straight off the pages of a pulpy crime novel—he’s her father. The person who bought her ice cream cones when her mother decreed she’d had enough sugar, the person who danced with her at family weddings and quinces at great risk to his custom-fit Italian leather wingtips because he always, always let her tiny toddler self stand on his feet, the one who taught her to wink, bluff, and ask nicely before throwing punches of any sort, and the one who brought congratulatory bouquets to every one of her plays or recitals in New York. They’re at odds now, each striving to thwart the other, but they’re still family. She can see it on his face every so often: the gleam in his eye he got the first times she gave him a real challenge in Monopoly and chess—how he’s simultaneously annoyed that she’s foiling his plans, and proud of his daughter for coming so close to victory.

Well-played, mija she can almost hear him say, and the thought brings unexpected tears to her eyes. Without question, she rushes straight to Riverdale General and demands his room number.

“Mom?” she says, bursting into the hall the nurses direct her to only to find Riverdale’s puppet mayor staring blankly at a wall, fist clenched around the cross pendant at her throat. “Mom, how is he? Is Daddy…?”

Her mother looks up. “He’s alive,” she answers, voice serene though her expression remains
strained. “Miraculously. The doctor says we’ll know more once he’s out of surgery.”

Vision misting, Veronica grasps the hand her mother extends and expels a shaky breath as she drops into a chair. “What happened?”

“We can’t say for certain.” The hand holding hers squeezes gently, then releases. “I was on the phone with him and there was a gunshot. He was found on the floor of the study, emergency personnel believe the assailant shot at point-blank range—that’s all we have to go on for now. Crime of passion, someone seeking revenge, the usual motivations against your father. I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you in person, Ronnie. I tried calling, but you didn’t answer and then I remembered the SATs, so I texted instead.”

The SATs.

Veronica nods numbly, forcing down the bile that rises in her throat as a horrible fear strikes her. Crime of passion. Someone seeking revenge. The reason she was so desperate to get at her phone in the first place when she burst out of the testing room, the person she still hasn’t heard anything from…

Oh, God.

“Right,” she mutters. “Will you please excuse me a minute, Mom?”

She doesn’t wait for an answer, just moves far enough away that she can’t be overheard. Fingers shaking, she goes to Archie’s contact and clicks on it, praying he’ll pick up.

He doesn’t.

Not any of the five times she tries his cell, not any of the three times she tries his house, and each time the impersonal recording informs her that she’s reached the voicemail of Archie Andrews, the queasiness in the pit of her stomach grows. When Kevin texts to find out where she disappeared to, she tells him her location and asks him to pass the word along as necessary. It’s unlikely any of her friends will care that her father’s been shot, but she was supposed to attend a cheer meeting and be at Pop’s later, and she’d rather not have to fool with all the questions and explanations when it’s all she can do to appear calm.

Especially when they finally wheel Daddy out of surgery and she sees all the wires and tubes, how pale and unnaturally still he looks. The doctor tells them, in one of those artificially-reassuring tones she despises, that they can talk to him if they want, but that there’s no guarantee he can hear them, and it’s probably best to let him rest for now. So she plants a light kiss on his cheek and leaves her mother to sit with him, going outside and plopping down in a chair to guard the door in case that’s needed.

After a while, time becomes meaningless. She’s always been in this chair. Always stared at this ugly wall. Always felt chilled, tired, and empty; always had to wonder if her father’s going to live, if someone she loves is responsible for making her wonder that, if she’s at fault for wanting so badly to believe that everything could go back to the way it was—that he could go back to the way he was—that she somehow overlooked the warning signs. Reggie’s probably right. He’s not her Archiekins anymore, and she’s just too big a fool to see it. She’s holding onto nothing, building a castle that’s made of air, and she’s doing it again.

“Ronnie!”

She looks up in a kind of daze to see him standing there, backpack on, panting, and she hates that
even with the doubts and suspicions assailing her, her first instinct is to run to him. To throw herself in his arms and ask why they can’t just be worried about normal things like games and grades and college plans, or getting grounded for missing curfew and having to sneak out to make the party on Friday. To ask if he’ll stay with her.

But because she wants it so much, she can’t let herself do it. Not after all the times she’s given the benefit of the doubt to someone she loves only to have it come back to bite her. She has to be calm, rational. She has to be emotionless. She has to consider she’s wrong about him.

Almost stupidly, she gets to her feet. Asks where he’s been, listens to him babbling about how he’s sorry he missed her calls, answers his questions with a feeling that’s like sleepwalking or watching the two of them talk from a distance where she’s powerless to stop anything either of them says or does.

“He was shot,” she hears herself say in a voice that seems to come from somewhere other than her body. “Sometime after you ran out of the SATs.”

“Sometime after I…” He trails off, staring at her what’s either astonishment or a damn good impersonation of astonishment. “Wait,” he says, and God, when he looks at her like that, she wants so badly to believe in him. “You don’t think that I…”

No, she doesn’t want to think that. Not at all.

But there’s a hard, cold voice in her head telling her she knows better than to take anything on faith anymore, that she can’t blindly trust someone with as much cause to hate her father as he has. Not when his behavior differs so radically from the Archie she’s always known.

“Did you?” she asks finally, either fear or exhaustion forcing out the words.

“No.” He shakes his head, hurt gaze pinned to her. “The fact that you could even ask me that…”

His voice is bruised; she steels herself against it and holds his stare. She’s tired right now, tired and under a lot of stress. All she really wants to do is lie down, curl into a ball, and sleep until the world’s ended and she has no more problems. She can’t afford to let sentiment get the better of her when she’s probably not thinking straight to begin with.

Besides, she wants to believe him. She’s more than likely looking for excuses to convince her he had nothing to do with it the way she always does whenever anyone close to her gets accused of anything sketchy. He’s not the happy-go-lucky boy she fell so hard and fast for anymore, and the only person who can’t seem to grasp that fact is her because she’s an absolute idiot. She can’t keep on letting her heart overrule her head. It’s not smart.

“It’s over, isn’t it?”

He says it bluntly, and she absorbs it with a kind of detachment. A dull, morose acceptance. Of course it’s over; it has to be. It makes no sense to do anything else.

The difficulty is that when he walks away, she can’t stop the flood of emptiness washing over her. Archie’s presence is quiet, steady, at times almost invisible, but his absence generates a sense of acute loss that only sharpens when he glances back at her with no sign of that look that’s been in his eyes since the moment she met him. And when Reggie turns up later, gifts and supportive hugs in tow, it troubles her that her appreciation for the thoughtfulness is tempered by an insidious inner voice that whispers she’s playing with fire. That no matter how nice it may feel, this isn’t the embrace she wants. That safe and smart don’t necessarily equal right, particularly when it comes to
affairs of the heart. That Reggie’s convinced at once by the I’m-okay smile she manufactures when Archie would see right through it.

It’s over, isn’t it?

It is, she tells herself firmly, but the qualms refuse to be silenced and sprout instead into a lone question that lurks in the recesses of her mind:

Isn’t it?

Stage 8: Dolor

“How many times can I break ‘til I shatter?

Over the line, can’t define what I’m after”

Did you?

No, he didn’t. Of course he didn’t. He’s not cold enough, or brave enough, or whatever enough to do a thing like that; hasn’t that been established multiple times?

But it doesn’t much matter what he does from now on, he decides. If even Veronica thinks he’s capable of killing someone (and honestly, he might be…he’s not too sure he gives a crap about things like right and wrong anymore; not when he’s a wreck and everyone around him seems to be carrying on like normal), he’s done for. If he ignores school and acts on whatever crazy idea comes into his head first, what’s the difference? If he wakes up at five to box, or drinks ‘til he can barely see even the bottle, or wants to work until he’s too tired to think about anything except moving his body from point A to point B, who’s going to care? Certainly not Veronica.

He (and her new boyfriend) sure made sure of that.

Archie tries not hate Reggie every time he sees him, because it’s not the other guy’s fault Veronica would rather be with someone who doesn’t keep putting her through the wringer, but he’s not real good at the trying. And he can tell Reggie knows he isn’t, which is even more aggravating, because being pitied by Mantle the Magnificent is not high on the list of things he’s okay with even if his old teammate weren’t dating his ex-girlfriend.

Which he is.

Which totally sucks.

Probably even more because the one who ruined it all is him. Because oh, hey, apparently Archie
Andrews does have one really consistent skill: screwing everything the hell up. Seriously. He’s like that Midas guy he learned about in class one time, only everything he touches falls to pieces instead of turning to gold.

Typical.

He’s already pretty out of it when he shows up at the speakeasy, and by the time Josie runs up to keep him from being thrown out on his ass, he’s in the kind of mood where he’s not sure which he wants more: to start a fight or start crying. But no way is he bawling his eyes out in front of Reggie, and it’s not like he’s gonna fight Josie even if she is the one making him leave. He tries ditching her so he’s free to break down in peace, explaining that he doesn’t really need help, that he’s fine, that he knows how to find his own home, thanks, but it’s no use. Josie’s too winded from holding him up to utter anything except no to his arguments, so he gives up, breaks down, and just begs her not to tell Veronica how pathetic he is. Because if everyone in town—no, everyone on earth—were to see him like this, he wouldn’t give a damn. But the thought of her knowing he’s been in this kind of state? It somehow makes him sicker than all the alcohol currently in his system. He can’t deal with the way she’d look at him—like she’s sorry for him, like she’s disappointed in him. That wary expression she wore when she asked if he shot her father is already stuck in his head; he can’t go through something like that again.

And yet…

He doesn’t mean to run out on Josie right in the middle of her pep talk, but she gives him an idea and he’s suddenly, absolutely sure of what he has to do. Like in that horrible dream he had when the bear got him, he knows it’s the only way out. He’s been afraid, and alone, and everyone and everything he’s ever cared for has been broken because of him running away from his demons instead of confronting them like he should’ve; now it’s time to quit running.

So he aims the gun at the other person who seems to be responsible for all the damage, at the person who manipulated him into thinking he was protecting his father and then tried to have his father killed, and he tells himself that this time he’ll be strong enough to pull the trigger. He’s already lost Veronica and she already thinks low enough of him to suspect him of shooting her father. What has he got to lose anymore? As far as she’s concerned, he’ll just have come back to finish the job he started.

He’s holding his breath, sweat beading up on his forehead, fury kindling inside him when it happens: someone with the same revenge idea shows up. In the split second he has to make a decision—pull the trigger himself, let someone else do it, stop it—his anger deserts him as suddenly as it arrived. He fires a warning shot, hears the intruder take off, and the quiet after the gunshot feels like waking up after a long, exhausting nap. Once again, he’s come far too close to an edge he shouldn’t even be near. And this time, he’s horribly afraid that it took a miracle to keep him from finally crossing the line.

You’re not a killer.

You’re not all those things you said.

Isn’t he, though? He’s beat people up, and he’s let people die, and he’s wanted—and now actually tried—to kill. He’s hated so hard that he’s pretty much destroyed his own life. He can’t keep doing this. He just can’t.

Brain swimming, he drops weakly into a chair as he tries to figure out what to do—call his dad, track down Jughead’s dad to see how long he needs to hang around, just leave and head home even if disappearing pisses everyone off…but as he pulls his phone out, he realizes it’s not much of a
dilemma. He’s not sure she’ll even pick up, but he already knows who he’s got to call.

To his shock, she answers after maybe one ring. “Archie?”

“Can you come to the hospital?” He doesn’t mean to blurt it out like that, but it feels like forever since he’s heard her voice, and it kind of K.O.s his reservations.

“What happened?”

If only he knew.

“Long story,” he says, glancing at the doctor who’s approaching with a businesslike stare, probably looking for more answers he doesn’t have. “Your dad’s okay, but they want to talk to a family member.”

By the time she arrives, heels clacking and questions flying, he pulls himself together long enough to give her a quick rundown of the facts and direct her to the doctor in charge so she can go in and see her dad. The jitters haven’t left him though, and he sits nervously in one of the chairs outside the door while he waits for her to come back out.

When she does, he gets to his feet quickly. He’s still shaken from what he almost did and means to ask if her dad’s okay, but then she holds out her arms and he kind of mentally blacks out for a second or two while she hugs him. They haven’t really touched since the night they spent together, and though this is nothing like that, he’s still left feeling as breathless as if he’s skydived when she turns him loose and takes a step back.

“H-how is he?” he says, taking a deep breath and silently ordering himself to calm the hell down because he’s here to say he’s sorry, not to go all weak-kneed over her.

“Alive. Thanks to you,” she responds, and the guilt hits him hard. It’s more like no thanks to him, though he’s not sure he’s brave enough to tell her the truth. “But Archie,” she adds, a little wrinkle of confusion between her brows, “what were you doing here?”

Something stupid.

“I…” he begins before the realization that he’s definitely not brave enough to tell her the truth kicks in and he changes his answer. “Came looking for you.”

Her eyes cut to the side and back like they do whenever she’s a little nervous, and he cringes inwardly because great, now it sounds like he’s creeping on her or something, and that is not what he wants her to think. Like—yeah, he’s a mess and everything, but he wouldn’t do that to her. He couldn’t. It’s bad enough she saw him flip and out and take off; he can’t stand the idea of her thinking he’s refusing to accept her moving on with someone else.

“Reggie may have told you what happened at the speakeasy,” he says quietly. “How I was acting like an ass.” He can’t tell from her expression whether or not she knows what he’s talking about, but he plunges on anyway, determined to finish now that he’s begun. “I wanted to apologize, I…wasn’t myself. I haven’t been, for a while.”

“I’m sorry, too,” she says, surprising him. “That I ever thought for a second that you shot him.”

She seems so sure she’s right, like she did all those nights ago in his room when she sat on his bed with him and patched him up, that Archie feels a little sick.

“At some point…maybe I could’ve,” he confesses, shame weighing him down as he remembers how
positive he was earlier and way back in the stupid barn that it would solve all his problems. “But I don’t hate him anymore, Veronica.”

She eyes him silently for a moment, and if it’s not quite a smile she gives him, it’s something really close to one. “He’s awake,” she says. “And he wants to see you.”

Okay. That’s…new.

Unsure how to respond other than by just going, he takes a quick breath to steady himself and starts toward the door.

“And Archie?”

He halts at the soft question, automatically scanning her face for a hint of what she’s about to say.

“If you ever need a friend,” she says. “To talk to.”

Before he can even think about whether or not he should be smiling at something like that, the grin’s already spreading across his face. It’s likely he would’ve hated hearing those words from her a few days, or even a few hours ago, but right now they sound wonderful to him. Because if nothing else, at least he knows she doesn’t hate him. That she’s willing to let him stay in her life and he hasn’t completely driven her from his.

Friends he thinks, tamping down the edges of his smile as he leaves the hospital feeling lighter than he’s felt in months.

Yeah. He can do that.

Can’t he?

Yeah. Sure.

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Stage 9: Simulacrum

“If you ask me how I’m doing I would say I’m doing just fine I would lie and say that you’re not on my mind”

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How spontaneous u feeling V?
MINIMAL. Less it involves coffee. Why?

My mom’s ‘crafting’ some weird kind of hot grain for our ‘morning sustenance’ & I’m more in the mood for bacon & sanity.

My condolences. Also, your maternal parent is WHAT?? And WHY???

Literally NO idea. Honestly just wanting to forget. U up for a 10oclock bfast/brunch/hangout at Pop’s?

But of course! I’ll be there with bells on.

Great! :) Un-nutritious food Mother Earth didn’t conceive & give birth to ftw!

?????

Sorry, another Alice Cooper quote. Don’t ask. Just get beautiful & get to Pop’s. I’m starving & I HAVE to talk to someone who’s not gonna spray me with essential oils or plant 5+ sandalwood diffusers in my room.

Ye gods, B. That bad?

Yesterday I woke to a recording of Soothing Ocean Waves played full volume at 4am. Day before that she was in a bad mood & it was Sounds of the Storm. U BE THE JUDGE.

Lol, escape needed. Got it. You beat me there, order me coffee, k?

Of course. See you in a bit, Audrey.

Au revoir to you too, Doris.
When she first gets the invite, it sounds like just what the doctor ordered: gab-fest at Pop’s, plenty of food, no drama. But not long after she and the bestie arrive—at precisely the same instant, a development they both find hilarious—Veronica’s breezy mood evaporates. The booth she and Betty automatically head toward is occupied. Two boys, one beanie-topped, the other with a thatch of bright red hair her fingers reflexively itch to smooth down, bookend the table. And to her dismay, it’s as though everyone’s default mode kicks in at the same moment.

Archie, who spots them first, stands like he always does to offer his seat. Veronica, from force of habit, smiles at him and unthinkingly slides in to accept said seat while Jughead (also out of habit), never stops shoveling food into his mouth and just scoots over toward the wall so Betty has room to sit. Betty naturally plunks down next to her boyfriend, already joke-scolding him for gobbling as she leans over to plant a quick smooch on his cheek, and now there’s only one seat left open: the one a foot or so away from Veronica.

The one Archie’s eyeing like it’s a bomb that might detonate at any second.

*It doesn’t matter* Veronica admonishes herself, even as Jughead’s fork freezes halfway to his mouth and he glances from Archie, to the empty seat, to her, then to Betty while he silently but clearly urges the ponytailed blonde to remember what he’s just remembered. *It doesn’t.*

Unfortunately for the situation, Betty’s too tired to notice the sudden tension around her.

“Arch?” she says mildly, covering an enormous yawn with one hand. “Are you ever going to sit down, or what?”

“Uh…”

Veronica’s face heats when Archie glances at her as if asking permission, but she smiles brightly anyway. “Oh, I’m sorry. Let me scoot over,” she says like she thinks a lack of elbow room is the issue.

“Yeah, thanks.”

He lowers himself cautiously onto the seat beside her, but the damage has been done. Betty squints at them, befuddled, then her eyes suddenly open wide.

Veronica stifles a groan.

“You know, I think I’m in a *seriously* breakfast-y mood,” she announces to no one in particular, hoping to redirect the awkward subject before it gains explicit acknowledgment. “Should I go for waffles or French toast?”

“Waffles,” Jughead answers promptly. With uneasy and decidedly ungraceful haste, he scrapes in yet another huge mouthful. “Definitely. Can’t go wrong with geometric breakfast foods, and you’d be doing Riverdale a major disservice if you didn’t support the syrup industry that put the town on the map.”

“Duly noted, Lobbyist Jones.”

“The bacon and eggs are really good today, too,” Archie says, and Veronica hates that her instinct is to take the fork from his hand and requisition a bite for proof. “So’s the coffee.”

“Coffee! Of course. Thanks for reminding me; my brain’s running on fumes at the moment.”
Tucking some hair behind her ear, she stiffens when she intercepts Betty’s apologetic gaze.

“I can swap seats,” the blonde blurts out before Veronica can signal her to not. “I mean if, if you guys want…uh, need more space?”

“No.”

Veronica and Archie say it in perfect synchronization, and Veronica forces herself to smile briefly at him so her discomfort isn’t too obvious.

“It’s fine, B,” she replies firmly. “Really. We and the space are fine.”

It’s perhaps not the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but it’s not as though it’s a lie, either. Technically speaking, the space isn’t as cramped as it could be, and it’s not as if they’re angry at one another. And anyway, Archie emphatically seconds her declaration. Doesn’t the sum of those facts warrant a label of fine?

Yes.

(Probably.)

They brush elbows a few times more than she and her goosebump-speckled arms might prefer, and once, she completely forgets herself in the middle of a story and lays a hand on the sturdy, denim-clad leg beside her. It’s not the hugest blunder she could’ve made, and it thankfully passes unnoticed by the two across the way, but Veronica feels how intensely rigid Archie goes. And when he falls into awkward step with her as they all leave, she’s not exactly surprised. Resigning herself to a discussion of whatever tricky topic’s on his mind, she raises an eyebrow at him in a wordless What? and is rewarded with a small smile.

“I don’t wanna make it worse,” he says quietly, holding the door open for her as Betty and Jughead go out ahead of them, nonstop-analyzing some book they both read that he loved and she hated. “I just need to know. What you told Betty…”

 Veronica tilts her head, sliding on her cat-eyed shades as they follow their debating friends into the midday sunshine. “What I told Betty?”

“Back in the booth.” His fingers graze her elbow just enough to halt her, and his voice drops to maybe a decibel above a whisper. “Are we fine?” he says like he’s asking a secret. “Really?”

“Who, us?” Nerves straining, she forces herself to ignore the tingles shooting up her arm from where he touched her and smiles. “Of course we—oh.” She breaks off, biting a lip as a thought she should’ve had long ago finally occurs to her. “I mean, as far as I’m concerned, we’re fine. Unless I’m completely misreading everything and you’re not…?”

“No, no!” He laughs out loud, sneakers scuffing along the asphalt as he shoves his hands deep into his pockets. “I’m good, Veronica. I promise.”

“Okay then,” she murmurs, sneaking a peek at him while the sunglasses obscure her eyes. He’s smiling a little, but he’s got his gaze trained on the parking lot, and she’s not quite sure how to quantify the disappointment she feels upon realizing that he’s not looking at her. “So we’re agreed: in the event that more scenarios of this ilk surprise us, we’re definitely fine?”

“Yeah, we’re fine.” This time he glances at her, the smile wide and crooked. “Definitely.”

“Excellent!” she chirps blithely.
They’re now over, done with, and officially all good. He’s not bitter or hung up on her, and she’s perfectly free to move on from him with no inklings of guilt. They are exes. Who are friends. And they’re fine.

*Probably.*

Chapter End Notes

*Chapter titled after a line in “Strange Times, Dark Days” by Isla June (the song from The Scene in the locker room <3).


*Sorry I haven’t posted anything in a while. I’ll hopefully be able to upload another fic toward Saturday once I get my old laptop fixed so I can get at the files still on it.

*First. 3x10? OUCH. SO painful, but also so beautiful. The ‘can we be together/will you stay with me?’ scene is honestly one of my fave A/V moments to date, and I just want to thank whichever writer was kind enough to throw me those crumbs of cuteness. It’s like exactly how I’d write a breakup I didn’t want to happen: “Ok, fine, I’ll make them split up, but they’re going to hurt, and THEY WILL DO IT ONE LAST TIME AND IT’S GONNA BE OBVIOUS HOW MUCH THEY LOVE AND WANT TO BE WITH EACH OTHER.”

*V&R: ugh, I’m so annoyed I don’t even know where to start. I mean, the WASTE. Of potential, my time, everything! I’ve expected A&V to break up since before S2 even started; TV shows ALWAYS do that once they figure out which couples work and which don’t, and I was ok with that. I even thought I’d be able to enjoy this relationship in the interim bc as a fun, filler ship, V/R is fine. They dated in the comics so that’s cool, and CM&CM are SUPER cute. But the plot seems to want me to take them seriously and I can’t bc there IS no reason V would date R other than loneliness/boredom/availability. Like, my girl is loyal, smart, doesn’t fall easily, and reeling from loss. I THOUGHT WE ALL (except Reggie & probably Archie too) UNDERSTOOD THIS??? Then Reggie played the “OH, so you love HIM when all I ever do is support and be there for you, guess I should’ve acted tortured and needy too,
maybe then you’d stay with me instead of going crawling back to him the second he shows up” [aka, ‘I’m The Real Hero/The Gale Hawthorne] card and insinuated that he’s owed for his services. Which first off, is a majorly wrong attitude and second, um, Reg? You’re dating the crème de la crème of Riverdale, bruh. Some humility/appreciation of this fact would not go amiss. HIJOLE, as MY abuelita would say.

*A&J: I’m cool with this pairing despite my suspicion that it’s a Hail Mary attempt to give J some of the screentime she’s been deprived of since S1 (I will NEVER get over the fact that the first Riverdale spinoff wasn’t a Josie & The Pussycats show. Josie and Val were my favorite girls after Ronnie in S1, and I am BITTER). Also, if A MUST date someone who’s not V, I’m glad it’s J. Aside from the poster stunt in S2 (bc drama!), she’s been awesome.

*Confession: in good conscience, I can't scoff at Alice for joining The Farm. Chad Michael Murray as the leader? Hahaha, YEAH. Tbh, I’d consider joining that cult, too. (Kidding.) (Not really.)

*Toni! TOPAZ!! It’s official, y’all. In the event of any more dating divorces, Ms. Topaz gets my full support. She’s a laidback badass I’d 100% be friends with in real life and continues to be THE BOMB; while I’m always glad to have Cheryl grace my screen, I’m tired of her trying to play both Heartless HBIC who ruins people’s lives for the fun of it and Poor Friendless Cheryl who deserves love and sympathy. Toni’s now my 3rd favorite girl <3

*Speaking of HBICs…HEY YO WESTERBERG! I’m excited but terrified. I was all good last year bc I had no attachment to Carrie, but HTM has been one of my favorite soundtracks since it was released however many years ago, and I <3 a lot of those songs. Like Grease, Chicago, Wicked, Hairspray, Mamma Mia, Mean Girls, Dear Evan Hansen, Jersey Boys, Rent, Heathers…those are my go-to roadtrip soundtracks when I’m not in a Sound of Music mood, and it’ll break my heart if “Candy Store,” “Dead Girl Walking,” “Freeze Your Brain,” “Seventeen,” and “Fight for Me” get sung but not sung right.
On the bright side: I doubt “Blue” will make the approved songlist, so at least I won’t have to explain to my sister (who I got hooked on this show and who’s watching with me tomorrow) why I know all the lyrics to that one. Plus, “Our folks got no clue/bout all the s**t their children do/Why are they surprised whenever we’re unsupervised?” is Riverdale summarized, so yeah. I can't wait to see what they’ll do with it, and if nothing else, my sis will now know why I sing “Dang, dang, digitty dang a dang” whenever I’m mildly annoyed.

Thanks as always for reading/commenting! Hope everyone’s having a great day, week, etc., or at least hanging in there! :]

All That Matters

Chapter Summary

I’m not exactly sure how to describe this fic, so we’ll just call it The One In Which Fred Andrews Is Greatly Missed and leave it at that <3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

It's all I can do to hold on and survive
When the colors have faded to grey
□ □ □ □ □ □

My dad is the best…

No.

Not is, damn it.

It’s was, now. My dad was.

Slowly, Archie stops writing and scribbles out the words. Hard enough, in fact, that the pencil rips right through the paper, so he crumples the whole piece of crap up and throws it toward the wastebasket with all his other failed attempts. The floor around his desk is starting to look a lot like a bad fake snow scene in a cheap movie, but he can’t bring himself to even pretend he cares. There’s too much pressure behind his eyes and too much weight in his chest, and the urge to give up, to just freaking quit already and go back to bed is too overwhelming.

But he can’t do it.

Dad wouldn’t do it, and Dad wouldn’t want him to. Never, not once in his life, did Fred Andrews stop working at something because it got too hard, and as much as he hates every second of this stupid speech-writing, Archie feels he owes it to the man who never once let his idiot son feel unloved to finish writing the presentation he has no idea how he’s supposed to give without crying.

Especially considering he’s not even been able to think anything without crying so far.

Biting his lip as his left eye begins to get all blurry again, Archie grimly drums his pencil against a
fresh sheet of paper. The lines on the page stare up at him, hollow and mocking, but even the empty space seems packed full of memories he’s not sure he can handle right now, so blinking fast, he takes to writing as quick as he can. None of it makes sense probably, but he keeps going because if he doesn’t, he knows he’ll cry. Again. And he’s just so worn out with all the crying he’s been doing lately; he can’t let himself go there again. Not when he knows full well there won’t be a hug from his father to make him feel better.

God, he’s got to stop this. Every word is pressed so deep into the page now that it looks like the fancy lettering on those quote decorations his mom and Veronica like so much, but the sentences are getting less coherent and legible the longer he works.

*He was the best dad ever. He’d always ask you how your day went.*

*He made me snacks. I had this flat tire one time and I was gonna be late for a date, and he just gave me his keys and had the whole thing fixed by the time I got back.*

*I wish I’d never complained about anything, ever. I’m sorry he had to have me as his son.*

*I remember this one time he took me fishing and we sat there five hours and only caught sunburns because I forgot to bring the sunscreen and Mom got mad at us. It was great.*

*It’s like some sick joke. He shouldn’t be gone. He can’t be gone.*

*I love you, Dad.*

*I miss you.*

*I hate this.*

*NO.*

Finally, his vision gets so blurry he has to take a break. And even then, it’s not much of a break—he just strides around the room, eyes stinging, chest aching, head feeling all swollen, NO pounding through his brain until he finds himself reaching for his phone. It’s past two in the morning, pitch black outside and he hates to wake her up, but he’s getting nowhere with this. He needs her help, or maybe he just needs her.

“Ronnie,” he says, feeling even more like a jerk when her sleepy voice asks what’s up. “I don’t think I can do this.”

Typical Veronica, she doesn’t waste so much as a second asking what he means.

“Yes, you can,” she replies in a tone that’s now wide awake, and he can hear the blankets rustling in the background as she sits up. “Hold on, I’ll be over in less than ten.”

She hangs up before he can even start to decide whether or not he wants to try to talk her out of coming to see him at this hour and, as good as her word, she’s texting him an *Outside* in eight and half minutes (he knows, because the only way he could hold himself together while he waited on her was by staring at the bright digits on his clock and watching them change). And though she’s in a weird outfit—blue satin pajama pants, a short white sweatshirt with Marilyn Monroe’s signature printed on it, the shoes she calls her emergency heels, and one of those eye mask things she seems to have forgotten she’s still wearing hanging around her neck—she’s never looked more beautiful to him. As soon as he swings open the door she holds out both arms and, without hesitation, he goes right into them and buries his face in her shoulder.
“I love you,” she says softly in his ear, her fingers gentle as they comb through his hair. “So much. And I am so proud of you for how hard you’ve been trying to deal with this on your own, but I swear Archie Andrews, if you keep doing this to yourself, I am going to kick your ass. Capisce?”

He nods, nose still pressed into the fabric of her sweatshirt, and she pushes him gently back into the house, somehow closing the door behind her. After a minute or two, when he still hasn’t moved, she steps back so he can see her and takes his hand. Her small fingers twist tightly around his, the coolness of her skin sending some sort of calming effect through him and making the crazy, unhinged sort of feeling drift into the background. Now all he really notices is the fatigue.

“I’m not hungry, Ronnie,” he says as she pulls him toward the kitchen.

Out of habit, he keeps his voice low, and he flinches when he remembers that the reason he’s got to do that now is because of Mom, not Dad. His realization must be noticeable, too, because Veronica immediately squeezes his hand again.

“I know,” she says. “But your mom told me earlier you skipped dinner, so I figure now’s as good a time as any for a snack.”

He sighs. “What, are you and she taking turns babysitting me now?”

“Something like that,” she says like it’s unimportant.

“Veronica.” Planting his feet in the doorway, he sighs again and steadies her when she stumbles back toward him thanks to the sudden change in momentum.

“What?” she says, head tilting to the side as she eyes him seriously. “Is it a crime now to check up on people you love? ‘Cause if it is, you should probably know I also have Betty and Jughead running reconnaissance for me, too. And I honestly wouldn’t put it past Amateur Hour Sherlock to set up a spyglass in case of emergency.”

She means to be funny, and he means to smile. For real. But somehow, the smile gets all mixed up on him when he tries, and suddenly his face is wrinkling like it does when he’s about to cry. He turns away fast to hide it, but even at two in the morning, with only the outdoor light to see by, Veronica’s too quick for him.

“Hey,” she says softly, the tenderness in her voice wiping out the last shred of control he has over the tears. “Come here.”

He sort of collapses into her hug, his back hunched awkwardly so he can hide his face in the crook of her neck, but it’s still the best he’s felt all day. Or maybe it’s just the most he’s felt all day; everything’s been such a numb blur and he’s just so tired of it.

“What can’t you do?” Veronica asks finally, rubbing his back while he tries his damnedest to breathe without hyperventilating.

*Everything*, he thinks. But that kind of answer won’t exactly clear anything up for her, so he makes an effort to pull himself back together and takes another shuddering breath. His head feels fuzzy, thoughts swarming through it like crazy, but they all come back to the same thing—the thing he can barely talk about.

“The speech,” he says thickly. “They want—I’m supposed to say something. About him. And I tried, Ronnie, I really tried to write it, but…I just can’t.”

“Archie,” she begins, but he shakes his head, hard.
“No. Don’t tell me it’s okay. My mom’s been telling me that all day, and it’s not. He’s always there for me, Veronica, he does—did—everything for me, and I can’t write ten words about him? Seriously? How fricking stupid is that!”

“Archie,” she repeats, with more force this time as she places both hands on the side of his face and makes him look at her. “Listen to me. It’s not stupid, and I promise you you’ll figure out what to say.”

Her words are like a lifeline to him, but he’s not ready to trust the buoying hope it sprouts in his chest. “How do you know?”

Her lips curl upward. “Because,” she answers, pulling his face down for another kiss. “It’s you, and it’s for him. Don’t worry about saying the right thing, don’t worry about whether or not you’re doing him justice, just…write what you feel. And write it to him.”

He nods slowly and lets her steer him all the way into the kitchen, but he’s skeptical. What he feels isn’t easy to put on paper—he’s honestly not sure there’s anything there anymore. Not counting the numbness, that is. But something about the businesslike way she yanks the pen and pad of paper that’s supposed to be used for grocery lists off the fridge and leans shoulder to shoulder with him on the counter settles the knot of panic that’s been choking him all day. Running a hand through his hair, he picks up the pen and takes the deepest steady breath he can. It’s then that he hears the small whine from the corner and looks up to realize Vegas is there, too—heads on his paws, curled up in front of the back door, exactly in the spot Dad always kept his work boots. And right away, the choky feeling at the back of Archie’s throat surfaces again.

“I don’t think he’s eaten much of anything today,” he says.

“Mmm. Seems to be a lot of that going around lately,” Veronica says, snapping her fingers to no avail—the lab’s tail thumps halfheartedly a few times, and then he goes right back to staring at the door.

“He really misses Dad,” Archie mutters, blinking hard when his stupid eyes start filling again.

Veronica nods but doesn’t repeat the comment, even though they both know it’s every bit as applicable. After a minute or so of him staring unmoving at the blank lines on the little page though, her arm nudges his.

“Start with ‘you,’” she says quietly. “Don’t worry how the hell it sounds to anyone else, don’t worry if it makes sense. Just tell him everything you ever wanted to.”

Archie surprises himself when he huffs out a laugh. “Pretty sure that’ll take half of forever, Ronnie.”

“So?” she says, wrapping her arms around his waist and leaning her head against his shoulder. “I’ve got the time, if you do. And it’s not like we don’t have the paper.”

He nods again, and she stretches up on tiptoe to give him a quick peck on the cheek.

“Okay, good. You get started on that, and I’ll see if I can find something I can make you eat. Both of you,” she adds, detouring toward the corner when another high-pitched whimper cuts into the silence.

He’s still gripping the pen so tightly it hurts, but warmth flickers through him as he watches her squat down and start sternly baby-talking Vegas. “Thanks, Ronnie.”

“Anytime,” she says briskly, like it’s nothing. “Anytime and always, Archiekins.”
The sun’s barely made the treetops when Mary knocks softly on her son’s door, but it already feels late. Yesterday, Archie found excuse after excuse to lock himself in his room without even Vegas for company, and though she smiled and hugged and agreed, she’s worried about him. He’s always been a tenderhearted kid, and as the woman who had to sit him down numerous times over the years and explain the tough realities of life just so he wouldn’t be completely blindsided by it, it’s painfully obvious to her how badly he’s hurting.

But she also knows how hard it is sometimes for him to accept help; in that respect, he’s Fred Andrews’ son through and through. This business of turning down meals and disappearing…it’s concerning, and she just wishes she knew how to reach out to him. But she’s out of practice in parenting. Even before the divorce, Fred was always the one who knew what to say. They actually used to joke about it— you be good cop, I’ll be bad cop? You got it, lady. Just don’t scare him too bad, huh?

It’s impossible to help wondering what they’re all going to do without him.

“Archie?” she calls softly, worry growing when silence is her only answer. God, she always swore she’d never be one of those ridiculous mothers who pressed ears to doors and essentially spied on the very offspring they claimed to trust, but now that she’s confronted with the fear that her child could be in trouble, she gains a sudden empathy for those women.

Shamelessly poking her head in to see if he’s all right, her stomach drops with the same feeling that invaded it all those years ago when he wandered off from her in the grocery store to pet a stray cat he spotted through the window. The room’s completely empty, the bed giving no indication that anyone’s even attempted to sleep there. Crumpled balls of paper litter the ground along with a tumped-over canister of pencils, and immediately, she glances at the window to check and see if he’s made an escape via that route like he used to do when younger. That theory implodes as soon as she realizes the entire thing’s shut tight though, so, calmness fading, she hurries downstairs to look for him.

But Archie’s nowhere to be found, and the search only multiplies Mary’s worries—what if he’s gone out driving or walking, and met with some accident? What if he’s avoiding her because he can’t bring himself to talk anything through with his part-time parent? Right as she’s on the verge of a full-blown panic however, she spots his phone on the counter and it occurs to her that Vegas has yet to put in an appearance. What are the odds that those two facts are unconnected?
By chance, the garage pops into her mind and she takes a moment to collect herself, embarrassed she didn’t think of it sooner. It’s the place little Archie used to follow his father around, asking ridiculous questions about which tool was used to do what, and it’s the place Fred turned into a makeshift music studio for teenage Archie. Of course he’s out in the garage, though what on earth he’s doing out there at this hour when he apparently hasn’t slept—or eaten, probably!—she’d very much appreciate knowing.

When she steps into the dimly-lit garage, however, the urge to read her thoughtless son the riot act on basic self-care fades. She more than half expected to find him engaged in some maudlin, destructive behavior; after the hell he’s gone through these last twelve months, who wouldn’t? But he’s not pounding a punching bag (or worse, hard liquor), and he’s not wallowing in misery all by his lonesome.

Rather, he’s with Veronica.

Like some modern twist on a Norman Rockwell painting, the two kids are curled up together in the oversized old recliner Fred had been intending and forgetting to get rid of for years, both of them fast asleep. Archie’s arms encircle Veronica’s waist while his head rests awkwardly on her shoulder, and Veronica has a loud magenta sleep mask pulled over her eyes, both arms wrapped around his neck, and her cheek half buried in his hair. Even Vegas, the only member of the little tableau who’s awake, doesn’t budge from his position; though he thumps his tail at Mary’s entrance, he remains seated at attention near the foot of the chair with his head on Archie’s ankle.

“Good boy,” Mary whispers, smiling for what feels like the first time in ages.

Much like the bedroom-snooping, leaving without questions or lectures isn’t something she would have ever imagined herself doing, but she simply can’t bring herself to play Disapproving Mother and interrupt the peaceful slumberers, so she turns to go. Besides, a voice in her head that sounds a lot like Fred Andrews is telling her she should let this one be. That it’s all right. So she listens to the voice, but on her way out, she gets a glimpse of a pile of what looks like papers yanked from the kitchen pad lying on a shelf.

“What in the world?” she murmurs, frowning as she takes in the scratched-out sentences and crumpled sheets. The few words she can make out are disjointed and rambling, and she wonders briefly what in the hell necessitated this odd mess.

Then she picks up the two neatest looking sheets—the ones set slightly apart from the others—and it hits her as she begins to read the one written in a large, sprawling hand she recognizes why Veronica’s here and there’s paper everywhere.

\textbf{Dad:}

\textit{You weren’t lame. Not even a little bit. You always said you were, but you weren’t. You were the best dad in the whole entire world, better than anyone could ever ask for, and I’m the luckiest kid of all time because I’ll always be able to say I’m your son. I’m so sorry for all the times I let you down. You always said I didn’t, but I know I did. I’m also sorry for all the stupid times I whined to go places with my friends when I was little. If I’d had any idea how soon I’d lose you, I’d have stayed home every night and bugged the hell out of you, and I wouldn’t have regretted one second of it. Dad, you were so much more than just my dad. You were also my best friend, and I’m going to spend the rest of my life missing you. We all are, everyone who ever knew you, and I know if you were here right now and I said this to you, you’d be so freaking embarrassed and say it’s not true, that you’re no better than the next person. But it IS true. You’re the best, Dad, you always have been, and I love you so much. You always knew what to say, you always made me feel like someone special, and I’m always going to miss you and wish you could be here with me. But since you can’t}
be, I’m going to do my best to make you proud. Because that’s really all I can do now, and that’s what you deserve.

Thanks, Dad. Thanks for teaching me to throw, for driving me to games, for all the talks, for loving me and being there no matter what, for everything.

Love, Archie

The spelling, punctuation, and penmanship on the second sheet of paper is far superior to that of the first, but despite the starkness of the contrast, Mary’s smile is not quite steady.

Dear Mr. Andrews:

Saying you were the best is probably the hollowest of hollow praise but you were the best. Truly. I doubt you ever knew it, or if you’d allow anyone to mention it more than once even if you had been made aware, but it’s just one of those undeniable facts. I wish to heaven that every time you showed me a kindness I’d shouted from the rooftops how much that kindness meant to me, but like a fool, I didn’t. So, I’ll say it now: thank you, Mr. Andrews. Thank you for welcoming me into your home with open arms, thank you for ignoring the reputation of my family and treating me as kindly as you treated every person simply by default, thank you for showing me how a real father behaves, and thank you, thank you, thank you for raising Archie. He loves you with all his heart, and you knew as well as I do how enormous that heart of his is. His generosity, his hope, the love and kindness and acceptance he shows everyone—it’s clearly something he inherited from you, and it’s so incredibly rare and beautiful. Both of you Andrews men have made a profound and lasting impression on me, and I just wish I could let you know face to face that I intend to do everything in my power to look out for your son.

So, thanks again, Mr. Andrews. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, and goodbye.

—Veronica

Very gently, and with a strong sense that she’s intruded on many, many things she was never intended to see, Mary replaces the notes. Very quietly, she tiptoes out of the garage. There’s a warmth in her chest, a sort of peace taking over for the regret and worry she’s been filled with these last few days, and as ridiculous as it sounds, she knows exactly who’s responsible for it. Or rather, which two people are responsible for it. She’s slower to be convinced of certain things than Fred, but as her eye lights on the expensive classic car parked crookedly in the driveway like someone was in too big a hurry to care and she recalls the mess of cereal boxes and dog chow that certainly weren’t in the kitchen when she went to bed last night, any last shreds of doubt she might have still retained dissipate. Yes, Archie will be all right.

For a long moment, she stands looking up at the sky, the early sunshine warm on her face.

“Magic eight-ball, huh?” she says, smiling in spite of the mist that fills her eyes.

That man always did know best.
*Title and song lyrics from “All That Matters” off the Finding Neverland OBCR.

*It’s been forever since I updated and the entirety of S3 closed out in the time I was gone, so can I just say: FLYING A LITTLE CLOSE TO THE SUN THERE AREN’T YOU. THE HIGH-FIVE. VERONICA’S GORGEOUS CAR. THEY WENT TO PROM ‘As FrIeNdS.’ I DON’T THINK I EVER STOPPED LOVING YOU. THE KISS I COULD BARELY SEE BUT WHO CARES BECAUSE IT WAS BEAUTIFUL. I keep saying this, but this time I really mean it: I’m GOING to write the long Tumblr essay on these two, because they are the best and it’s ridiculous to pretend otherwise. S3 was painful and pulled a lot of unnecessary stunts to try to achieve certain outcomes, but honestly, that last episode managed to deliver enough of a payoff that I can forgive most of it (NOT that elevator-doors-closing-on-sad-Archie stunt in 3x21, though. Because first off, what was the point other than stalling, and second off, Veronica Mars pulled that same crap on me back in the day and I’m still emotionally scarred so nope, a pox on whoever’s idea that scene was). I hate seeing A&V separated, especially when it’s kind of pointless, but I love getting to watch them pretend to be friends when they both clearly have it bad for each other.

*This was a sad fic that I kind of hated writing because everything’s so wound up in real life, but it’s also a cathartically sad fic I kind of needed to write. Luke Perry made Fred one of my favorite characters on this show, and there’s no point pretending I’m not going to miss both those guys badly. If I spread the sadness around, I’m sorry and I promise I’ll make up for it by posting a fun fic next <3. (On a related note, special thanks to veronicathemafiaprincess for fielding my “which should I post first” questions.)

*I had more to say, but it's late (early?) and I'm tired, so if you have a question because I said something confusing, feel free to ask it!

*Finally, thanks as always for reading/commenting! I haven’t had a chance to catch up on reading/replying to comments in a bit, but I’m going to try to do that later today. Hope everyone had a great summer and has a fantastic weekend!
Method Vs. Classical

Chapter Summary

That feeling when you agree to be in your friend’s based-on-a-horror-story-musical and your significant other is *not* playing the role of your character’s significant other.

[Medium-length fic set in 2x18, somewhere between “In” and “The World According To Chris” (incidentally, two of the three best numbers in this episode <3) and told from both A&V’s POV.]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Kevin first asks him to sign up for the school musical, Archie agrees without a second thought.

It’ll help a lot, so Kevin says, and all it seems to require is some dressing up in crazy outfits from the seventies, learning a bunch of lines, and of course, some singing and dancing to a bunch of pretty fun songs. Besides that, most of his friends are going to be in it, too. How bad can something like that be?

But then things start to fall apart, and he gets his answer: bad.

Bad and worse, pretty much exclusively.

Like the whole thing with Veronica and Betty not speaking (or, to be more accurate he guesses, the whole thing with Betty not speaking to Veronica).

He’s not real clear on what was said to spark the issue, but it seems to come out of nowhere and it’s rough. Because while he’s watching Veronica worry in private over all sorts of crazy stuff with her family, Betty keeps trying to convince him that Veronica’s evil or something and Archie’s running out of polite ways to explain to his friend that she doesn’t know what the hell she’s talking about. And that he’s starting to really wish she’d give it a rest, or at least leave him out of it. He’s not wild about his best friend making him choose a side in whatever beef she’s got with his girlfriend; that’s just all kinds of messed up, and he’s got enough of that crap going on already with his dad and Mr. Lodge.

But it’s the casting news that really has him squirming. Most of it’s pretty expected, but some of it is just…not. Like Chuck Clayton as Billy? He has his doubts the second the arrangements are announced, but decides to keep them to himself.

And he makes it maybe five minutes.

Then the group breaks up to go get into costume, the reality of the role he’s *not* playing sets in when he sees Chuck saying something to an unimpressed-looking Veronica before she turns her back on
him, and he can’t ignore it any longer.

“Hey, Kev,” he calls, hopping off the stage in one bound and jogging to catch up with his friend. “You’re not like, serious about this, are you?”

“Okay, first, please do not literally break a leg before we get even one rehearsal underway, and second, which part?” Kevin asks in a resigned sort of tone. Probably, Archie realizes, because in the twenty feet from the stage to the door the guy’s already been accosted by Ethel, who’s pissed about Cheryl being cast as Carrie, Mrs. Cooper, who’s asking tons of weird questions about her role, and a bunch of other kids who want to know why the hell they have to put up with somebody’s mom hanging around their rehearsals. “Because I gotta warn you, Archie—if it in any way pertains to protecting the sanctity of the arts, the answer is most likely yes. No, scratch that, I lied—not most likely. Definitely. The answer will definitely be yes.”

“I mean about Chuck,” Archie explains, lowering his voice as a couple more people file by. “You know—him playing Billy?”

“Oh, that.” Kevin relaxes a little, tapping the pen he’s been clutching with a death grip for a while now against his clipboard. “Yeah. I’m very serious. He seemed genuinely interested in the production when he came to auditions, and he has the talent to pull it off. Talent which, I might add, I’m not insane enough to turn away because of suspicions based purely on past behavior.”

“I know, but—“

“But?” Kevin prompts, raising an eyebrow. “He’s supposedly turned over a new leaf.”

“Yeah, but Billy?” Archie stresses. “I mean, isn’t that character the exact opposite of everything he’s wanting to do and be now? Isn’t he trying to steer clear of stuff like that? And…aren’t there like, I don’t know, a couple scenes where Billy and Chris—”

“Ah. Okay, uh-huh, I see where this is going now. No worries, buddy.” Giving Archie a friendly slap on the shoulder, Kevin resumes his walk. “It’s just a story set to music. Your girl isn’t going to fall in love or abruptly realize she has feelings for someone she went on one disastrous date with and was slut-shamed by a while ago simply because she’s playing his girlfriend. I mean, is Chuck hot and an excellent dancer to boot, yes. But not even he has enough Gene Kelly magic to woo Veronica Lodge away from a preexisting beau, so how about you just take five and remember to breathe?”

“Yeah, I know that, but—“

“Plus,” Kevin goes on thoughtfully as if Archie hasn’t spoken, “if you really stop to think about it, the whole one-song-revelation-of-love thing doesn’t really happen outside the confines of Disney-quality musicals. Which, I am both relieved and sorry to remind you, this isn’t.”

Archie sighs, ears heating as he realizes how stupid he sounds. “I know, I just—look man, I don’t think he’s faking anything and I want to trust him, but what if I’m wrong and he tries something on Veronica?”

“Then Veronica will utilize what she believes is known as a right hook and swiftly disillusion him,” a familiar voice interrupts as a small hand slides into the crook of his elbow. “Presto! Problem solved, everyone wins. Well, except for Chuck, who would in fact be the ultimate loser should something like that come to pass, but you get my drift.”

“Ronnie…”
Steeling himself against the argument-shattering smile he knows is being aimed his way, Archie glances down at her. And, sure enough, she’s already got her chin embedded in his arm and one of those big, you-worry-too-much smiles on her face. Her left hand squeezes at his elbow, her right hand clasps around his, and it’s horribly distracting because it automatically makes him relax and start to smile back.

“I’m serious,” he says, trying to keep the little-kid whine out of his voice.

“What, and you think I’m not?” Pressing a light kiss to his shoulder, she pouts teasingly up at him. “I promise. This isn’t blind trust, it’s an evaluation. Even if we’re skeptical of the act—and believe me, I am—Chuck does, by all appearances, seem to be sincere, so… I vote we take the wait-and-see approach. If he steps one toe out of line, there’ll be plenty of time to take him down. And should that occur, I’m sure not only you but our esteemed director will have plenty to say on the subject, am I right?”

“Exactly,” Kevin agrees, tucking his pen behind his ear. “And not to unsupportively point fingers or play devil’s advocate Archie, but weren’t you one of the ones suggesting we take Chuck’s recent atonement attempts more seriously?”

“Well…” Archie clamps his jaw shut because that’s right. And truth be told, he does believe his teammate is trying to make amends for the crap he pulled in the past. “Yeah, I did, I mean, it’s just… I don’t know.”

“I think he’s a little freaked about all the grinding,” Kevin says to Veronica in a confidential tone.

*Grinding?*

Archie stiffens, his head whipping back around. “Wait, all the WHAT?”

From beside him, Veronica sighs loudly. “No, Kev, I think that now he’s a little freaked about all the grinding. Before, I think he was just concerned about the kissing directions.”

“No,” Archie can feel his hand balling into a fist. “I was talking about the fake-groping stuff. Please tell me you’re both kidding?”

They exchange glances, and Kevin hems and haws awkwardly for a few seconds.

“Well, no,” he says finally, and Archie can actually feel his blood pressure rise. “But the good news is, I’ve decided to strike all non-essential-to-plot kisses from the script purely for the comfort of all parties involved, because frankly, a lot of people just flat-out don’t want to swap spit with each other. And the choreography isn’t going to be as down and dirty as you might think, because there will be a lot of parents in attendance and I’m not really interested in fielding a ton of complaints from all the Prudence Pingletons of Riverdale.”

“There, you see?” Veronica says brightly, rubbing his arm. “We heard it straight from the horse’s mouth. No kissing, no sexy hip thrusts, and a minimum of theatrical groping. What’s left to stress about?”

Archie shuts his eyes, trying very hard not to think of any of those terms in connection with Veronica and Chuck. Or Veronica and anyone who’s not named Archie Andrews, for that matter. God, why is he even like this? Toni’s not sending him threatening looks; neither is Jughead.

Of course, he’s got no interest in Cheryl or Betty, and it’s a definite possibility in his mind that Chuck still has a thing for Veronica, but still.
“If anything happens—like, if he makes you uncomfortable in any way—you’ll say something, right?” he asks, turning his hand so his fingers link up with hers.

“Yes. Without hesitation. And come on, Archiekins,” Veronica urges, leaning her head against him. “No one’s going method here. It’s just a stupid little play.”

“A hem,” Kevin says, whacking her over the head with his clipboard. “A what, now, Your Royal Highness who might do well to remember that yours truly decides who gets what size dressing room and there’s definitely a broom closet that could have your name put on it?”

“Sorry, Mr. Hammerstein. It’s just one play,” she corrects. “One utterly unforgettable and brilliantly directed play in which I happen to be portraying someone who is not your girlfriend. There’ll be a little sitting and dancing together, and that’ll be it.”

Kevin clears his throat. “Um, actually…”

Archie stares at him while Veronica groans.

“Actually what?” she demands. “Go on, just spill it already.”

Their friend grimaces. “There’s a move in The World According to Chris I feel I should warn you guys about. It’s not horrible or anything, but it is kind of a…lap-dance inspired move. And don’t kill me, but I kind of really want to keep it because it’ll look awesome.”

“Oh, God,” Archie mutters, head sagging back. If Chuck lays one hand—no, if he lays so much as a finger on her…

“Now, now,” Veronica puts in, grabbing him by the hand and dragging him after her toward the door. “Let’s not panic. We can cross that bridge over troubled water when we come to it, champ. What we’re in desperate need of at the moment is a little less Rocky Balboa and a lot more Link Larkin.”

“And you also need to hurry!” Kevin howls after them. “I want everyone center stage in ten!”

Veronica snorts. “Yeah, what he said. Come on, let’s go make sure these kitschy costumes of ours actually fit. I don’t know about you, but the thought of tripping over my bellbottoms whilst onstage doesn’t exactly overwhelm me with joy.”

Because she’s trying so hard to make him laugh, Archie answers with the biggest smile he can manage. But it’s all just a really bad false front, and the harder he tries to not think about Veronica in another guy’s lap, the more he thinks about it.

And boy, does it ever bother him.

One rehearsal and some close (but not awful) dancing later, she finds him waiting for her just outside the school gathering room—arms folded, tense thundercloud expression on his face, staring fixedly at the wall opposite like he’s trying to burn holes in it or something. His foot jitters to a quick, unknown rhythm, and Veronica can’t resist the temptation to tiptoe up on her feisty, bristling little Bulldog.
“Problemo, handsome?” she teases, poking him smartly in the side and giggling when he jumps. “Or are you just contemplating the fascinating artistic scope of taupe-painted walls?”

To her surprise, he doesn’t join in her laughter. Or grumble about her sneaking up on him. Or roll his eyes, or counter with a joke of his own, or even smile back. He just reaches out and pulls her toward him and, in a move so reminiscent of the golden age of Hollywood musicals that it would make Kevin weep directorial tears of joy were he to see it, lifts her smoothly up onto the window ledge and absolutely smashes his lips down on hers.

It’s a long, breathless moment that ends only when he breaks the kiss and sort of sags against her with his head pillowed somewhere between her chest and shoulder, but though she’s still blinking in surprise, Veronica has to smile.

“Well,” she says, resting her chin atop his head. “Hello to you too, Lothario.”

Instead of chuckling with her however, Archie heaves a sigh that seems very relieved.

“Hey,” he says finally, voice muffled.

“Hey.” Laughing at the little pants she can tell he’s trying to downplay, she wraps her arms around his neck. “So am I to infer from this lavish and semi-public display of affection that you’re still not comfortable with all this?”

His reply is lost, an unintelligible murmur against her collarbone that feels warm and illicit but communicates nothing, so she pokes him gently in the back.

“Come again?”

He drops a firm, smacking kiss on her neck, then turns so that his cheek rests on her shoulder instead of his forehead. “I said, are you gonna hate me for hating this?”

“What, the Billy-Chris thing?” She purses her lips, fingers combing through his hair as she thinks that over. “Why exactly would I want to do that?”

He sighs again. “Because girls can’t stand jealous guys?”

Despite the moroseness of his tone, Veronica very nearly snorts.

“Seriously? And what sage, undoubtedly-male philosopher ever gave you that impression?” she inquires.

“Jughead.”

Of course.

Stifling another laugh, she runs a thumb over his cheekbone. “Well. Spoiler alert, my little green-eyed monster, but Jughead Jones doesn’t speak for all of womankind, and he most certainly does not speak for me. Besides, there’s an enormous difference between jealous guys and guys who get jealous. The former are obnoxious, the latter can be somewhat endearing under certain circumstances, and you, fortunately for the both of us, fit into that last category. As do the circumstances.”

His brow creases against her shoulder. “What?”

She smiles. “I’m saying, I’m not against a little overprotective jealousy here and there, Archie.”
He makes a confused-sounding grunt. “Really?”

“Yes, really.” She slants her head to the side, giving him a light peck on the temple. “Provided there’s some justification for the whole quit-looking-at-my-girlfriend-like-that behavior, of course. I don’t respond well to unfounded or excessive displays of possessiveness, but you not being excited about a guy with a dubious track record having the opportunity to be all over me? That’s solidly in the realm of things I’m okay with. I see that as...less Alpha Male wannabe and more pure-souled protector.”

“Oh.” Straightening up, he blinks at her with a sheepishness she can’t even pretend she finds less than adorable. “So it’s cool that I kind of can’t wait ‘til this is all over?”

Veronica chuckles, thumbs scuffing at his earlobes. “I wouldn’t put it quite that way in front of Kevin, but yes. I’m incredibly flattered you dislike the idea of someone else getting handsy with me. And if it helps,” she adds teasingly, leaning in to touch her lips to his again, “you can come find me the second I’m offstage, and I’ll do my level best to help you remember that we’re Veronica Lodge and Archie Andrews, not Chris Hargenson and Tommy Ross. Okay?”

He kisses her again, deeply, and she decides to take that as a yes. Eyes slipping shut, she winds her arms around his neck as his hands fall from her waist to her hips, and lets herself sink into the moment. For a long, blissful stretch, she’s conscious only of him—the warm weight of his palms sliding down toward her thighs, the soft pressure of his lips and the minty burn of his tongue that’s an aftereffect of the too-potent chewing gum she’s pretending not to notice he just accidentally swallowed, the way his breath heats her skin.

But then he interrupts the smooch-fest to ask her about—of all things—the car, telling her he still hasn’t said anything to his dad about it, and just like that, she’s reminded that they have way more going on their lives than one mixed-up musical. That as hard they try to tune out the mess going on around them, they can’t. Not fully. No matter what, there’s always some unpleasant part of the outside world that manages to sneak in and threaten to wreck things, and, frankly, she’s sick of it. Archie’s too young for the wrinkle that’s taken up almost permanent residence between his eyebrows, and she’s protecting so many secrets these days that keeping track of them all is beginning to get exhausting.

So all the way to the parking lot, she maintains a steady stream of chatter, measuring her success in terms of how often she’s able to make him laugh. (Six, not counting the halfhearted chuckle that her Cher-style rendition of The World According To Chris drags out of him.) And when they pull into the Pembrooke’s parking area and he starts to regain that grim look even as he dashes around to her side to open the door for her, she treats him to a solo production of Do Me A Favor—one designed to show him exactly how much worse Kevin could have made the whole seventies shake-your-groove-thang.

“Well?” she comments at the end, raising an eyebrow as she leans back to gauge his response to her now being draped all over him with the kind of Chris-level sultriness that would scandalize the parental portion of the show’s future audience and probably get her tossed off the Riverdale High stage forever. “Thoughts, or is this you giving me the saddest encore of all time?”

He holds it together for exactly three seconds before a half-smothered laugh bursts out of him, and she smirks in satisfaction.

“All right, Ronnie,” he says. Eyes crinkled in laughter, he negates her sizzling end-Pose by engulfing her in one of those ridiculously sweet hugs of his. “I get the message, and I’ll try to just enjoy everything without getting all hung up on the moves. Whatever you end up doing on that stage, I promise nobody’ll be clapping harder than me.”
“Aww.” She leans her cheek against his chest, savoring the steady warmth he brings to everything. Impulsive nature notwithstanding, Archie doesn’t adapt all that well to change, and she appreciates his constant willingness to stretch himself for those he cares for more than she’ll probably ever be able to put into words. “Now I feel like I should regale you with the Hallelujah Chorus or something.”

He snorts. “Yeah, that’s okay.”

“What?” she demands in pretended outrage, lifting her head so that her chin’s digging into his chest now. “Are you suggesting these vocal chops wouldn’t utterly own a classic choral masterpiece?”

The corners of his mouth twitch. “If it keeps you from going after notes that could break glass, I’m gonna go with…yes?”

“Uh-huh.” She makes a face at him, sternly repressing a smile. “Just for that, O Doubting Thomas, I’m tempted to break out some major falsetto trills.”

“If you really love me, well then baby, baby please,” he sings jokingly, tightening his grip as he shuffle-walks them toward the door until her back bumps into the wall nearest the exit. “Do me a favor…”

“Mhmm.” Raising a brow, she affects disinterest as his lips cut a tantalizingly warm path along the side of her jaw. “You know, I was going to ask if you wanted to help me rehearse some moves for The World According To Chris, but if my high Cs are truly that repulsive to you…”

He grins, the movement scraping against her ear as he puts his mouth up to whisper, “Can I change my answer?”

“To?”

She makes the question sound skeptical, but doubts he’s fooled. He knows her too well to buy the faux indignation, and besides, when they’re standing this close, affecting disinterest is pretty pointless. Already, her pulse is doing a damn good tap dance, and he can probably feel it.

Sure enough, the grin stretching his face widens. “To ‘anything you wanna sing is great?’”

“Ooh, I like it,” she drawls. “And bonus points for the speedy backpedaling! But, no.”

“No?” he repeats, forehead already wrinkling.

“No. The flattery ship has definitely sailed.” Veronica remains stoic for a grand total of three seconds before his sad-face emoji expression gets the better of her and she bursts out laughing. “I am open to various forms of restitution, however. Just so you know.”

“Good.” His arms pull her into him, and as she tilts her head up to meet his kiss, he flashes a grin at her that’s pure Archie—two parts sweetheart, one part rogue. “So, uh, what was that you said earlier about Lovers’ Lane?”
*I kind of (and by “kind of” I mean “completely”) forgot I wrote this at some point after the S2 musical episode in response to a suggestion from someone in the comments (my apologies, because I have no idea which chapter it was on/who it was). I had intended to post a different update, either one from 3x18 or one set somewhere betw. 3x16-3x18, but since it’s been a good minute since S2, I figured I’d better post this now. It didn’t come out quite how I wanted though, so I’ll probably post one of the fics I’m happier with by Friday (if it hits Friday night and there’s nothing new, definitely harass me on tumblr about it because it means I’ve forgotten).

*I decline to discuss Big Fun because there are just some things best left in the past (also, if I start talking about it all the missed opportunities in that ep/the wrongly-distributed singing parts I’ll run out of room here), but A Night To Remember remains one of my favorite RD episodes to date. I grew up on musicals, and I love how that one’s kind of a self-contained ep that still connects to the overall plot. Also, Archie standing up for V (both literally and figuratively; ugh, I love how hard he’s applauding when she gets done with TWATC) warms my dang heart <3

*So. I can’t remember if I’ve said this before or not, but I *love* watching Archie struggle to play it cool when other guys flirt with Veronica. I’m personally not a fan of dudes who get their noses out of joint the second their girlfriend/girl they want to be their girlfriend talks to another guy, but Archie (bless him) never does that crap...he just gets that “I will HAPPILY take you out, bro” look when someone’s hitting on her while they’re officially together, or does the “Man, I wish that were me” side-eye thing when they’re not officially together, and yeah. It’s adorable. Also, I don’t think he gets enough credit for trying to stay out of situations he doesn’t like but feels he has no right to interfere in, like in S1 when he hears V’s going on a date with Chuck, or in S3 when he freaking walks away from V in 3x20 without telling her anything because he thinks she wants to be with Reggie and doesn’t want to make it awkward for her. (Seriously, what is WITH people who hate Archie Andrews? It makes no sense.)

*I’m still trying to get caught up on checking & replying to comments, but thanks as always for reading/commenting, and hope everyone has the best Monday that can be reasonably expected seeing as how it IS Monday! :D
Chapter Summary

Told from A&V's POV and based on the scene in 3x19 “Fear The Reaper” when Archie drops by the Pembrooke because it’s one of my absolute favorite Small But Extremely Important Archie-Veronica Moments <3

**Sorry this didn't make it up on Friday! I had a busy day and forgot (shocker), so now I'm updating on commercial breaks in the Bama-Duke game. Notes are longish, so if you don't feel like reading them, thanks for reading/commenting, and hope you have an awesome weekend! :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

|::| |::| |::| |::| |::| |::|

The gentleman is a dope

A man of many faults

A clumsy Joe who wouldn’t know

A rhumba from a waltz

The gentleman is a dope

And not my cup of tea

Why do I get in a dither?

He doesn’t belong to me

|::| |::| |::| |::| |::| |::|

She’s two seconds—maybe—from finally collapsing into bed when the knock sounds. And yes, it’s probably the epitome of laziness, but for another two seconds, she seriously considers ignoring said knock. After all, it’s been a day. Couple days, really, what with everything leading up to the fight, the fight itself, and the aftermath of the fight. At this point in time, any modicum of relaxation is a luxury she’d consider selling a less-vital organ for; is it absolutely necessary for her to admit that there’s someone home?
But then another series of knocks commences, this set louder and more insistent, and she realizes there’s no point in even entertaining the notion. If she doesn’t answer, she’ll only spend the rest of her evening wondering who it was and what it was about, and that’s assuming the unknown caller admits defeat and leaves. It could very well be Betty or her mother forgetting a key, and neither of them will be thrilled if she leaves them spinning their wheels on the doorstep. So, refastening the dressing gown she only just finished untying, she shoots a quick glance at the mirror as she passes to make sure she’s relatively presentable, then pads briskly across the apartment.

A bright flash fills the room followed closely by the bass rumble of thunder, and she rolls her eyes at the uncanny-yet-appropriate setting as she approaches the door.

_Talk about your midnights dreary_, she thinks. _Whatever this is had better be worth my beauty sleep._

Use of the peephole requires that she go on tiptoe, but all it takes is one brief glimpse for her to ID the visitor, and surprise flickers through her. The unknown presence rapping at her figurative chamber door is none other than the primary contributor to this week’s series of extremely unfortunate events, and that alone piques her curiosity enough to banish any annoyance she might have otherwise felt at the interruption.

Particularly when she swings the door open wide and gets a good look at the panting, waterlogged figure before her.

“Archie, did you _run_ here?” she demands, concern ousting all pretense of tact. “It’s pouring outside!”

Predictably, he seems unfazed by the question.

“I can’t stop thinking about Randy,” he says as he strides in like a man on a very tense mission, scattering raindrops hither and yon. “And Randy’s sister and what she said to me, that I’m a murderer.”

Her hearts sinks at the wounded note she hears underlying all the bluster. Oh, God. Not this again; why, _why_ must he always take everything on himself?

“Archie,” she states with a calmness she can only hope is contagious since he looks as though he’s on the verge of yet another full-blown panic attack. “This is not your fault. This is on Elio, not you.”

“Yeah,” he bursts out almost before she finishes speaking. “I still feel responsible, Veronica.”

_Of course you do_ she thinks, lips pressing together as she watches his agitation grow before her very eyes. _Good ol’ responsibility_. A valuable asset to ninety percent of humanity, but the Achilles heel of the boy before her. Feeling responsible for the misdeeds of others that somehow involve him is a side effect of that preternatural compassion of his, and precisely why he’s such a dream target for any and every manipulator. If he could only _not_ care quite so much, his troubles would lessen exponentially.

But he can’t.

So they don’t.

“I just, I wish…” He gestures vaguely, a kind of despondency in his face and tone as he gropes about for words. “I knew how to help them.”

Help, help. How to help. Not necessary, not requested, and very likely won’t be appreciated, but not a bad idea either. Restitution’s obviously out of the question given the circumstances, so… compensation, perhaps? Or if not compensation per se, the best olive branch possible?
“Maybe…El Royale can host a charity boxing event,” she suggests, noticing somewhat distractedly that her advice sounds a bit more placating and PR-ish than is probably prudent given his current state. “We can raise money for the family.”

“No .”

The answer is swift, accompanied by a vehement shake of the head that confuses her, but it’s followed quickly by an even more desperate-sounding No boxing, and then it all makes sense again .

“Okay, fine,” she agrees, scrapping that plan and shifting her brain back into high-gear. Non-culpability aside, what he just went through is undoubtedly scarring from an emotional standpoint, and if he’s not there yet he’s not; no point in pressing the issue. “Um, we can host a…benefit concert. At La Bonne Nuit. Josie has been calling me about doing a set, so…let me talk to her, and the Ronsons. Okay?”

For a couple of seconds, his expression resides firmly in the unpleasant vicinity of shell-shocked. A droplet, tiny and glinting in the low light, beads up on the edge of his chin while his eyes stay glued to her face, and the whole thing creates such an intense lost-puppy-on-a-busy-street resemblance that she has to wonder whether or not any of this is helping. But once he visibly sorts through the proposed solution and seems to find no glaring issues, some of the barely-controlled panic abates. Miraculously, he relaxes.

“Okay,” he says, almost meekly now that the fit of furor seems to have passed. “Thank you.”

“Yeah.”

She says it softly, some instinct warning her to tread as cautiously as she would with a frightened animal, and they stand there for a beat or two surrounded by the lumbering rattle of thunder. His breathing’s slowly evening itself out and the tension appears to be draining from his shoulders, but it’s not enough. In her experience, Archie Andrews’ lack of outward turmoil rarely denotes inner peace, and even if that weren’t the case, he still seems oblivious to the fact that he’s soaked. Beyond that glaring indicator, he’s staring at her in a way that suggests he’s got more to say but can’t for the life of him recall what it is.

“Is that it?” she inquires tentatively after a few more seconds elapse. The silence feels amplified with neither of them speaking, and though she knows it’s nothing more than a mechanical, reflexive stare, the weight of his gaze is just a little too much.

“Yes.” He takes a long, open-mouthed breath, the worry wrinkles in his forehead finally smoothing themselves out. “Yes, that’s it.”

“Okay,” she says. A smile threatens to escape when he runs an absentminded hand through his plastered-down hair and stands about half of it up into punk rocker-esque spikes, so she clears her throat to hide it. “Yeah, that’s it.”

“Okay,” she says. A smile threatens to escape when he runs an absentminded hand through his plastered-down hair and stands about half of it up into punk rocker-esque spikes, so she clears her throat to hide it. “Then let’s go get you a towel or something. Preferably before you get chilled; the last thing anyone needs right now is for you to come down with a debilitating head cold. Matter of fact, why don’t I go see what teas we have on hand?”

“What?” He blinks at her for a moment, owlish and bewildered, then appears to finally grasp his painfully liquid state when he looks down and sees the circle of water-darkened spots on the carpet surrounding his feet. “Oh . Oh, no, Veronica, you don’t have to—I mean there’s no point, I’m just gonna go right back out in it anyway, so—”

“No, you absolutely are not,” she interrupts calmly, reaching out to squeeze his sodden arm in the hopes of easing at least a little of the embarrassment that flashes across his face. “You’re going to go
down the hall into that bathroom, dry yourself off and put on the robe I’m going to bring you, and then you’re going to come back out and have some tea while I call for the car. Or your dad, if you don’t want Smithers or me taking you back,” she adds, seeing him open his mouth like he’s preparing to argue. “But you are not walking home in that cloudburst. Okay?”

Archie hesitates. For a couple of seconds, his gaze alternates from his dripping self to the front door like he’s debating the merits of continuing the discussion, and she notes with an inward shake of the head how exhausted he seems these days. Damn Elio and his conscienceless exploitation of people who take the entire world’s problems to heart; if she could in any way guarantee there’ll be no future need for that bottom-feeding shyster’s dubious aid, she’d slash his tires herself. And air every single skeleton she knows of that inhabits his closet.

“Ándale, Rainmaker,” she commands when he shows no signs of moving, giving him a shove that takes a lot of effort for her but barely budges him. “If you think this is in any way negotiable, let me be the first to assure you—it’s not.”

He doesn’t say anything, but he glances at her over his shoulder with the beginnings of a tiny—albeit exasperated—smile and nods. His entire demeanor falls in the neighborhood of docile now that his agitation’s lessened, and the contrast tugs insistently at what she fears might be her heartstrings. As strong and sturdy as he is physically, as fierce and stubborn and formidable as he can be when someone or something he cares about is threatened, he’s still the most tenderhearted person she’s ever met. She could steal a bullhorn from cheer practice and follow him around for a week reminding him he’s not the one with Randy Ronson’s blood on his hands, but it wouldn’t even come close to convincing him. Or make him feel any better. In his mind, the accidental role he played in the tragedy makes him as guilty as if he orchestrated the whole thing, and he won’t be content until he’s at least attempted to make amends for his perceived wrongdoings.

“Good,” she states, compassion tempering the bossier edges to her tone. “I’ll go fetch the robe, you quit drizzling on my mom’s carpet, ‘kay?”

“Okay. Thanks, Ronnie.”

The thing on his face doesn’t quite qualify as a smile, but there’s enough incidental lip-twitching that she decides to count it as a win. And, smiling in response, she gives him another light shove forward.

“Yes.”

He nods—once, almost curtly—but doesn’t turn or slow. Footsteps squishing, he makes his way to the bathroom while she sets off to go dig the robe out of the back of her closet. It’ll most likely be a bit snug on him she reasons, doubtfully eyeing the close-to-Veronica-sized creation made of bulky terrycloth and intended for spa days at ski resorts, but at least it’s warm and dry.

If nothing else, it’s also an article of clothing that doesn’t require any unwieldy explanations. She’s excruciatingly aware that she still has a couple of boring cotton t-shirts that don’t belong to her buried in the bottom of her bureau drawer, maybe even one pair of sweatpants. And, while she can haul them out if necessary, the thought of the questions their existence might evoke (You still have these? Why? Why didn’t you give them back or throw them out?) is a major deterrent.

Especially when things these days with Archie are, to say the least, delicate. Most of the time, she can convince herself she only thinks of him as a friend now, and it’s fine. But other times, she can feel herself forgetting, feel herself starting (and wanting ) to slip back into old and dangerous habits.
Most troubling—or perhaps tantalizing—of all though, is that every now and then, she catches a
glimmer of something in him that makes her wonder if he’s not suffering from a similar strain of
amnesia. Like the other day on the couch, when she was just trying to let him know he can count on
her no matter what and he started looking at her almost as if he were thinking about—okay, no.

_No_, she is so not going to go there. Not now, and hopefully not later, either. There are boundaries
and then there are _boundaries_, and by all appearances, this is one of those hazardous ones better left
un-transgressed. Regardless of whatever _Poor baby_ sentiments her hapless visitor continually
manages to trigger in her, she’s got to stay on track.

“Exes and nos, Veronica,” she mutters under her breath. “Exes and _nos_."

Shutting her eyes, she takes a moment to collect herself. This is about aiding a friend in crisis, not
theorizing about possible narrow escapes. There’s no call for edgy nerves or dwelling on almosts;
she’s simply offering assistance. Same as she would if she’d found say, Kevin, dripping away on her
doorstep.

It’s just…basic decency. Natural concern for a fellow human in distress.

Thus resolved, she wings all burgeoning thoughts of sofa-based encounters away like the forbidden
fruit it is. Another second or two and she’s off, striding back into the hall like it’s nothing, her mind
firmly fixed on the task at hand rather than the fleeting fancy of a few days ago.

_As it should be._

“Archie?” she calls, rapping twice and determinedly refusing to recall another time and another rap
on a different bathroom door. “Semi-special delivery. May I come in?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure,” he answers, his voice muffled but nearer than she expects. “It’s—ow—not
locked.”

A medium-sized thud sounds within like a period finishing off the sentence and, fearing he’s slipped,
whacked his head, or something else in that vein, she reaches quickly for the knob. But when the
door creaks open to reveal he’s just waging a fierce battle with wet clothing, Veronica silently curses
her own proactivity. Of all the moments she could’ve chosen to enter, _of course_ she had to pick the
one that requires the single greatest execution of willpower—Archie, flush-faced and frustrated-
looking, standing in the middle of the floor in his boxers, his feet hopelessly tangled in his jeans
while he struggles to remove the sodden shirt that’s all bunched up around his neck.

_Damn it._

He’s not looking at her (thank God), not doing anything more than trying to wrench an arm from its
cotton prison, but her pulse accelerates anyway. There’s just…entirely too much skin on display. She
has, for the most part, been able to keep herself from fixating on things like that while he’s in the ring
because—well, he’s in the ring. There’s distance, ropes, other people, mass quantities of unwashed-
male sweat, and far too many worries to fence out her ever-present and somewhat-concerning
awareness of shirtless ex-boyfriends. Here in her bathroom however, there are no helpful
distractions. There’s only…shirtless ex-boyfriends.

Tall, sweet, shirtless ex-boyfriends _who belong to someone else now_.

And heavens to Betsey Johnson, but she has _got_ to remember that and drag her eyes away from the
vast and glorious expanse of rain-glistened muscles. Preferably before she launches herself right over
the platonic safety gate and straight into trouble she can ill afford.
“Here you are,” she says in a slightly strained tone, pasting on a bright smile as she holds the blessedly-opaque terrycloth garment up and shakes it at an angle that screens everything save his face from view. “One robe, as promised. I can’t guarantee the fit will be glamorous, but…”

“Ronnie.” To her enormous relief, he turns and shoves both arms into the sleeves rather than taking it from her and exposing her to any more dangerous scenery. “It’s seriously not a big deal how it fits. You don’t have to bother.”

She forces out a chuckle, the room suddenly hot and suffocating. “Who’s bothering? To be honest, I think I’ve always secretly wanted to see you parade around in miniaturized spa gear. You’re just lucky Betty’s been staying with me and I don’t have any silk peignoirs to spare. I’d for sure have you decked out like Gloria Swanson.”

This time—finally—she’s rewarded with a smile. A tiny, short-lasting smile, but a smile nonetheless, and it somehow feels like a victory for the ages. But it also just adds to those off-limits instincts she’s trying to ignore, so she grabs a towel from the rack and tosses it to him. Fast.

“Have you eaten?” she asks abruptly, not trusting herself in the silence that comes when he sits on the edge of the bathtub to dry his hair. “Recently, I mean?”

“Uh…”

He hesitates too long for her to believe anything other than no, and she sighs. “Archie. I know it’s been intense lately, but you have got to start taking better care of yourself.”

“I am,” he says gloomily, shoulders slumping as he lowers the towel.

“Are you, though?” She lifts a brow, arms crossing of their own accord as she stares him down. “‘Cause from here, I have to say it looks more like you’re forgetting you don’t change in phone booths and have an allergy to green space rocks.”

He huffs out something between a snort and a laugh. “I’m really not, Ronnie.”

“Well, if you say so,” she returns in a tone that screams how unconvinced she is. “But just so we’re clear, I happen to have a very fierce aversion to watching good people rake themselves over the coals for terrible things that are beyond their control. I catch you doing that, and you’re going to hear from me. Every time.”

His mouth twists like he’s fighting another smile, but that forlorn, defeated air still hangs about him like mist on a Bronte-penned moor. And when he finally does look up from the towel he’s crushing in his hands, the combination of sadness and worry she reads in his face is borderline heartbreaking.

“What?” she says with a playfulness she doesn’t feel.

If anything, he looks more tired than ever. “Nothing, I just…”

“Just what?” she prompts, taking the towel from him when he trails off into silence and scrubbing it energetically over his hair so he’s not just standing there drizzling.

He sighs, apology in the one eye that’s still visible. “You were going to bed, weren’t you? And I kept—I mean, I’m keeping—you up?”

She was and he is, no two ways about it, but a smile steals over her face anyway. “That’s neither here nor there, Archie.”
“So yes?”

She chuckles, sternly resisting the impulse to finger-comb the tousled mess now topping his head. “Come on, now. Less talking, more drying. Then we can get your clothes hung up and go see to some problems that actually are in our power to remedy.”

And I had the week that came from hell
And yes, I know that you could tell
But you’re like the net under the ledge
When I go flying off the edge
You go flying off as well

By the time he finishes the last swallow of the good-smelling but kinda gross-tasting tea Veronica insists he drink, Archie’s calm enough to be majorly embarrassed at how he’s pretty much just wrecked her entire evening.

Not that she’ll admit her evening’s wrecked, of course.

Even though they both know she doesn’t put on her robe and pajamas until she’s officially decided to go to bed, she keeps acting like she planned to stay up reading or something. Like he didn’t barge in on her and freak out and make her feel like she has to take care of him when that’s basically what she’s already been doing all week. He already owes her bail money for crying out loud, or at least he would if she’d let him even talk about paying her back.

“Ronnie,” he tells her for probably the fiftieth time, raising his voice to be heard over all the stuff she’s telling Smithers on the phone while he stands around awkwardly in the bathrobe she lent him. “I really can walk home. You don’t have to—”

Without turning, Veronica makes a hand-pinching, shut up please gesture at him that effectively cuts him off. “Yes,” she says into the phone. “Thank you. That’s perfect; we’ll meet you downstairs in ten.”

Heaving a sigh, Archie folds his arms and leans back against the wall while he waits for her to hang up.

“What?” she says when she takes the phone away from her ear, eyebrows rising as she swivels back
around. “Don’t give me that look. I told you there’s no way I’m letting you hoof it back in this gale.”

He rolls his eyes, not sure whether he’s supposed to be grateful or annoyed by how stubborn she’s being about this. “Yeah, but Ronnie, you’re not even dressed to go out. And I know we hung my stuff up and everything, but there’s no way it’s even close to dry, so what difference is it if I get rained on again? This way, nobody has to put down towels or trash bags or anything for me to sit on.”

Her mouth opens like she’s about to say something, then snaps back closed almost immediately. For about five seconds, she stares at him, lip bunched between her teeth in a way he thinks probably shouldn’t distract him as much as it does.

“What?” he says, his frown and smile getting a little mixed.

Lips pursing, Veronica tucks some hair behind her ear. “Just…hold that thought, okay?” she says finally. “I’ll be right back.”

She takes off quick, robe swishing and fluttering as she goes, and the frown wins out. There’s no way to ask what she’s up to though, so he waits around for a bit, toe tapping, only she doesn’t return in any kind of time range that counts as right back. But just as he gives up and heads down the hall to see what’s keeping her, she reappears. So suddenly they almost crash, and it gets him weirdly embarrassed all over again. Because he’s sure, he’s sure his stomach isn’t supposed to jump the way it does when, to avoid a collision, he puts his hands out to stop her and they somehow end up on her waist for about three seconds longer than they should. Not when she’s just his friend now. And there’s definitely no way his heart should be beating this hard when she breathes out a funny-sounding little laugh. It’s all wrong.

“Sorry,” he says lamely, stepping back at the same time she does. “I didn’t know you were—”

“No, no, it’s fine! Just—here.” Almost hesitantly, she holds something out, and he notices for the first time that she’s carrying clothing.

More specifically… his clothing. A wadded-up bunch of gray cotton and blue lettering he missed months ago and figured he must’ve lost somewhere, most likely at school.

“Is that…?” he starts, pointing to finish the question.

She nods, eyes still on the t-shirt. “Property of Riverdale High Athletic Department. I’ve been meaning to return it, but…”

“Yeah.” He takes it from her, feeling a little funny as he thinks how it’s probably a good thing she was always good about not forgetting stuff at his house. If he had to deal with all that, wow. It’s bad enough going through his phone and seeing all those photos with her he can’t bring himself to delete because they remind of times he’s always going to want to remember. But hey, they’re still friends though, so, like—is it that terrible he still has them?

“There’s these, too.”

A pair of sweats appears, jolting him back to the here and now, and he smiles out of habit as he remembers how Veronica always turned up her nose at them, saying they were the clothes equivalent of rolling over and waving a white flag. She must remember it too, because one side of her mouth hitches upward.

“Don’t get too excited,” she says. “This isn’t me finally giving my reluctant endorsement to all things sloppy and weightroom-appropriate. I’m only offering this crime against fashion because I’m fresh
out of dry alternatives. And because I feel instinctively that all my pants would turn into mid-calf leggings on you.”

“Thanks.” He takes the sweats from her, the back of his neck going uncomfortably hot and fuzzy when their fingers brush and he realizes he’s about to grab her hand out of habit. “That’s…probably true.”

She doesn’t answer, just smiles wider and tells him to go change so they don’t keep Smithers waiting. He agrees, but it takes a little longer than he expects to collect his wet stuff and get out of the robe and into the dry clothes, so by the time he walks out of the bathroom, Veronica’s waiting for him. Leaning against the door, now dressed in a black raincoat and high-heeled rain boots that still only bring her up to barely past his shoulder, and he has to work hard to slow the grin that spreads across his face when he sees the bored way she’s twirling her keys around a finger.

“All done,” he says, holding his arms out for a second or so before letting them—and the Barney’s bag full of damp, crumpled clothes in his right hand—drop back down to his sides.

“Marvelous,” she says cheerfully. “Ready to re-brave the elements—this time via more sensible methods?”

He nods, and before long they’re in her car and pulling out into the drizzly streets. Neither of them says anything for a bit, the silence broken only by sound of the tires splashing through puddles, the pinging thud of rain on the roof and windshield, and the swish-squeak of wiper blades. But finally Veronica tells him to put the radio on, and they end up groaning together when literally every station he tries has some kind of weather song playing.

“Just leave it there,” she says at length when he pauses on a bouncy, old-sounding tune he thinks he’s heard his dad play before. “I Love A Rainy Night” isn’t exactly a groundbreaking selection, but this station at least has a bigger variety of storm-themed ditties to choose from since it’s mixed-genre. All the rock stations ever do is play ‘Rain,’ ‘Purple Rain,’ ‘November Rain,’ and ‘Have You Ever Seen The Rain’ until you want to throw a sunbeam at their heads.”

Archie feels another of those unwilling smiles starting up again at the contempt in her tone. “Don’t forget ‘Thunderstruck.'”

“Oh, right. How could I?”

She laughs, head tipping back though her eyes never leave the road, and another hush blankets them as the music and rain start to take over. She hums softly, fingers tapping on the wheel, and he wonders absentmindedly as he drums along to the rhythm if he can pick out the chords on the guitar later. If there’s time. He guesses there’s probably less of a chance he’ll have time for stuff like that as there is he’ll wind up behind bars again. Except he’s really not so sure this time that he doesn’t deserve whatever he gets. Yeah, he isn’t the one who gave Randy those drugs, but he is the one who threw the punch that the doctor as good as said killed him. Whether or not that makes him guilty in the eyes of the law, it’s still his fault. The Ronson sisters lost their brother because of him. Because he couldn’t let the bout go. Because he had to win. Maybe he’s not a murderer, but by anyone’s standard, doesn’t that make him…a killer?

“Hey.”

A sudden light pressure on his knee makes him realize he’s nervously jouncing his entire leg up and down, and he glances down to see Veronica’s hand there.

“It’s okay,” she says like she’s reading his mind. “Or, at any rate…it will be.”
He sighs, though the clump of worry knots in his stomach lessens anyway under her support. “How do you know?”

“I don’t,” she answers, aiming a quick smile at him before her gaze goes back to the road. “But I do know you, and I know for a fact you won’t stop until you’ve done everything humanly possible to atone for something that, by the way, isn’t even yours to atone for. The grimmest set of circumstances in the world can’t withstand that level of determination. Besides that…” Giving his knee a brisk little pat, she smiles again, this time without looking over at him. “You have me.”

Does he?

She doesn’t mean it like that of course, but he can’t help his eyebrows going up anyway. Ever since things ended between them, it’s like he’s never quite sure how he’s supposed to act around her. They’re friends, definitely, but sometimes when she looks at him a certain way, or laughs, or gets within five feet of him, he sort of just…forgets that. Or wants to forget it. One of the two; he doesn’t know. And sometimes, he almost thinks she forgets it, too.

Which honestly kind of sucks.

Because whenever he starts wondering if she’s having as much trouble remembering they’re not together anymore as he is, it makes him even more forgetful, and then he does dumb stuff like, like—well, like what he almost did on the couch. When she was sitting so close and being so nice and making him feel like he could take on freaking anything as long as she believed in him…God, if she hadn’t backed away and basically shocked him back to his senses, he could’ve seriously screwed everything up. In seconds.

No, that’s a lie.

Not could’ve…would’ve. He would’ve screwed everything up in seconds.

In truth, it scares him to think about how fast he would’ve kissed her if she hadn’t realized what he was about to do and got the hell out of there, and if he could think of any way to thank her for that without making everything a bazillion times more awkward between them, he would.

But he can’t. There’s just no okay way to go about saying Hey, sorry I kinda almost kissed you the other day. Not without getting into the whys behind it all, and he’s not sure he’s ready to look too closely at those.

“I appreciate it, Ronnie;” he says to get his mind off that memory, because the last thing he needs right now is to get confused (again) about the girl who spent last week feeding him burgers and this week posting his and his friend’s bail. “But like I said, you really don’t have to—”

“I know.”

Something in her voice catches his attention, and he glances at her again to see she’s wearing one of her sadder smiles, one of the ones he hates because it always feels wrong to him somehow that she should ever have to be sad about anything.

“So…?” he says carefully when she doesn’t immediately finish whatever it is she’s obviously got to say.

Her eyes cut over to him, the smile less-sad now. “So what? You think you being all noble and saying I don’t have to help is going to suddenly convince me I should just leave you to your own devices?”
Before he can stop himself, he snorts. Yeah, come to think of it, that is a stupid idea.

“Besides,” she adds, voice sharpening. “It’s not like I wouldn’t adore the chance to remind Elio this is not his town and he can’t just blatantly pin his crimes on whomever he wants. ‘Not personal, just business’ is one thing, but cavalier disregard for any and all collateral damage is entirely another, and I for one won’t stand for it. Particularly when said collateral damage happens to include my friends.”

She’s so obviously outraged over the whole thing that it’s funny, but also kind of touching because it’s not like she’s in any way to blame for whatever crap Elio pulls.

“Ronnie, it’s not your fault,” he reminds her, his free hand going to cover the smaller one that’s still on his knee. “He’s just…”

“A fledgling mobster? An adolescent Don? A wannabe all-powerful lynchpin who’s successfully snuffed out all remaining traces of his moral compass but lacks the necessary guts to actually rule?”

He cracks another smile in spite of the non-funniness of the subject. “I was going to say an asshole, but yeah.”

“Oh, he’s that, too. In spades,” she assures him, rolling her eyes. “But at the end of the day, he’s a bigger ass et than ass-hat. If for no other reason than that he’s abominably vain and you can always bank on that vanity causing him to temporarily lose sight of the long-term goals.”

He nods, remembering the guy’s quick shift from annoyingly-calm to pissed. “You know last year, I thought you and he were friends?”

“We are.” Catching sight of his dumbstruck expression, Veronica makes a sound midway between a laugh and sigh. “Granted, only in the loosest sense of the word, and absolutely not how I’m friends with you—or, Betty or Kevin and everyone—but…”

He feels his eyebrows going higher, her casual attitude throwing him for a loop. “But…?”

She shrugs. “But, in the world he and I both grew up in, what we have is about as close to friendship as it gets. There is no…hanging out and drinking milkshakes. You don’t ask what’s wrong with someone when they seem sadder than usual, you just use your eyes and open your ears, and you keep your mouth shut so you can stay on good terms with everyone who’s not actively trying to stab you in the back.”

“And if someone is trying to stab you in the back?” he asks—partly out of curiosity, but also partly because her jaw’s set in a way that makes him think she’s not super proud of what she’s saying.

“They way I was raised Archie, my whole pre-Riverdale life—you don’t keep someone’s dirty secrets for love or friendship’s sake. You keep them because one day, you may need them as ammunition. And it’s not even deliberately malicious or vindictive, it’s just…what you do. Call it social Darwinism or mutually assured destruction—either way, it’s essential to survival.”

He stares at her for a minute or so, amazed by her matter-of-factness. Technically, he guesses he knows all this. God knows he got plenty of hints last year that Veronica’s life has probably always had more money than real happiness in it, but he’s not sure he’s ever thought in terms of what it was like for her before she moved to town and met all of them. For as long as he can remember, he’s been able to call Jughead and Betty his friends. They’ve built tree forts, drunk from garden hoses, argued over popsicle flavors, fought and refused to speak to each other. Always, though, he’s known
he can count on them just like they can count on him. However mad they all are at each other, however much they disagree, however much they’ve talked or not-talked, they won’t set out to hurt each other or ruin each other’s lives out of pure spite, because that’s just not what friends do. And here Veronica is acting like Elio switching between being her friend and trying to screw her over is no big deal.

“Ronnie, that…really sucks,” he says finally, unable to pretend for even a second that he gets it.

“Oh, I know that now,” she says almost cheerfully. “Not to go all sappy greeting card on you, but you—all of you I mean—have been something of a revelation in the meaning of friendship.”

A disbelieving chuckle sneaks out. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“So did your old kind-of-friends ever cause you this much trouble?”

Veronica smiles. “No.”

He nods, wrinkling his nose because yeah, he figured.

“But,” she continues, whacking him lightly on the knee, “they also didn’t give a damn about me the second my family’s name got dragged through the mud, and they certainly didn’t care how I felt about anything, ever. Call me a deranged masochist, but I’ll always take friends that cause me trouble and aren’t afraid to publicly argue with me at the drop of a hat over friends who would happily watch me burn but pretend to like me as long as my social standing increases theirs.”

He sighs. “Well, at least you know I’d never be happy watching you burn.”

“Wow.” Her light laugh bubbles out. “You say that like it’s nothing.”

“Because it kind of is.”

“I beg to differ.”

A frown knits his brows together, and he glances at her on reflex. She’s smiling again, like she knows a secret or joke he doesn’t, and it’s confusing.

“Why?” he says bluntly.

“Archie.” She doesn’t look over at him this time, but just something about the way she says his name makes him feel calmer. “I know you have trouble believing this, but not everyone takes kindness for granted. What you consider average decency, most of the rest of the world considers going above and beyond the call of duty.”

Kindness…decency…call of duty.

He still doesn’t get what she’s talking about, but he can tell it’s meant as a compliment, so (naturally), it makes him redder.

“Oh,” he ends up saying. “Okay.”

Veronica’s smile widens. “I rest my case.”

It feels like she’s teasing him, so he decides to quit trying to understand and just laughs instead. And by the time she pulls into his driveway, the two of them now head-bobbing along to Rihanna of all
things, he realizes with a start that she’s somehow made him forget for the better part of the ride over how anxious he is about basically everything. Which he can’t let go unmentioned.

“Thank you,” he says for what must be the hundredth time tonight. It barely scratches the surface of what he means, but it’s the best he can do.

“No thanks necessary, Sir Knight,” she jokes, turning to face him. “You’re always welcome to stand under my umbrella-ella-ella if need be. Just promise me you’ll turn off worry mode for one night and get some sleep, huh?”


“Excellente.” Mouth twisting into a crooked smile, she holds up a fist. “Now get going. And hey! Try to dodge as many raindrops as you can— you might actually be at risk of melting from sweetness.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He smiles back, awkwardly bumping his fist against hers and wishing right away that he’d just left well enough alone since now his knuckles are tingling from the contact. “Goodnight, Ronnie.”

“Goodnight, Archie.”

The softness is back in her voice and eyes again, but before he has a chance to wonder why, he steps out of the car. In a hurry. And as he jogs toward the porch, he tells himself it’s nothing. That all the prickling skin and racing adrenaline is nothing. That it’s just…from the rain.

He also wishes he believed it.

_Crap,_ why can’t he ever seem to get her out of his head?

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*Title is from a Led Zeppelin song by the same name that I absolutely love and will always tell people to go and listen to (seriously, go listen to it). Song lyrics quoted at the beginning of each section are, respectively: “The Gentleman Is A Dope” by Ella Fitzgerald (the Eydie Gorme/Jo Stafford/Dinah Shore versions are also good), and “Something I Need” by OneRepublic.

*So. This is another of those technically-unnecessary-but-majorly-appreciated scenes that make me love whichever RD writer is responsible for it, and the second I saw it, I knew I was going to do AT LEAST one fic on it. It’s the best. Archie freaking out and Ronnie calming him down? Um, YES. Please sir, may I freaking have some more??? I’ll never get tired of watching these two be each other’s other half whilst claiming to be “friends.” I mean, this scene lasts hardly any time at all, but it still encapsulates why
A&V are the ones for each other and also parallels both the wrist-wrapping scene from 1x05 and the (EXTREMELY! UNDERRATED!) trailer scene in 1x11 when V is the one panicking and A talks her down and brings everything back into focus.

Plus, it’s fun to imagine what went on after the scene cuts away...after V solved the problem, did A just pull a Forrest Gump and be like “I’m pretty tired...think I’ll go home now,” and if so, how long did it take V to inform him that THAT was not happening? Were there awkward silences after the panic was gone and they both remember the couch incident? Was Smithers there, and did he raise his eyebrows? Did Fred? Call me obsessed, but I like to know these things. It’s important to me. Especially when you consider that A ran out in the rain in the middle of the night because he was stressed and needed to talk to V. The boy *has* a phone. He could’ve called/texted. But did he? NO. He had to talk to HER, and he had to talk to her face-to-face. Seriously though, the CUTENESS.

*In related news, because the stretch from 3x18-3x22 has some of my FAVORITE A&V moments, you'll be seeing more than one fic based in/around this episode. I love how V casually takes care of A and the rest of the boys, and how quickly the boys accept her basically being A’s gf/manager. (Note: Mad Dog is my favorite new character since Ms. Toni Topaz, and I am ECSTATIC that RD decided to bring him back. Never go away, my dude! <3)

*Finally: thanks as always for reading/commenting, and I *will* be catching up on reading and replying to comments this week. Hope everyone had a good week (my condolences to everyone starting school), and fingers crossed that we get the S4 trailer on Monday, because wouldn't a Labor Day presentation be fitting?
Be Wise, Be Smart, Behave, My Heart

Chapter Summary

Archie and Veronica are broken up, but it's okay because they're Just Friends™ and it's all good.
Really.

Set somewhere between 3x16-3x18, and told from both A&V’s POV. It's a little similar in tone to the preceding chapter, but somewhat fluffier, because fluff is always good :]

Chapter Notes

This one’s dedicated to veronicathemafiaprincess/monica-posh because it should have been posted a while back and she’s the one who keeps me relatively honest by reminding me about things like that <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She’s tired. In a hurry. Thinking of a quintillion-and-one things at once, and the puddle of grease is almost invisible in the shadow of the fryer. Perhaps what happens next—flat, brisk-moving rubber heels squeak-skidding in oil—is inevitable, but it still comes as the nastiest kind of surprise.

"Damn it!"

The building, quiet and devoid of patrons thanks to the late hour, echoes and reechoes with her screech and the crash of flying trays as she flails all the way down to a tailbone-killing seat on the tile. Squirming in discomfort, she heaves a sigh due half to exasperation, half to her unforgiving landing pad, and glares at her surroundings.

"Perfect," she mutters.

In hindsight, maybe insisting Pop leave early to go check on his mother wasn’t such a great idea after all. Things haven’t been too busy all evening, but closing up for the night is a job with so many tasks that keeping them all straight is something of a nightmare, and her mental capacities are already frayed from that calc test she stayed up studying for late last night. It’s probably pure luck she hasn’t experienced anything worse than a fall, and that far removed from anyone’s presence or line of sight.

Right as she comforts herself with the knowledge her clumsy moment’s gone unnoticed, however, the bell at the front of the shop clangs. And in trying to clamber to her feet so the gaffe stays secret, she slips again—this time kicking silverware around with an obnoxious clatter.

"Ronnie?"
Double damn it.

Her eyes close as the voice she recognizes all too well is followed by the sound of footsteps she also recognizes all too well darts across the floor and, not for the first time this evening, she wishes she were anywhere but here. It’s not fair that of all the people who could’ve happened to catch her like this, it has to be him.

“Archie, hey,” she says in the perkiest tone she can muster when his concerned face appears somewhere above her. “We’re technically closed, but if you’d like a burger-fries combo and can wait a sec, I think I can accommodate you.”

He stares wide-eyed at her for a second, like he’s not sure whether he should laugh or ask if she’s concussed. “Ronnie, are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine. I just slipped in the fryer’s splash zone, that’s all.” She starts to stand, but right on cue, her feet slide out from under her again and her knee smacks the ground smartly. “See?” she says, wincing. “As fortune would have it, grease is very much the word right now.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” Before she realizes what he’s doing, he hops the counter in one adept move and lands beside her, hand extended. “You didn’t break anything, did you?”

“No,” she answers, laughing to distract herself from the tingle that shoots up her arm when his hand engulfs hers. “Unless you want to include my pride and maybe one salt shaker.”

Archie grins, hauling her to her feet at a speed that puts her quite a bit closer to him than she’d prefer considering she now knows exactly why she’s noticed him talking and hanging with Josie far more than his usual wont. “That’s good to know.”

“Right?” She sidesteps him swiftly, one degree away from alarmed at how aware her senses are of his presence. Veronica Lodge has never in her life been subject to uncontrollable impulses or irrepressible passion, but whenever she’s around this one particular person, it somehow becomes difficult to remember that. “Imagine how embarrassing it would be to have to call in my own Life Alert when I’m not even a senior in high school yet.”

Behind her, he laughs. “Well, you did fall, Ronnie, and you definitely couldn’t get up.”

“True.” Carefully avoiding the smeared, glistening puddle, she squats down and begins collected the scattered pieces of cutlery. “Hey, what did you need, by the way? Before I forget.”

“Oh, yeah.” His voice sounds closer than she expects, and she’s startled to glance up and find him right beside her, stacking trays and scratched forks like it’s a matter of course. “I think I might’ve left my pencil here earlier when I was studying with Jughead and Betty.”

Veronica frowns. “Well, I can check the lost and found, but I don’t recall Pop mentioning anything like that when he left. What color, and does it have any stickers, or special kinds of markings on it?”

“No stickers or anything, it’s just…yellow. With a little blue cap eraser? It is kind of chewed on though, if that helps. I got a little stressed during that last math test.”

Wait a second.

She tilts her head back to squint up at him as he stands. “Hold on, you said pencil, not pen, didn’t you?”

He looks confused. “Yeah, why?”
“Oh my God.” Balancing her trays, she stands carefully. “Archie, please tell me you didn’t come all the way over here right at closing to hunt for something you have probably fifty-eight of buried in your couch cushions alone.”

“Well, not exactly,” he responds, looking too sheepish for her to buy it. “It’s not just any pencil, it’s…kind of my lucky pencil.”

“Your lucky pencil.” Now she really has heard it all. “Okay. Not to belittle the mysterious forces of fate or anything, but what?”

He sighs, following her toward the sink. “I don’t know. Just—I used it on the last couple of tests, and I did way better than I have in a while. I really need to do decent on that English test tomorrow, so I figured…”

“Ah.” As hard as she tries, she can’t stop her smile. “Did it occur to you perchance that the reason you did better on those tests may have more to do with you studying your brains out than your having or not-having some literal dime-a-dozen inanimate object?”

“Yeah.” He chuckles, the sound still bordering on embarrassed. “That’s pretty much what Jughead said, too. Except he called it a ‘distant relative of a murdered tree’ in his version.”

“He would.”

Archie’s laugh is genuine this time, the noise warm and happy in a way Veronica could swear she feels. Out of the corner of one eye, she watches him dump his cargo into the sink full of dishwater. As with most things, he’s not overly-careful, and she has to bite back a grin when he creates a small tsunami of sudsy water that splashes up into his face.

“Crap,” he mutters, eyes and nose scrunched up, and it’s almost disgusting how cute she finds him. Or—could find him, in the unlikely event she were free to apply adjectives like ‘cute’ and ‘adorable’ to him.

Which she isn’t.

Not anymore.

“Towel, Merman?” she inquires in a voice that’s probably a bit too soft to count as teasing.

He nods frantically as water drips down his chin, mumbling something out the side of his mouth that she can’t quite catch.

“Here you go,” she says, snagging a cloth from the clean pile and doing her best to dry him off.

“What was that last part?”

“I said I think I’ve got soap in my eye.” Grimacing, he reaches for the faucet handles, off-track about ten inches, then fourteen. “Ronnie, can you…?”

“Yeah, I got it. Just let me—Archie! Stop trying and hold still; you’re nowhere close.”

Giggling in spite of herself at his Long John Silver-esque squint, she slaps his hands away and turns the water on, testing to make sure it’s not scalding before she guides him to it.

“All good?” she questions when he finally raises his head, the edge of his hairline and the neck of his t-shirt now soaked. “Or should I go in search of a snorkel?”
“Yeah, no.” He shoots her a sheepish grin, water dripping everywhere. “I’m good.”

“Excellent. Here.” Biting back a smile, she hands him a clean towel off the stack she carried in earlier. “I don’t know how much it’ll help, but it can’t hurt.”

“Speaking of help,” he says, the thick cloth burying his voice. “You want some?”

“Oh! No. No, I’m fine.” She waves a hand at the pile of dishes, laughing to cut the refusal’s curtness. “I don’t want to keep you from study group or anything.”

He lifts his brows, clearly not buying it. “Ronnie, it’s not a problem. And anyway, I’m done studying for the night. Officially done, I mean. I’m pretty sure I was mentally done like four hours ago when we were going over dates.”

\textit{Dates.}

She knows full well he means it in a historical context, but the mere word still makes her flinch. However okay the two of them have managed to be after everything that’s happened in the last year, she still has no desire to even think about Archie in connection with the term \textit{date}. Particularly not when she has it on fairly good authority (aka, the ever-active Riverdale High gossip chain) that she’s not a factor in the discussion.

And yet…for all that dread, she can’t help the next words that come out of her mouth.

“How’s Josie?”

She doesn’t turn her head, but even so, she catches the surprised glance he sends her way out of the corner of her eye.

“Good,” he answers after an awkward second or two, scrubbing hard at a pot. “Uh…how’s Reggie?”

Reggie.

Reggie?

It’s embarrassing that it takes her a full ten seconds to grasp why in the world he would ask her that since, as usual, she’s completely forgotten he’s not caught up on the details of her social life. Right, of course, Reggie. Her other ex. Assuming he even counts as an ex. If she’s being totally honest with herself, she never really gave the whole thing enough thought to know for sure how to define it—office-ish flirtation-turned-romance? Recurring hookup? Something located somewhere between the rather roomy posts of dating and dallying? Convenient placeholder? God, it’s been a banner year in the l’amour department for Veronica Lodge, hasn’t it?

“He’s good too,” she responds, feigning interest in the plates she’s moving to the washer. “I guess.”

“You guess?”

She sighs, punching the start button with maybe a little more energy than necessary. “We’re not what you’d call close as of late. Or on speaking terms, even. Things were done, conversations were had, truths were uttered. It’s now entirely possible he hates my guts.”

“What?” There’s a louder-than-normal splash, a belated clatter of metal on metal, and she doesn’t have to look to know he’s dropped the pot and is now staring. “Why would he do that?”
“Honestly?” She tries to laugh, but it just winds up sounding tired more than anything else. “I’m not sure. Maybe I’m not as much of a what-you-see-is-what-you-get type person as I’ve always thought.”

To her surprise, Archie chuckles.

“What?” she demands, a flicker of indignation running through her at how funny he seems to find her statement.

He darts a grin at her, eyes twinkling. “No offense Ronnie, but you’re not exactly an open-book.”

“Excuse me?” Even though she knows he’s teasing (mostly), she props a hand on her hip, hackles rising. “And just what is that meant to imply?”

The grin turns into a laugh. “Nothing, only…you play things pretty close to the chest sometimes. Not in a bad way,” he hastens to add, probably due to the warning look she levels at him. “In like a—I don’t know, a mysterious way.”

As neat saves go, it’s a fairly good one. Still, she rolls her eyes to let him know she’s not fooled. “Oh, joy. So I’m a mystery.”

“Well, not to me.”

He says it lightly—like it’s a fact so indisputable that the need for self-consciousness is nil, and his confidence is more than a little intriguing.

“Oh?” Veronica says as casually as possible.

“Yeah.” The smile in his voice is apparent, and she’s not sure how to handle the hot, fuzzy sensation that sweeps over her when he reaches past her to set the pot down and his arm scrapes against hers. “I kind of did a lot of studying to figure you out, too.”

“I see. And am I to assume there was some sort of lucky pencil involved in that, as well?” she queries, deliberately refraining from asking what he ‘figured out’ about her. Because whatever it is, she has a terrible suspicion that it’s probably all spot-on. As clueless as he can be sometimes, Archie has an unsettling knack for seeing right through her, and she’s not too gung-ho on the prospect of hearing what he’s learned.

“No, nothing like that.” He peeks at her over his shoulder, the apology rendered pointless by the laughter he’s failing to smother. “I, uh—”
“What? Didn’t see me there?” she fills in, lifting a brow. “It was an accident? You don’t know what came over you?”

He grins and holds out the half-filled pot. “Yeah, you wanna just go ahead and get me back now?”

“That would be childish,” she returns, smoothing her apron down with her best air of dignity. “And anyway, what’s the point? You’re halfway to Drenched-ville as is.”

He bursts into laughter, his head tipping back in a way the sarcasm doesn’t deserve, and she realizes with a funny little twinge of the heart that she’s missed this. For a good while now. In the emptiness, the sound reverberates off the bare walls, and she watches him chortle away with a smile she can’t for the life of her smother. So, to drag her uncooperative mind away from taboo topics, she waits until he’s turned back to the sink, then quickly scoops a handful of foamy bubbles and blows it straight at him.

“But on the other hand,” she says like it’s a matter of course while he spits and sputters, “you are pretty suds-free at the moment, so…”

His mouth curls into a grin, and he lifts a palmful of dishwater threateningly enough to send her into instant retreat.

“No,” she warns, laughing even as she points sternly at him. “Don’t you dare. I want to get out of here before three a.m. and besides, I’ve already slipped enough for one night.”

“Oh, yeah.” He ducks his head in apparent remorse, but the grin on his face remains in high-beam mode and she knows him well enough to be certain he’s still giggling on the inside. “Truce then, I guess?”

“Truce.”

Without thinking, she squeezes his arm as she rejoins him at the sink. And for one hideously nerve-wracking second when his gaze drifts down to her hand on his sleeve, she’s convinced she just committed a major blunder. They are, after all, still somewhat adjusting to the awkward status of friendly exes, and she doesn’t want to ruin the progress they’ve made by accidentally blurring any lines. If continuing the habits she’s honed ever since meeting him make him uncomfortable, she needs to quit them. Preferably as soon as possible.

But Archie just smiles at her again, warm and cheerful, and she breathes a sigh of relief as she makes a joke about who-knows-what to disguise that relief and finds a quick excuse to head for the mop and bucket. He’s not averse to the random touches. They don’t bother him. She doesn’t have to unlearn any more instinctive behaviors just to function on a relatively normal level around him, and that’s wonderful because now they don’t have to worry about becoming bitter exes, they can just be friends. He’s moved on with a beautiful, kickass girl who shares his love of music and calls it like she sees it, and he’s happy. As his friend, she should be glad.

Should.

It kills her a little that she can’t quite seem to get there.
Chill out, will you? Archie tells himself firmly, scrubbing hard at a ketchup stain that doesn’t want to come off the stupid tray. *You’re just lending a hand to help a friend. This isn’t weird. This isn’t weird, this isn’t weird.*

But then the door to the kitchen area swings in and Veronica appears, holding one tub of dishes balanced on her shoulder and another tucked under her arm, and he’s forced to admit that yeah. It’s definitely weird. Messy ponytails and sneakers have never been her thing, not even for games or cheer practice, and it seems wrong somehow to see her moving plates and wiping tables.

It’s also…something else.

Something he really doesn’t want to think about, because if he thinks about it, he’ll also have to think about why he doesn’t want to think about it. And if he thinks about the why, it’ll be a lot harder to make himself believe he’s not standing around and basically lying his head off about stuff that’s way more complicated than he’d like it to be. Not the pencil thing of course; he told her the truth about that, but pretty much everything else feels kind of dishonest—right now for instance, he’s working real hard to convince himself that he hasn’t been smiling at her like an idiot every time she looks a little bit in his direction, and he’s not having a whole lot of success. Especially since he keeps noticing and then getting hung up on random things she says or does. Like the way she gets annoyed when the freezer door won’t close right and mutters something in Spanish before hip-checking it shut with a scary-sounding *y tu madre,* and how she has to jump to reach anything on the taller shelves, and the sigh she heaves when he holds up a pot lid to show her how shiny-clean it is and she gets a look at her reflection.

“What?” he says, laughing at her expression though he doesn’t understand it.

She makes a face, reaching up to pluck at the sweaty little curls sticking out all around her hairline. “*Archie. As a friend, it’s your official duty to alert me as speedily as possible whenever I and my hair start to look like I just got back from a major bender.*”

“Ronnie, come on,” he argues, a grin escaping as she suddenly yanks the thing holding her hair out and starts fluffing, finger-combing, and re-fixing the black waves with a grumpy air. “You look great. And even if you didn’t, who cares? You’ve been running around like crazy all night.”

“And?” she says in tone that makes him grin even wider as she straightens up, ponytail back in place. “Busyness is no excuse for slovenliness. Even if it were, I’d never allow myself to adopt that defeatist way of thinking. That’s the kind of slipshod mentality that inevitably results in the wearing of fashion atrocities like overalls and—perish the thought—crocs.”

There’s no way he can *not* laugh at the horror just the suggestion brings to her face, and it hits him suddenly when she joins in that he hasn’t felt this cheerful in a while. Ever since he came back to Riverdale, since he watched himself pretty much single-handedly ruin everything he’s ever cared about, it’s been an uphill climb just to get back to something that feels reasonably close to normal. He thinks he’s there now, but sometimes it gets bad again, and he never knows why.

Standing around with Veronica though, he wonders if he’s maybe got his answer after all: her. Whatever happens in his life, everything always seems to come back to her. When he’s with her, he’s happy. When he’s not with her, he’s…no, he probably shouldn’t think stuff like that. It can’t possibly lead anywhere helpful.

By the time they head out into the quiet night and she locks the door behind them, he’s caught between feeling relieved and sorry they’re about to say goodnight. Whatever’s going on in his head, it can’t be good. Or, at any rate, it can only end in one thing: disaster. However hard it is to remember—for him, at least—they’re not dating anymore. He’s with Josie, and even if she’s no
longer with with Reggie, she doesn’t love him. Not the way she used to, and definitely not the way he…crap.

Yeah, it’s definitely a good thing they’re leaving.

“’Night, Ronnie,” he says as soon as they reach her car, realizing too late that he really didn’t need to walk her there seeing as how they’re parked maybe ten feet apart in the empty lot. Thankfully though, she doesn’t seem to notice and just smiles at him while he holds the door open for her.

“Goodnight, Archie. And thank you,” she adds, voice going soft in a way he wishes it wouldn’t, because when she looks at him like that, it makes it just that much easier to forget he shouldn’t be looking back at her and remembering how it felt to kiss her. “Glad to see you’re still hanging that hero cape of yours up with the rest of your coats.”

He laughs, not sure how else he’s supposed to respond to that kind of joke. “I guess.”

“I’m serious,” she says, and though he only meets her gaze for a split second, he believes her. “Don’t ever lose that, okay? It’s kind of what makes you you. Getting rid of that would be a tragedy.”

“Of epic proportions?” he says without thinking and immediately flushes.

NO, dammit.

That is not something he should be bringing up. At all, but especially not when they’re alone in a dark parking lot with moonlight and stars and he’s already noticing the way all that light bounces off her hair and kind of gets caught in her eyes when he shouldn’t be noticing any of that at all.

But Veronica doesn’t seem to get mad. She just sits there and studies him for a second or two, a small wrinkle scrunching her eyebrows.

“Right,” she says in the same soft voice, a smile that makes no sense to him tilting her lips up. “Exactly.”

He kicks himself for the slip all the way home. What is he doing? Why does he even remember that conversation from last year? And most of all, why did Veronica look at him like that? Almost as if she were sad?

He doesn’t know. It makes his brain spin just thinking about all the possible answers, most of which don’t even add up to the one he has no business hoping might be the real reason. Because if she maybe does miss him—just a little, like he sometimes kind of thinks she might—what good is that? It’s the same as burning up in Death Valley, or the Sahara or something, and someone offering you a swallow of water. Nice, but totally fricking useless, because you’re probably just going to die of thirst anyways.

Heaving a sigh, he slams the truck’s door a little harder than he means to, so it’s not too surprising when he walks in to find his dad actually awake on the couch. As usual though, Dad doesn’t say anything about the door-slam—he just raises his eyebrows.

“ Took kind of a while to hunt down the magic wand, huh?” he asks.

Archie shakes his head, grinning in spite of himself. “Not really. When I got to Pop’s, Veronica was closing up. She was by herself ’cause Pop left early to check on his mom or something, so I gave her a hand.”

“Oh.”
His head jerks up at the funny note in his dad’s voice, and he squints at the man for a second, trying to gauge whether or not he’s being made fun of. But Dad’s just got his eyes closed again, and aside from the small pucker around his mouth that looks like it could be the beginnings of a smirk, it’s hard to tell for sure. Besides, it’s not like he needs anyone else pointing out how dumb he is for still liking…to spend time with his ex-girlfriend. He gets that. There just doesn’t seem to be much he can do about it; he always thought you got over someone once some time passed after the breakup, but this is the second time he’s found himself having issues doing that, and no, he does not want to think about how the girl he’s having trouble getting over now is the same one he had trouble getting over then.

Or how if he wants to be technical about it, he never actually did get over her…he just went around telling himself he needed to, and then she showed up on his porch at Christmas and told him she loved him, and why the hell did he have to go and screw everything up? Now he can’t even be in the same room with her without having to be on his guard all the time; if he looks her way or laughs at something she says, everybody including him questions why. Like Josie didn’t exactly come right out and say Dude, are you sure this isn’t just some kind of a rebound? but he knows a big part of the reason she wasn’t too sure about them making it official was because of Veronica. And not even Veronica, really, but him. Him and his feelings for Veronica.

Not that he has feelings for Veronica.

None except leftovers, that is. It’s just that…he misses her sometimes. And he’s not the best at breaking habits, and he didn’t really know it until they broke up, but he has a lot of habits when it comes to her.

Like…a lot.

Come to think of it, that’s probably why he can’t stop watching her and stuff. Like in the parking lot, when she looked up at him and he got that funny feeling in his chest he always used to get right before he leaned down and kissed her. It’s not because he still loves her, it’s just…habit.

Yeah, definitely.

Habit.

And that’s fine, right?

“Son?”

He jumps, looking up to find Dad watching him from the couch, eyes open and eyebrows way up on his head, and it’s embarrassing to realize he’s still standing smack-dab in the middle of the living room.

“Yeah?” he says.

Dad smiles. “You planning to stand there and gather dust all night?”

“No. No, just…” Archie rubs a finger across one eye, laughing because he doesn’t know what else to do. “It’s been a long day, Dad. My brain’s pretty fried.”

“I’ll bet.”

Okay, now he’s sure of it—that’s definitely speculation he hears in his parent’s voice, and now he’s really got to get out of here before the conversation can get awkward.
“Yeah, all that studying was pretty rough,” he says quickly, pointing behind him with his thumb. “So I’m uh, gonna go on up to bed now. Got a couple tests tomorrow; I could really use the sleep. Goodnight.”

A chuckle sounds behind him as he basically sprints for the stairs, but he doesn’t stop or even begin to slow down, not even when his dad calls a Goodnight, Arch that sounds a lot like he’s trying not to laugh. It’s a gigantic relief when he falls safely into bed; he even yanks the covers up around his ears like he used to do when he was little and scared so he can’t hear anything, but it’s no good. He can’t fall asleep. His stupid head’s too busy replaying bits and pieces of what happened earlier, and it kind of seriously freaks him out because it’s almost like he’s got no choice in the matter. Like he’s nowhere close to a relationship expert or anything, but even he knows he shouldn’t be having this much trouble trying to not think about his ex-girlfriend in a way that’s not so ex-like. Especially when she’s not into him and he’s got a girlfriend he cares about. Because he does care about Josie. Just like he cares about Veronica.

And Jughead. And Betty. And Reggie, and Kevin, and Moose, and Cheryl, and…crap, this isn’t helping him get unmixed-up at all, is it? ‘Cause yeah, whatever it is that’s going on with him, he knows damn well doesn’t involve anyone he’s ever called a friend except for Veronica and Josie. And if he’s really honest with himself, it might not even be an and thing. There is, after all, only one person he has a lot of trouble getting out of his mind, and while one part of him wishes he could quit, another part of him is okay, and maybe even happy with the fact that he can’t.

Which is pretty messed up.

Puffing out a loud breath, he slumps deep into the pillows, digging the heels of both hands into his eyes.

Cut it out already, dude he tells himself silently. What the hell is wrong with you?

He falls asleep not knowing the answer—or not wanting to admit it, anyway—and he guesses it’s his own fault that he gets maybe an hour of uninterrupted rest before his alarm’s screeching in his ear that it’s time for school.

“Great,” he mutters, but there’s no time for anything except rushing around, so he drags himself out of bed and staggers off to the bathroom.

And when he gets out of the shower and clatters downstairs, hauling his backpack along by a strap while he pulls on his shirt one-handed, he guesses it’s also his fault that his dad’s watching him over the top of a coffee cup, eyes twinkling.

“What?” he says, grinning back self-consciously.

“Nothing.” The almost-smirk is still there though, and his dad nods toward the clock. “You need a lift so you don’t have to park today, or, you know…drive?”

“Nah, I’m good, Dad.” He rips a packet of uncooked Pop Tarts open with his teeth, stuffing them in his mouth as he grabs a sports bottle out of the cabinet and sloshes some milk into it. “I’ll just stomp on it, and if I run to class, I’ll make it there in plenty of time.”

“Well, if you’re sure.”

Something bright yellow appears out of the corner of his eye, and he glances up from the refrigerator to see his dad holding out a familiar-looking stick.
“What’s that?” he says before he thinks, crumbs exploding from his mouth.

“You got me, son.” Perfectly straight-faced, his dad unzips a corner of the backpack and tucks the pencil inside. “But Veronica thought you might need it.”

“Veronica?” He tries to sound nonchalant, but even he can tell his voice is a little higher-pitched than usual.

“Yeah,” Dad says with the same knowing twinkle. “She stopped by while you were in the shower. Said you forgot it at Pop’s? Now, I didn’t see how that could be, seeing as how you made a special trip last night just to get it, but…she seemed sure.”

Archie’s face warms as his stupidity sinks in. “Oh, uh…yeah. I guess I did. Thanks.”

Dad cocks his head, eyebrows lifting as he bends to take another slurp of coffee. “You’re welcome, but…don’t know if I’m really the one you should be thanking.”

“Yeah, I…” He sticks on a smile, edging toward the door before his dad can ask any awkward questions. “I’ll be sure and tell her. Later, though. At school. Gotta go now, Dad, see ya.”

“Drive safe, kiddo.”

“I will.”

He does, though it takes him longer than it should because he sits a little too long at three different stop signs and ends up having to park out near the baseball field. Then it’s a long sprint to class, and he still barely makes it by the last ring of the final bell, so there’s no chance to do anything except drop into the nearest empty desk and start digging out writing supplies.

But first chance he gets, when everybody else is bending over their tests, he risks a glance over his shoulder at the person sitting one row over and one seat behind him. And as luck would have it, she’s looking in his direction too, her eyes wide and curious.

Thank you he mouths, holding the pencil up subtly.

She smiles, and it’s like the room gets brighter when she sends him a quick wink.

Least I could do she mouths back. Good luck.

Archie grins back, holding the pencil up in front of his nose as he returns the wink, and she rolls her eyes.

He decides it’s best to not ask himself why he spends the entire test grinning at even the questions he doesn’t know the answers to.

Chapter End Notes
*Title is a line from the song “Too Close For Comfort.” Eydie Gorme does my favorite version, but Michael Buble has a good one, too (really, every version I’ve ever heard of this song is good).

*I started this one back around the time 3x11 aired (so yes, I was super happy when the 3x18 couch scene came out because it was total vindication, even down to Fred saying something, ugh my HEART), but I kept working on other stuff and forgetting to upload it, or finding something else I’d forgotten when I meant to upload it, so...here it is. Better late than never, I guess?

*This is one of those fics rooted firmly in my headcanon that Archie and Veronica had several awkward run-ins at Pop’s and at school that we never got to glimpse until the prom episode. It is also one of those fics firmly rooted in my love for all A&V scenes where Archie just casually helps Veronica with whatever manual labor’s at hand because that stuff’s super cute, and I cannot be the only one who’d like to see those two closing up/doing final inventory together. I CAN’T be.

*Speaking of the 3x18 couch scene, OH my GOSH. The way Veronica hightails it out of there!!! The way Archie stares after her!!!! The parallels to the couch scene in 1x10!!! Archie’s FACE!!!! It’s adorable, and my love for it knows no bounds. I’m touching on it in the follow-up fic to Ch. 26 I’m currently working on, but I’ll probably also do a whole different chapter based on that one scene alone, because there’s just too much good stuff there.

*Random note: I have no episodic proof other than that absolutely hilarious moment at the fight in 3x18 when V’s maybe a little TOO chipper and confident and an eyebrow gets raised, but I like to think the primary reason Josie never really expected a lasting relationship with Archie was because she saw enough of A&V’s interactions to let her know there was no point in bothering. Even in Big Fun, Archie couldn’t help himself and snuck a peek at Veronica; who really wants to waste their time being someone’s second choice?

*I had something semi-important to add about something, but I just got done working out and now I’m too tired to remember what it was. (Also, I was dumb and made the mistake of listening to one (1) old Pussycat Dolls song, and now I’m in the throes of a PCD marathon and can’t stop.) So, if I remember tomorrow, I’ll try to come back and add it to the notes. If I don’t remember...I’m sorry.

**As always, thanks for reading/commenting! Hope everyone’s doing well, and that y’all had a chillier first day of fall than I did! <3

End Notes

I'm going to try to update this once a week (more if I can manage it) because there just isn't enough stuff starring Archie/Veronica out there. If you have a prompt/idea/whatever, feel free to suggest it here or send it to me on tumblr (alwaysspeaksrermind). Or if you just have a lot of feelings about Varchie/Archieronnie or Riverdale in general, you
can let me know that, too. I love discussing this show.
Thanks for reading! :) 

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!