Nothing Wrong With It

by nouseforaname

Summary

They say that the slightest of changes can produce a ripple effect on a course of events.

Betty makes a startling discovery about herself over the summer, which throws a gigantic wrench into her plans for sophomore year.

Or: An AU where Rad Brad from California is a girl and Season One ends up radically different.
She’s lying a little too close to the water in Venice Beach on a scorching Saturday afternoon because there wasn’t an available spot farther away. She’s had sand kicked in her face three times and a kid even dropped his ice cream on her, but she’s not moving because she bought this goddamn bikini for a reason and she’s not going to let sand or annoying tourists ruin her day off. Also, it took her nearly three hours to find parking so if you think she’s going to give that up any time soon you’ll be disappointed.

But, of course, Betty Cooper never has anything nice for long - so when a splash of salty ocean water douses her from head to toe, causing her to shriek and sit up in a cold shock, she’s almost tempted to sigh in defeat and lie back down because honestly, she should have expected this.

“What the hell?” She lowers her sunglasses to take a better look at the ruiner of her day: Her short, shaggy blonde hair is rippling with the summer breeze and her bright blue eyes are wide with shock. Her board shorts are dripping with water and there’s a surfboard tucked underneath a toned bronze arm. She’s the physical manifestation of California.

“Oh my God,” The girl groans, “I totally didn’t mean to do that. I’m so sorry - let me make it up to you.”

Betty can’t help but be intrigued, though she retains the annoyance in her tone. “And how, exactly, are you going to do that?”

The stranger’s expression is hopeless for a moment, but when she finally comes up with an answer she lights up and Betty swears the sun has gotten hotter somehow. “Are you hungry, by any chance?”

Before she knows it, Betty finds herself grinning.

“Yeah, but how are the boys?”

“Boys?” Betty blinks; she looks as if she hasn’t heard of the word. “There aren’t any, Pol.”

“There aren’t any boys in Los Angeles?”

She snorts. “I’ve been too busy with work to even think about boys. My internship’s literally all I’ve been doing.” Her eyes suddenly widen, “-oh, wait - I forgot about Brad.”
“Brad?” There’s the sound of Polly shifting around in her bed, preparing herself for the upcoming story.

“Yeah - a skater and a surfer. Vegan, too. Really nice, and super sweet.” Betty smiles as she recounts the past couple of weeks they spent together. “Brad’s been helping me with the Toni Morrison book party I’m organizing and even brings me food sometimes-” She briefly pulls her phone away from her ear so she can check the time, “-speaking of food, we’re heading out to Mel’s soon for dinner.”

“Mel’s?”

“It’s kind of like Pop’s,” Betty answers, “But yeah - Brad’s great.”

“I thought you said there weren’t any boys, Betty.” She can hear the smirk in Polly’s voice, but it only confuses her.

“There aren’t.”

“You just went on a minute-long tirade about this boy named Brad and how helpful he’s been with your work.”

“Wait, what?” Betty shakes her head. “No, Polly - Brad’s a girl. She’s my friend - we met at the beach.”

“What?” Betty has to lean away from her phone so she won’t go deaf. “But you said this person’s name is Brad-”

“Bradley can be a unisex name, Pol.” She rubs the back of her neck. “She’s been really nice, showing me around and stuff. She knows all the best places that aren’t tourist traps; she says she’s showing me the real LA.” She laughs to herself, like she’s remembering an inside joke.

“I see,” Polly’s voice is strangely suspicious, “Well, it’s good to know you have a friend. I was afraid you were getting lonely over there.”

“It’s not so bad now that I have Brad.” She grins. “It’s a lot better, actually.”

“I can tell.” That smirk from earlier returns to Polly’s voice, but Betty doesn’t understand why.

A month’s worth of being shown the real LA go by and now Betty’s ambling down the boardwalk one breezy Friday evening with a gigantic wad of pink cotton candy. Brad’s ambling alongside her with one hand curled around the front trucks of a beaten up longboard; it swings casually against her muscled, sun-kissed thigh as the pair make their way past a row of carnival games.

“I tried out for the River Vixens,” Betty briefly pauses her explanation to take a bite out of her cotton candy, “But there’s this mean girl, Cheryl, who despises me - so I didn’t make it.”

Brad frowns and ruffles her mop of dirty blonde hair with her free hand. “You must hate living in a small town.”

Betty shrugs. “I don’t - not really. I have my friends in Riverdale…” She trails off for a moment when a memory she would very much like to forget resurfaces. “And Archie.”
She assumes Brad picked up the uncertainty in her tone, because when she asks, “Who’s Archie?”, There’s a hint of concern in her words.

Archie - she can’t believe she nearly forgot about him. She hasn’t thought of him once in the past month, and now she feels horrible about it. Wasn’t he supposed to be the love of her life, or something? She should’ve been thinking about him every day - and she was…up until recently, though she can’t fathom why.

“Just a friend.” Betty finally answers, though it doesn’t sound very convincing.

Fireworks begin to pop, and it illuminates the blue in Brad’s eyes. “Not a boyfriend?”

Betty shakes her head. “Nope.”

Brad’s so close to her that she can feel their shoulders brushing. She smells like sunblock and seawater. “So you won’t mind if I…”

Betty feels Brad’s palm gently pressing into the back of her head, and Brad’s even closer now - she can count the freckles mottling the bridge of her nose and cheeks - and hey, her eyelashes aren’t blonde, and wait, what’s happening?

Brad tastes like Cherry Coke. _Wait, is Cherry Coke vegan?_

_Wait._

_I’m kissing Brad._

_I’m kissing a girl._

_A girl is currently giving me my second kiss._

But she isn’t pulling away - in fact, she finds herself leaning in, and her eyes flutter to a close and the hand that isn’t holding her cotton candy finds its way to Brad’s perfectly chiseled bicep, which could have been carved out of bronze for all she knew. Brad is warm and sweet against her lips and she’s smiling even though she isn’t aware of it. Sunblock and seawater invade her senses and she smells _so good_, she wants to bury her face in Brad’s hair and breathe her in for the rest of her damn life.

_This is nice._

When they pull apart Betty’s heart is pounding and her cheeks are tinted pink. Brad chuckles before reaching up to tuck a stray strand of honey blonde hair behind Betty’s ear; when she’s done that same hand drops to wind their fingers together, and they continue their casual stroll down the boardwalk like they’ve been doing this for years.

She kissed a girl and she liked it.

As Brad says something about wanting to take her out early tomorrow morning to watch the sunrise over the water, Betty’s eyes widen when the realization hits her like a slap to the face.

_Holy shit._

_I like girls._

Chapter End Notes
I wanted to try something a little more lighthearted since everything I've posted on this website so far has been kind of depressing - and by "a little more lighthearted" I really mean "still kind of depressing but with a bad joke slotted in every few sentences or so".
She's Looking At You

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is taken from "This Is What You Came For" by Calvin Harris.

Betty hates surprises.

She’s most comfortable when she knows exactly what she signs up for. Betty needs to have every single detail laid out in front of her. She needs to have every stone turned. She needs to know everything. She needs to be in control.

So you can only imagine how pissed off she was when she comes home from the best summer she’s had in her entire life, only to find out Jason Blossom drowned in Sweetwater River nearly a month ago and Polly has been missing for the past couple of weeks.

This explains the sudden silence, the unanswered calls, the ignored Facebook messages and emails. Betty knew something was wrong but had no way of finding out what it was. Now she knows, and she’s furious.

“I can’t believe you didn’t even bother to tell me.” Betty grits her teeth as she drags her suitcases up the stairs; her dad offered to help but she figured the physical labour would help expel some of the negative energy bouncing around inside of her.

“We thought it would be best you didn’t know,” Alice shrugs as she follows Betty into her room; her mother's nonchalant demeanour is only making her angrier. “We didn’t want you to be distracted from your work.”

“Mom,” Betty whirls around to glower at her, “Polly is missing. My sister is missing.” She clenches her fists and she can feel her nails biting into her palms but she’s too angry to care. “How is a stupid internship more important than that?”

“Your internship is a stepping stone towards your future, Elizabeth,” Alice casually brushes past her to unzip one of her suitcases; she pulls out a powder pink cardigan and shuffles over to her dresser. “I know you’re worried about Polly-”

“Apparently I’m the only one who is.” Betty grumbles as she begins to sort through her dirty laundry.

Alice’s eyes widen and she places a hand on her chest. “Of course I’m worried, Betty. We’re doing everything we can; Sheriff Keller and his team have been searching every inch of this place for the past couple of weeks. It’s the best we can do for now - so until we find a better way to look for your sister we’re going to have to concentrate on your academics.”

“Fine.” The younger Cooper is too annoyed to continue this conversation. She crosses her arms and jerks her head towards her luggage. “Look, I’m really tired from the flight, so do you think you can just…leave me alone for now?”

Alice sighs, but agrees to it and silently leaves her room. Betty shakes her head in frustration as she continues to sort through her things in silence. Why didn’t her parents bother to tell her about Polly’s
disappearance and Jason’s death? Why are they so goddamn calm about this? How are they so goddamn calm about this?

She tries to piece things together as she continues to unpack. Her parents hated that Jason and Polly were seeing each other, so they probably see Jason’s death as some sort of sick consolation - which might explain why they’re unnaturally placid about the situation, but it doesn’t explain why Polly’s missing. She knew Polly loved Jason, even though she was unsure if the feeling was mutual despite her sister’s insistence. Maybe Polly was in denial that he died, so she went to search for him. It’s the only logical explanation.

Something in her pocket begins to vibrate; Betty pulls out her phone and sees a single line of text blinking at her from her screen.

Ur back!

She glances up towards her window and grins when she spots Archie across the street in his own room, holding his phone in one hand and waving at her with the other. Did he get taller?

Yeah, I literally just came home. Betty types back, We need to catch up. She almost adds, There is a lot I need to tell you, but she backspaces at the last minute, cursing under her breath as she does so.

When she looks up again she sees Archie hunched over his phone, already coming up with a reply. Pop’s tomorrow night? We can celebrate the last day of summer together.

Betty-From-Two-Months-Ago would have fainted from his text. Alas, she is long gone. Things are different now. Sounds perfect. See you then, Arch.

She waves goodbye before tossing her phone on her bed and returning to unpacking. Ideally, Archie would be the first person (Aside from Polly, but that obviously isn’t possible right now) to know about this… new detail she recently discovered about herself over the summer, but how does she go about telling him?

Hey Archie, so I met this girl in LA and we kind of made out.

Hey Arch, do you know the movie Grease? Well, picture that, except I’m Sandra Dee and Zuko’s another girl - also she’s a surfer, not a greaser. Also, she doesn’t look anything like John Travolta.

Remember how I was supposed to have this lifelong crush on you? Well, that sort of went out the window last month when I kissed a girl and enjoyed every second of it.

So, you’re a guy, right? And you’re a guy who likes girls, right? And we’re living in the 21st century, where people are more open-minded and tolerant, right? Well, do I have some news for you!

Okay, so there was this girl in LA who got me wet at the beach - oh God, no, I didn’t mean to word it like that-

Betty lets out a noise that sounds like a cross between an agonized cry and an aggravated grunt, and she suppresses the urge to kick one of her suitcases. Polly’s missing, Jason’s dead, and she’s attracted to girls. It’s like the world wants her to have a mental breakdown.

As much as she’d like for Archie to be the first person she’d come out to, Betty concludes that there is a more suitable candidate.

She reaches for her phone, scrolls down her contact list, and taps on Kevin Keller’s name.
“According to my dad,” Kevin is lying on his stomach on Betty’s bed, not even pausing to glance up at her as he scrolls through his phone, “Cheryl and Jason went out for a boat ride on the morning of July Fourth. Cheryl dropped a glove in the water and Jason fell overboard trying to get it back. He’s been missing ever since - but after searching for so long, we’re positive the body’s lost at this point. There have also been reports of a gunshot going off that morning, but there isn’t any hard evidence to prove that the incidents are related.” He pauses, squints at something on his screen, then resumes scrolling. “As for Polly, your mom went to wake her up in her room one morning only to find an empty bed and an open window.”

Betty, who’s sitting by her dresser in her underwear and glancing at herself in the mirror, frowns as she searches for the right shade of lipstick. “But how can you say Jason drowned if you can’t find his body?” She squints at a stick of plain but glossy pink lip balm.

“Cheryl did see it happen, Betty.” Kevin points out. “She saw him fall over, she saw the water take him under. From a logical standpoint, his body’s probably in the Hudson by now, which is way out of our reach.” He sighs. “Such a waste - Jason’s shoulders were to die for.” When Betty gives him a pointed look, he raises his eyebrows. “Too soon?”

“I just wish I knew where Polly was.” She groans as she resumes scrutinizing herself in the mirror; she gave up on the lipstick and is now figuring out which top to wear. “The last time I heard from her was when I was still in California. What if she’s…” She can’t bring herself to finish the sentence; her hands are beginning to close into fists.

No, Polly isn’t. She can’t be.

“Polly’s fine, Betts. I know she is. We’re going to find her, and she’ll be back in no time.” Kevin reassures her. “Now, I don’t mean to change the subject so abruptly but since you brought it up I can’t help but ask: How was California?”

She’s actually relieved he decided to change the subject; if she thought about Polly any further she’d probably have an aneurysm, but now she has to talk about an equally harrowing topic so she’s not sure if this is better. “Um.”

Kevin sees Betty’s hesitance as an opportunity to pry further. “You met someone there, didn’t you? Please tell me you met someone. Is he famous? Let me guess, he’s a YouTuber - no, a former Disney Channel star. An Instagram model.”

“No, no, and no.” Betty chuckles and shakes her head. Her demeanour is surprisingly calm even though her cheeks are burning and her heartbeat is crashing against her eardrums. “Brad was none of those things.”

“Of course his name was Brad-”

“Including a he.” Betty finishes her sentence, her gaze transfixed on Kevin’s face.

His baffled expression gives Betty the impression that he might not have heard her, but when his eyes widen and his mouth curves into a perfect ‘o’, her pulse begins to thrum again and she can feel her palms starting to sweat. Her fingers begin to curl, her nails instinctively making their way into her skin.
“Oh.” Kevin finally says, blinking rapidly. He sets down his phone and gawks at her. “Oh.”

She doesn’t know how to decode his reaction, and it makes her feel uneasy even though she knows it isn’t anything negative. The tears spring to her eyes - Why do I have to be such a crybaby - and she nods before biting her lip. “Yeah.” She chokes out before laughing sadly to herself.

He rolls off her bed and shuffles towards her, opening his arms. “Oh, hon.” Kevin wraps his arms around her and squeezes her tight, and the affection in his gesture makes Betty’s heart leap to her throat. “Betty.”

Why the hell am I crying? She sniffs and laughs again as she relaxes her hands and pats the back of her friend’s shoulder. “I know, I know - I just…it just happened, if that makes any sense.” She pulls away from him and swipes at the tears staining her cheeks.

“It does.” She can feel Kevin’s arms tenderly tightening around her waist. “Tell me everything.”

And so she does: She explains how they met and how Brad taught her how to surf. She talks about their evenings spent at Mel’s pigging out on french fries and chatting until two or three in the morning about nothing in particular. She describes how nice Brad was, how she was an incredible listener, and how she was there for her when she was stressed over work or homesick.

“We both knew it wasn’t anything serious, so we amicably ended things before I left.” Betty instinctively tugs on her ponytail. “She really put things into perspective for me. I’ll never forget her for that.”

“Oh, Betty,” Kevin’s smile is suspiciously rueful. “I’m happy for you and everything, but how bad would it be if I told you my gaydar needle has been twitching in your direction since seventh grade?”

Cue the figurative record scratch.

Betty pulls away from him, her eyebrows knitted. “Wait, what? What are you talking about?”

Kevin shrugs as if they’re talking about something as casual as the weather. “I kind of had an inkling; I don’t know, it was sort of…always there. It was easy to see - well, it was easy for me to see, at least.”

Her green eyes are wide. “How?”

“What kind of straight girl fixes cars as a hobby?”

“Now you’re playing with stereotypes.” She defiantly crosses her arms, though her blush is burning hotter than it was before. “As someone who’s part of a marginalized group, isn’t that counter-productive?”

His expression is dead serious. “But I’m right about you, aren’t I?” When Betty fails to come up with a smart reply, he smirks. “So if you’re officially playing for the other team, what’s the deal with tonight? When you texted Please come over, I need help with Archie, I was under the impression you were finally going to confess your undying love for him.”

Oh, right. Archie - the reason why she invited Kevin over in the first place. “I want to tell him, but I have no idea how.” She throws up her arms and swivels around in her seat so she’s facing her mirror. “He needs to know - he’s my best friend. We never hide anything from each other - and, for the record, I still love him. I always will. It’s just that I love him in a different way now.”

“But you do realize you can’t force these things, right?” Kevin reaches over her shoulder to grab the
lipstick she was scrutinizing earlier. “When you’re ready, you’re ready.”

“But I know I’m ready,” Betty whines, “I’ve been thinking about it for over a month now and this feels like the right thing to do. I want to tell him, Kev. I just can’t shake these nerves.”

“Nerves are acceptable, but if you really think it’s time then it’s time.” Kevin pops off the cap of the lipstick and makes a small streak on the back of his hand, examining it underneath the light. “Well, since we’re playing with stereotypes we might as well throw cliches into this too.” He raises his head to glance at her reflection. “You and Archie have been friends your entire lives-”

“Most of our lives.”

“Whatever - which means he’ll love you no matter what. What I’m trying to say is that you should just be yourself. Act like you guys are just having another one of your usual nights at Pop’s. If he senses you’re nervous, then he’ll be nervous too, right? Then everything will get awkward, which will make it harder for you to talk about it.” He returns the lipstick to its proper place on her dresser and spins on his heel, making his way towards her window. “Plus, what’s the worst that can happen? It’s not like he’ll disown you or anything; he’s not like that.”

Betty knows this is true; when Kevin came out four years ago Archie was the first person to publicly announce his support. He even vowed to keep the bullies and homophobes away - a promise he still keeps true today, even though Kevin’s fully capable of handling them himself. “You’re right, but-”

“Oh my God.” There’s an indistinguishable air of panic in Kevin’s voice, and just like that the short break in her anxiety comes to an end.

“What?” She glances over her shoulder to see Kevin bent over her window.

“Archie got hot.” Kevin gapes; Betty finally gets up and makes her way over to him so she can see what all the fuss is about. When she peeks out her window to peer into Archie’s room, her eyes nearly pop out of their sockets when she’s met with a six-pack and bulging pectorals. “He’s got abs now.”

Sure, she’s not attracted to him in that way anymore (And maybe she never really was), but she knows when a compliment is due. “Working with his dad’s construction company really made a difference, didn’t it?”

“This is a major game changer.” Betty didn’t even know Kevin’s eyes were capable of being so wide. “Okay, just to clarify: Are we certain Archie’s one hundred percent hetero? Because he just gave me six more reasons to take that ginger bull by the horns.”

Betty makes a face. “Okay, TMI.” She laughs and makes her way to her dresser, pulling open one of the drawers and staring down into the neat stack of pastel cardigans and blouses. She places one hand on the pink sweater her mom put away earlier, running her fingers across the soft fabric and toying with one of the buttons.

What I’m trying to say is that you should just be yourself.

Cliches are cliche for a reason, right? If they didn’t work, they wouldn’t be repeated so many times.

Instead of pulling the cardigan out, Betty shifts her hand to the bottom of the stack of clothes, the tip of her tongue poking out of her mouth in concentration as she rummages through the drawer. A couple of minutes later, she’s holding up a teal and heather grey baseball shirt. She sits back down by her mirror and pulls the shirt over her head; when she glances at her reflection and sees that it still fits despite it being a few years old, she can’t help but grin. This feels right, this feels like home. This
feels like Betty Cooper.

“Hashtag TBT.” Kevin’s reflection emerges from behind, his grin matching hers. “I missed seeing you like this.”

“Mom tried to throw out all of my old clothes a few years back, but I managed to save a few of them by hiding them away.” She explains as she moves to her closet to pick out a pair of jeans. “She said that if I continued dressing like this people would think I’m either poor or a lesbian - or even worse: Both.”

Kevin snorts. “Oh, the irony.”

Betty chuckles; after putting on pants she briefly disappears inside her closet to search for her old black and white high tops. “She told me I had to dress more like Polly.”

“But you’re not Polly.”

“Exactly,” Betty reappears, hopping on one foot as she pulls one of her sneakers on. “And you told me that I should be myself, so that’s exactly what I’m going to do from now on - and I’m not just talking about tonight. It’s a new school year, a fresh start. I’m going to do things for me this time - not for Polly, not for my mom, not for Archie, not for anyone. Me.”

“I can’t be any more proud of you.” When Betty’s finished dressing Kevin approaches her and places his hands on her shoulders, squeezing lovingly. “Alice Cooper, eat your heart out.”

Easing back into her friendship with Archie is a lot easier than Betty thought it was going to be. She forgot how well they got along; slipping into their usual booth at Pop’s and catching up on what they did this past summer feels like second nature, like an instinct encoded into her DNA. Now she feels ridiculous for festering over talking to him in the first place. Of course he would accept her. Of course he would still think of her as a friend. Why wouldn’t he? There’s nothing that can get in the way of their relationship. Nothing at all.

“She says to me: Don’t rush this time, Betty. It goes by so fast at your age.” She smiles at the memory, and the way Archie softens at her words almost makes her feel guilty that she’s no longer in love with him. “One summer can change everything.”

Suddenly she’s whisked back to the long nights spent sitting by the coast with her toes buried in the sand. She can smell sunblock. Her hand is clasped in someone else’s and there’s a voice whispering in her ear, hoarse but gentle. An ache begins to form in her chest; a yearning for something out of her reach.

It’s not that she wants Brad back or anything - they both knew it wasn’t going to go anywhere, especially when they live on opposite sides of the country - but it’s just beginning to dawn on Betty that she actually doesn’t know any other “out” kids in Riverdale aside from Kevin. LA’s different; it’s a bigger city with different kinds of people, and the atmosphere is more laid back. People are comfortable with being themselves there…but Riverdale? Riverdale has been the same since its inception; aside from the recent news surrounding Jason and Polly, nothing new or earth-shattering ever happens around here. Sure, she’s ready to tell Archie, but what about the rest of the town? When will she be ready? Will she ever be ready?
“Wow.” Archie’s voice pulls her back to the present. He looks so innocent, so boyishly curious. Completely oblivious. “That’s so true.”

The only hard part about conversing with him is deciding when it’s appropriate to bring up what else happened during her summer in California. How do you transition from talking about your internship to your sexual awakening? The thought of it threatens to push her into cardiac arrest, so she decides to procrastinate a little further, justifying it by telling herself that she needs a little more time to prepare. “How was working for your dad?”

To be fair, she actually does want to know about his summer. She didn’t expect it to be anything special, and for a second she was right; he tells her that all he did was “Pour concrete every day, all day long”, but when he starts talking about how he would write music after work she’s pleasantly surprised. She had no idea Archie was even into music like this, or any sort of poetry at all - in fact, she thought he hated poetry.

“It made me feel like I’ve finally broken through to something real about my life and what I should be trying to do with it.” The way his warm brown eyes ease up at the corners as he talks about his newfound passion, the eagerness in his voice, the way his shoulders relax and how his fingers flex over his milkshake glass - Archie really means it. He’s fallen in love with this newly discovered part of himself, and he’s visibly relieved to be able to share it with one other person. “Music, starting this year. Tomorrow!”

Little does he know he isn’t the only one planning to reinvent themselves for the upcoming school year. “That’s amazing, Arch. Are you going to ask Miss Grundy to tutor you? What about football? Does your dad know?”

“I’m not sure, and as for football I’m still gonna try out.” Archie answers tentatively; the headlights of a car parking outside shine through the window and briefly flashes on his face, causing him to squint for a moment. “My dad doesn’t know, and until I’ve got things more figured out you’re the only person I’m telling. Okay?”

She nods in response to Archie’s request and tucks her joined hands under her chin. “Okay, but you have to let me hear one of your songs sometime.”

The redhead gives her a toothy grin. “Deal.”

So maybe their summers weren’t as different as she once thought. This revelation brings a boost to Betty’s self-confidence, and she sucks in a breath as she readies herself. “Also, Archie, there’s something else I want to tell you. There’s another reason why I agreed to meet you here tonight.”

He raises his thick eyebrows, and that boyish curiosity returns to his face. “What is it, Betty?”

This is it. It’s time. It’s now or never. “When I was in LA,” Betty’s voice is slow and uncertain; a small bell chimes as the door to the diner swings open, “I met someone, and…”

Her words fall on deaf ears. Archie’s gaze is locked on something behind her; he looks like he just saw the face of God. Really? I’m this close to revealing something very personal, and you can’t even pay attention. Betty glances over her shoulder to glare at whatever’s responsible for stealing Archie’s attention, and holy shit.

There’s a figure shrouded in a black cloak standing by the entrance. A small hand moves upward to push the hood back, unveiling full red lips, wavy black hair, and large brown eyes.

The girl struts towards them, her heels clicking against the linoleum. Betty briefly looks back at her
redheaded companion, whose jaw is practically dangling. Her neck is getting uncomfortably hot, her stomach is doing somersaults, and she’s pressing her palms against her thighs because they’re starting to sweat. Her and Archie are ogling the same person; she isn’t sure if this is supposed to be relieving or embarrassing.

The stranger says she’s here to pick up an order for Lodge; the name rings a bell but Betty can’t figure out where she heard it from. Pop tells her she has to wait a bit, and she nods politely as she watches him return to the kitchen. She glances around for a moment, her manicured hands neatly folded in front of her, and when her eyes fall on the booth Betty and Archie are occupying the blonde’s chest painfully contracts.

“How,” Betty’s heart begins to beat to the tune of her voice, “How are the onion rings here?”

The blonde wants to say something but her mouth is drier than the Sahara. Instead, Archie pipes up with an overly enthusiastic, “So good”, and she has half a mind to kick him underneath their table. His tone is saturated with hormones.

After briefly turning away to ask Pop for an order of onion rings, the new girl says, “My mom and I just moved here.”

“From where?” Archie beats Betty to it again, and her eyes narrow.

“New York,” She replies, and a light goes off in Betty’s head when she remembers where she heard the name Lodge, “Do you guys go to Riverdale?”

This time, Betty and Archie respond simultaneously. “We do, the both of us-” The blonde’s eyes lock onto Archie’s.

“Yeah, we’re sophomores.” Archie stares back, confused.

“-together.” Betty finishes her sentence, her green eyes hardening. She doesn’t know why she feels so spiteful; neither of them even know this person - but she feels like she’s competing against him for her attention, and she has a weird desperation to come out on top.

It’s clear the girl senses tension between the two, but she makes no comment. Smart move, Betty thinks wryly. “Me too.” The brunette responds rather awkwardly, clearing her throat; the blonde notices the string of pearls sitting on her collarbone. “I’m filled with dread.”

Archie cautiously steals a glance in Betty’s direction, as if he’s afraid to say anything else, but he speaks up anyway. “Why’s that?”

“Are you familiar with the works of Truman Capote?” Her dark eyes flit back and forth between the redhead and the blonde, checking to see who reacts first. It’s like she knows they’re fighting over her.

Archie’s face falls, a clear indication that he has no idea who she’s referring to, which gives Betty a chance to pull ahead in this weird, imaginary race. “Life is a moderately good play with a badly written third act.” She tops off the quote with a smile.

The girl’s eyes return to Betty, and the two make eye contact for the first time. Her eyes are so dark that Betty can’t tell where her pupils are; they’re beautifully depthless and she swears she can feel a gravitational pull towards them, as if they have their own orbit. Her painted red lips stretch into an arresting smile, revealing perfect white teeth, and Betty’s throat threatens to close in on itself. This girl is something out of a movie; she can’t be real. “I’m Breakfast at Tiffany’s but this place is strictly In Cold Blood.” It really isn’t that great of a joke, but Betty bursts out in a fit of laughter anyway.
She can feel Archie staring at her, but she keeps her eyes trained on the new girl, who’s laughing with her. “So happy to hear this place has a fellow bibliophile.”

“How can you tell?” Betty challenges; she’s feeling particularly daring for some reason. “What if I’m just a Capote fan?”

Her head cants to the side, though her smile is still present. “A girl who can quote Capote on a whim knows better than to confine herself to just one author.” She holds out a hand; there’s an expensive-looking bracelet hanging off her wrist. “Veronica Lodge.”

This girl is as interesting as she is breathtaking. “Betty Cooper.” The blonde quickly wipes her palm against her jeans before shaking her hand. Her skin feels impossibly soft, like she’s touching cashmere.

“And I’m Archie,” The redhead interjects, as if to remind the two girls that he still exists. “Archie Andrews.”

But Veronica is still staring at Betty; there’s a quizzical look on her pretty features, like she’s trying to remember something. “Wait, did you say your name was Betty Cooper?”

“Yes?” Betty’s voice is high and squeaky; she hears her pulse thudding in her ears and her palms are sweating again.

“So that means you’re…” The brunette trails off with a knowing smile, and Betty is more than happy to complete her sentence.

“Supposed to give you your tour tomorrow.” She nods, then shyly pulls her gaze back to her milkshake, a chuckle escaping her lips. “Yes, I’m your peer mentor.”

Betty doesn’t really believe in fate, but this has to mean something. An unimaginably beautiful girl moves to Riverdale the summer after she realizes she’s attracted to girls - it’s movie-worthy.

“Then this isn’t just a chance meeting.” Veronica’s voice is velvety, sensual, teasing; Betty can listen to her speak for hours.

“Do you want to join us?” Archie asks, and Betty resists the urge to roll her eyes. She told Pop she was here to pick up an order; that obviously means she doesn’t have time to stay and chat. God, Archie, do you ever listen? “Maybe we can unfill you with dread.” Okay, first of all: Unfill isn’t a word. Second: She talked about being filled with dread five minutes ago.

Alright, that was a bit harsh. She’s not usually like this - actually, she’s never like this. What is it about this girl that makes her want to fight tooth and nail for the slightest bit of her attention?

“My mom’s waiting for me, but…” The brunette is apologetic, but her eyes are still on Betty. The blonde’s sure she hasn’t glanced in Archie’s direction since she first got here. “To be continued.” She dips her head once in a courteous parting nod before sauntering off to accept her takeout bag from Pop; her hair whips around her shoulders as she leaves and Betty can suddenly smell lavender. She keeps her eyes fixated on Veronica until she’s completely out of sight, and when she’s finally out of the restaurant she returns her gaze to Archie, who’s pitifully nonplussed.

Did she really just get jealous over a complete stranger? Did this complete stranger drive her to temporarily hate her best friend of nearly twelve years? There’s obviously a lot about herself that she still doesn’t know when it comes to physical attraction, and it kind of scares her. The last thing she wants is for this new part of herself to compromise her friendships, which are even more crucial to her now that Polly’s missing. The whole point of meeting him here tonight is to tell him the truth so
that she doesn’t lose him, but now she isn’t so sure.

But Archie’s her best friend. He’d love her no matter what. Something as trivial as a girl wouldn’t be enough to tear them apart, right?

“Uh,” Archie leans forward and rests his forearms on the table, “So what were you saying?”

There’s something about the way he sounds that gives Betty the impression that he’s trying to figure out what just happened too, and he’s hoping that she would bring it up first. It’s almost like he’s actually asking, Do you mind telling me what that was back there?

She was wrong.

She isn’t ready to tell him. Not yet.

So she smiles and shakes her head. “Nothing.”
“It’s the first day of school and you decided to wear those?” Alice wrinkles her nose. “I thought I threw those dreadful things out.”

Betty raises an eyebrow and glances downward at her blue and red flannel shirt, faded jeans, and scuffed high tops. “What’s wrong with my clothes?”

“School is preparation for the real world, Betty. You can’t walk into work looking like you rolled out of a back alley.” Alice strides over to her dresser, yanking open a drawer and pulling out a pale blouse with plastic jewels on its collar. “This is much nicer.”

“I’m sixteen, Mom - I’m old enough to dress myself, thanks.” The younger Cooper rolls her eyes as she bends over to shove a couple of notebooks into her schoolbag. “Any update on Polly?”

“I don’t want your sister getting in the way of your academics.” Alice chides as she stubbornly closes the drawer. “This coming year is critical for colleges; grades are important - co-curriculars, athletics, maintaining a decent character is hugely important. They do look at that.”

Betty resists the urge to roll her eyes a second time. “First of all, Polly disappearing without a trace isn’t getting in the way; she could be hurt, or worse, and we don’t even know it. How can I not be worried about her?” She picks up her bag and hoists it over her shoulder. “Second of all, I’m a sophomore. Colleges don’t acknowledge your existence until junior year.”

“You’ve accomplished so much,” Alice implores, “And I just don’t want anything jeopardizing that. Let your father, Sheriff Keller, and I worry about Polly.” She lets out a sigh. “Your poor sister - she was such a shining star before she let that Blossom boy ruin her life.”

“Mom,” Betty’s voice hardens, “I’m not Polly. I never was Polly and I never will be Polly.”

It’s Alice’s turn to cock an eyebrow. “You missed curfew last night.”

“By seven minutes.” Betty fires back. “I was with Archie, whom you’ve known for twelve years, and you and I both know he’s nothing like Jason Blossom.”

The elder Cooper makes her way over to her daughter, grasping her hands in her own and staring straight into her eyes. “Sweetie, all boys are like Jason Blossom. Don’t be like your sister. Don’t let a boy get in the way of what’s really important.”

Betty wants to tell her that boys should be the least of her worries, but she holds her tongue and nods. It’s too early in the morning to argue with her mother, and she doesn’t want to kick off sophomore year with a foul mood.

When Alice reaches into her pocket and pulls out a small orange bottle, Betty’s eye twitches and she clamps her teeth down on her tongue. “Stay focused.” Alice’s smile is sickeningly sweet. “I refilled your Adderall. Seems you forgot to pick up your prescription.” She presses it into Betty’s palm,
strokes her face with one hand, and abruptly leaves her room.

The blonde stares at the bottle in her hand, frowning at the label. A part of her is tempted to chuck it out her window, but she tucks it into her bag’s outer pocket and makes her way towards her door.

When Betty walks into the administrative room her eyes immediately home in on Veronica, who is turned away from her and chatting with the receptionist. The tight white and violet dress she’s wearing highlights certain...aspects of her body that were previously hidden by the black cloak from the other day.

Aspects. Aspects.

Oh, God. She’s beginning to sound like Reggie.

Don’t stare, don’t stare, don’t stare. “Er, Veronica?”

She whirls around, her obsidian waves of hair majestically swaying around her shoulders, and Betty can smell lavender again. Now that they’re both standing Betty can see their staggering difference in height; even with heels, the brunette’s head barely grazes her cheek.

“Capote girl!” Veronica flashes her a smile worthy of a Colgate commercial and the blonde swears she’s about to have a stroke. “So nice to see you again, Betty Cooper.”

Betty swallows, but it’s not enough to remove the gigantic lump in her throat. “Are you ready for your tour?” How the hell is she going to spend the next half hour with this girl without making a complete fool of herself?

“I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.” There’s a challenging glint in the brunette’s stare, which only makes the lump in Betty’s throat larger. She takes a couple of steps towards the door; there’s a black Saint Laurent bag swinging from the curve of her elbow. “C’mon, tour me.”

Betty leads the way, taking her down the hallway while running off a few facts about the school that she memorized months before. She knows they aren’t anything Veronica wants to hear - it’s unlikely she cares about how the Bulldogs haven’t been to a state championship since 1967 - but she’s clinging onto these bits of useless information for dear life because they’re the only things she can talk about. Outside of school, what else would she and Veronica Lodge have in common?

What she does know is that Lodge Industries was in the top ten of the Fortune 500 before Hiram was arrested for fraud and embezzlement, and that he and his wife Hermione are from Riverdale and went to school with her parents. After failing to fall asleep last night (Due to her thoughts being invaded by a certain brunette in a black hood) Betty did a little bit of online snooping and learned that Veronica Lodge, Hiram and Hermione’s only child and heiress to the company, is notorious for being a bit of a spoiled brat and a mean girl - which came off as a huge surprise, because Veronica has been nothing but nice to her since they met. Maybe the kindness is just a facade, and when she finds people who are more on her level - Reggie Mantle, Josie McCoy, Chuck Clayton, and Cheryl Blossom, for instance - she’ll ditch her and forget she exists. Maybe she’s only using her as a stepping stone to something greater. Maybe she’s only being nice for now because she has to be.

Still, Betty wants to be a little more optimistic - and it wouldn’t be fair to assume such things anyway. It’s a new year, and she knows she isn’t the only one who’s looking for a fresh start;
Veronica might be one of those people. She knows what it’s like to want to be given a second chance.

If there weren’t enough people staring at her before she took Veronica on a tour around the school, there are definitely more than enough of them now; the entire student body had its eyes on her the second she walked onto school grounds. The unwanted attention, coupled with the knowledge that Veronica Lodge exists and is walking so close to her she can feel their shoulders brushing, make it incredibly difficult for Betty to concentrate.

When they round the corner and arrive at a quieter hallway with significantly less nosy students, the both of them sigh in relief, turn their heads to face each other, and utter a meek, “Sorry about that”, at exactly the same time.

Both pairs of eyes widen; Veronica chuckles sheepishly and drops her gaze to the floor while Betty coughs into her fist and shifts in the opposite direction, hoping to God the burning in her cheeks isn’t visible.

The brunette is the first to break the heavy silence. “Not to sound like a complete narcissist, but I thought they were staring because of what happened to my dad.”

Betty’s glancing at her from the corner of her eye because she still doesn’t know if she’s blushing or not. “I thought they were staring because of what happened to my sister.”

“Your sister?”

“She’s been missing for the past couple of weeks.” Talking about Polly definitely wasn’t on the itinerary for this tour, but if it’ll distract her from her obvious attraction to this new girl Betty’ll take it. “Her boyfriend Jason drowned in Sweetwater River a month ago and she disappeared not long afterward. It’s been the talk of the town lately.”

“Oh my God.” Veronica gasps, her brown eyes even larger than they already are. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know.”

The blonde gives her an apologetic smile and a small shrug of the shoulders. “It’s okay. You were gonna find out eventually.”

“Find out about what?” Kevin swoops in out of nowhere, leaning in between the two girls and sticking out a hand for the brunette. “Hi. Kevin Keller. Love your Weitzmans, by the way.”

The bemusement in Veronica’s expression is painstakingly cute. She grasps Kevin’s hand and shakes it. “Veronica Lodge. Love your sixth sense for good shoes.” She leans in a little more, a devilish smile stretched across her full lips. “I can already tell we’re going to be good friends.”

Kevin grins; it’s almost like the two of them have known each other for years and just exchanged an inside joke. “So, has Betty bored you with useless facts about our wonderful school’s outdated interior decorating and sordid athletic history?”

“I wouldn’t say they’re useless.” The blonde pouts, but she resumes walking and the other two follow suit.

“Honestly, I feel like I’m wandering through the lost epilogue of Our Town.” Another vintage pop culture reference; Betty’s beginning to wonder if this girl has seen or read anything past the 1960s. “What’s the social scene like around here? Any night clubs?”

“Haven’t you heard? Riverdale’s the heart of upstate nightlife.” There’s enough sarcasm dripping
from Kevin’s tone to drown a person (Too soon, Cooper). “We have a strip club called The Ho Zone and a tragic gay bar called Innuendo.” He turns around and begins to walk backward so he can face the two girls as he continues to run off his mental list of “great” things to do. “Friday nights - football games, and then tailgate parties at the Mallmart parking lot. Saturday night is movie night regardless of what’s playing at the Bijou, and you better get there early because we don’t have reserved seating in Riverdale.” He takes one large step forward, half-turning and falling back into step next to Betty, and throws an arm around her shoulders. “And Sunday nights…thank God for HBO.”

What do you do when you take a girl like Veronica Lodge out on a date? Betty briefly wonders this as she listens to Kevin further complain about Riverdale’s pathetic excuse for a nightlife.

*Like you’ll ever go on a date with her anyway, Another part of her rebukes, She’s definitely not into girls.*

“What is it true what they say about your dad?” Kevin’s incredibly invasive question forces Betty back to reality; Veronica’s expression transitions from relaxed to annoyed in seconds and the blonde can feel her stomach tightening. Damn Kevin and his lack of a filter.

“That he’s the devil incarnate?” The brunette stops walking and crosses her arms; her gold bracelet glints underneath the hallway’s fluorescent lights and now she looks more like the stereotypical rich bitch Betty thought she was supposed to be. “I stand by my father.”

Kevin nods awkwardly; Betty looks like she was just caught trying to steal from the cookie jar. The blonde has half a mind to apologize for Kevin’s sake, but just as she opens her mouth Veronica sighs and reaches up to toss her hair over her shoulder. “Look, it’s not that big a deal. I was sort of expecting to be the Blue Jasmine of Riverdale High anyway, with how widely covered the scandal was and everything.” *Hey, a recent pop culture reference.*

“If it’s any sort of consolation, people have been talking more about Polly and Jason.” Kevin shrugs.

Veronica’s defensive demeanour quickly melts away and she relaxes her arms. “Okay, no offence-” She turns to Betty, who mutters a quick “None taken” before she continues, “-but now I feel like I have to know more about what happened with them.”

Kevin shoulders his bag and glances upward at the wall clock. “Well, actually-”

“Wait.” Veronica’s hand is suddenly on Betty’s bicep; the blonde swears she can feel her heart leaping to her throat, but when she glances up to see what caught the brunette’s attention her heart plummets to the pit of her stomach - Archie is a few feet away from them, walking in the opposite direction. “That’s the hottie you were with last night - the redhead Ansel Elgort.” The faraway, almost dreamy look on Veronica’s expression only makes Betty’s heart sink lower. “Is he your boyfriend?”

“No, she’s-” Kevin starts, but Betty cuts him off with a glare. He clears his throat. “He’s straight.”

That was the worst coverup in the history of coverups. Betty shoots him another glare before turning to Veronica. “We’re just friends.”

As expected, Veronica looks unconvinced, but she wisely chooses to avoid the subject - just like last night. “I dunno…you two were pretty chummy the other day.” She smirks and nods at a poster taped to the wall next to her. “You should ask him to the back-to-school semiformal.”

She almost forgot about that - the annual semiformal held on the first Friday of the school year. It’s one of the few school events she isn’t organizing, which is probably why it slipped her mind. “Er,”
Betty bites her lip as she feverishly searches her brain for an excuse, “I’m not really into dancing.”

The brunette leans in towards her; her eyelashes are amazingly long and her lavender shampoo (Or is it perfume? Maybe it’s both?) threatens Betty to close her eyes and bury her nose in her hair. This girl is going to be the death of her. “In that case, mind putting in a word? I’ve tried every flavour of boy but orange.”

Betty didn’t think it was possible for her heart to drop any lower. See, told you - she isn’t into girls.

And if she was, there’s no way she would be into a girl like you.

The disappointment on her face must have been easy to see, because Kevin suddenly pipes up with, “Actually, I heard the dance might be cancelled because of what happened to Jason. I was just going to tell you about that memorial we’re supposed to be having before homeroom.”

Betty rolls her eyes. “But is it a memorial or an opportunity for Cheryl to rub her misfortune in our faces?”

Veronica quirks a bold eyebrow and stares at the both of them. “Who is Cheryl and why is she rubbing things in peoples’ faces?”

Wow, a life where Cheryl doesn’t exist. Must be nice - too bad that’s going to change very soon.

The blonde briefly exchanges jaded looks with Kevin before responding. “Trust me, you’re better off not knowing.”

Cheryl is surprisingly sincere at the assembly, imploring that the dance should go on because “Jason wouldn’t want us to spend the year mourning and would want us to move on with our lives”. The way she talked about using the semiformal to heal as a student body, as a means to move forward together, was actually kind of inspiring, and Betty can feel a stirring in her chest as she listens to the redhead go on about how her and Jason were soulmates.

She can’t help but think about her sister. Would Jason be worried if he found out she was missing? Her fists clench at the thought; he’s the reason why Polly’s missing in the first place. He’s the reason why Polly isn’t here with her right now, sitting in this gym, listening to Cheryl talk about how much she misses him. He’s the reason why people stare at her when she walks past them.

The first day of school always progresses quickly, and before Betty knows it she’s sitting outside with Kevin for lunch. Archie’s supposed to meet them soon; he’s planning on showing them a few of his songs, and she’s excited to hear them.

“So,” Kevin sets down his lunch tray and plops down across from her, “You’ve got the hots for the new girl.”

“Keep it down!” Betty hisses, cautiously looking around them to make sure no one’s eavesdropping, “Don’t you have an indoor voice?”

“But we’re outdoors, Betty.” He grins as she rolls his eyes. “Can’t blame you, honestly - even I know an attractive girl when I see one. You’ve got good taste.”
“Was I that obvious?” When Kevin nods, the blonde groans and hides behind her apple. “It’s just a stupid infatuation. Plus, she’s clearly attracted to guys - Archie, in particular. You were there when she wanted me to put in a good word for her.”

He shrugs as he begins to dig into his sandwich. “Actually, I don’t think she’s as-”

“Hey,” Archie slides into the seat next to her with his laptop already open, “Sorry I’m late.”

Betty gives Kevin a nonverbal We’ll talk about this later with her eyes before turning to face her best friend. “It’s okay. So, what have you got for us?”

“I’m warning you now - what I have so far is really, really rough.” Archie looks a little flustered; this is the first time he’s showing this new part of himself to his friends, and Betty’s heart goes out to him.

“I’m sure it’s great, Arch.” She reassures him.

“I’m ready to be swept off my feet, Ed Sheeran.” Kevin leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. “Let’s hear it.”

If what Betty’s hearing is rough, she can’t wait to hear what the final product sounds like. The soft plucking of an acoustic guitar and Archie’s heartfelt crooning blend perfectly together; it’s hazy, dreamlike, even nostalgic. It shows a side of Archie that she’s never seen before despite knowing him for most of her life, and she feels even more guilty for not being ready to talk to him about the new part of herself that she discovered over the summer.

“Can I join?” Veronica’s suddenly hovering over them with her own lunch tray; Archie immediately shuts his laptop, cutting off his song and Betty’s reverie. When the blonde agrees, she moves to sit beside Kevin. “What are we doing?”

“Listening to one of Archie’s songs.” Betty can’t help the grin that creeps into her expression as she turns to him, playfully nudging his shoulder; the redhead chuckles sheepishly and rubs the back of his neck.

“I thought we were gonna have to pretend to like it, but it’s actually really good.” Kevin looks genuinely surprised.

“Wait, that was you singing something you wrote?” When Archie nods, she gapes, and Betty feels the twang of jealousy picking at her insides. “It’s incredible, from the little snippet I heard.” Veronica leans in, and Betty can smell lavender again. She props her elbow up on the table and rests her cheek against her fist. “Is that your thing - music? Are you doing something with that?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.” Archie nods again as he shifts around to push his laptop into his bag. “Hey, sorry for cutting this short but I gotta go - meeting with Grundy, then football tryouts.” He stands up, shoulders his bag, and leaves; he looks like he’s in a hurry.

“He plays football too?” Veronica gushes as her eyes longingly follow Archie’s retreating form. “What doesn’t he do?”

Betty can feel Kevin’s eyes on her; is her jealousy showing? She’s only known this girl for barely a day and she’s acting like she owns her. This is bad.

“Veronica Lodge.” Betty’s eyes shoot upwards to the new voice; Cheryl’s pushing her aside, forcing her to make room on the bench next to her. “I’ve heard whisperings. I’m Cheryl Blossom.” She folds her hands under her chin and gives Veronica an up-and-down with her eyes, ogling her like a meal she’s just about to scarf down. “Was that Archie I just saw depart? Were you three hens gossiping
about his Efron-esque emergence from the chrysalis of puberty?”

Betty’s sure Archie wouldn’t want Cheryl knowing about his music, but aside from the truth she can’t find anything else to talk about. Luckily, Veronica’s a fast thinker. “Extracurriculars. Weatherbee wants me to sign up for a few.”

Cheryl’s face immediately lights up at this. “Cheerleading! You must.” She accentuates on the must, and it grates against Betty’s eardrums. She knows she’s doing this on purpose. “I’m senior captain of the River Vixens.”

“Is cheerleading still a thing?” Kevin asks, and Betty suppresses a snort.

“Is being the gay best friend still a thing?” Cheryl bites back, and Kevin rolls her eyes at her before she continues. “Some people say it’s retro, I say it’s eternal and iconic.”

“At Spence I sat at the top of the elites’ pyramid.” Veronica shrugs. “I’m in.”

Betty’s trying very hard not to imagine what Veronica looks like in a cheerleading uniform (FYI: She’s failing miserably), so when the brunette adds, “Betty, you’re trying out too”, her reaction doesn’t come until Cheryl comments on it. “Of course - anyone’s welcome to try out.” Cheryl’s eyes drop to Betty’s lunch tray and the corners of her mouth sag with disappointment; the blonde bites the inside of her cheek to keep herself from saying anything that might tempt Cheryl to get even nastier. “But Betty’s already got…so much on her plate right now, and being a Vixen’s kind of a full-time thing.” She swings back to Veronica, her smile back and her eyes alight. “But open to all!” She rises with a flourish. “Follow me on Twitter and I’ll do the same - my handle’s @CherylBombshell.”

When Cheryl’s finally gone Veronica chuckles and shakes her head. “Okay, go ahead and hate on cheerleading, but if Hipster Prince Harry-”

Instead of listening to whatever else Veronica has to say about wanting a piece of Archie, Betty interjects with, “I really wanted to be a cheerleader at one point. Polly was on the Vixens with Cheryl and they made it look like so much fun - plus, it would look great on my college applications, but…” Her face falls. “Last year, when I tried out, Cheryl said I was too fat.” Her face sours at the memory.

“’Too season five Betty Draper’ - it was a great line.” Kevin butts in, and when Betty gives him a pointed look he swallows. “But not at all true - it never was. Cheryl just has it out for Betty - she’s hated her guts way before Polly and Jason dated.”

“Well,” Veronica flips her hair over her shoulder. “You’re a total smokeshow now-” Betty nearly chokes on her lunch at the compliment, “-I mean it. As hot and smart as you are…”

Betty would have gotten to the end of Veronica’s sentence if the brunette didn’t just follow You’re an total smokeshow with as hot and smart as you are. Her head is reeling from the unexpected compliments; she lets out a shy laugh and drops her gaze to her lap. She can feel the blush burning her cheeks and she knows Kevin’s looking at her.

If only she could just melt into the ground. Why does she have to fall for a straight girl? Why?

“But wait - you said you wanted to be a cheerleader.” Kevin points out, pulling Betty out of her thoughts. “Past tense?”

“Oh, yeah,” Betty nods vigorously, as if shaking her head hard enough would make her embarrassment go away. “Polly made me want to be a cheerleader - but I told you that I’m going to start doing things for me, remember? So I’m going to try out for the softball team instead.”
“Oh my God,” Kevin looks like she just told him he’s getting a puppy for Christmas. “2010 Betty Cooper really is making a comeback!”

“Peer mentoring, softball…next you’re going to tell me you play music too.” Veronica smirks.

“My mom forced me through four years of piano lessons.” Betty mutters as her blush worsens.

“It seems like you’ve got more layers than Archie.” There’s something very sensual about the brunette’s tone, and it makes the blonde even more nervous. *Oh, if you only knew.* “So if I make the cheerleading squad and you make the softball team, does that mean I get to cheer at your games?”

The floodgates reopen and images of Cheerleader Veronica Lodge rush back into her, wiping out every trace of coherent thought. *Give me a G…give me an A…* “Er,” Betty desperately reaches for her apple, grabbing it and ripping out a gigantic chunk with her teeth. “I guess so.” She can feel Kevin staring at her again. *Dammit, Kev, I get it - I think she’s pretty. Like…really pretty. Gorgeous. Radiant. Breathtaking. Stunning. Beautiful. You can stop judging me with your eyes now.*

Betty Cooper has it *bad.*

It’s incredibly sunny outside but Veronica’s eyes are as black as pitch. “Great, because I’ve got moves that’ll knock you out of the park.”

Betty’s suddenly finding it very hard to swallow; whatever happened to the suave, Capote-quoting, confident Betty from last night? “I-I’m looking forward to seeing them.”

A couple of days later, Betty’s walking home from school with Archie. Both of them are clad in blue and gold varsity jackets.

“I can’t believe it.” Archie’s grinning at the giant ‘R’ sewed onto the chest of Betty’s jacket. “You’re finally on the softball team after wanting to play for so long! Varsity, too!”

She pokes at his own gold ‘R’. “You’re one to talk.”

The redhead chuckles. “We both did what we said we were gonna do when we were kids - me on the football team, you on the softball team. Unreal, isn’t it?”

The blonde puffs out her chest in triumph before straightening the brim of her new Bulldogs hat, which now sits proudly on her blonde head. “I’m not going to let my mom stop me from doing what I want to do anymore. This year’s going to be different, Archie - I’m going to do what I want, when I want. I’m doing things for me - just how like you’re going to do music.”

His grin broadens, and she can’t help but smile with him. “That’s really great to hear, Betts. I’m proud of you.”

“I’m proud of you too, Archie.” Betty cants her head to the side, her ponytail bobbing. “You’re really talented, and you have a lot of potential. I know you’re going to go places - whether it be football or music, or even both.” She bites her lip; this is the part where she tells him that she has something very personal she would like to share, and that she feels comfortable telling him because he’s been her best friend since the dawn of time - but she chickens out yet again and falls silent, mentally chastising herself.
“Are you going to the dance on Friday?” He suddenly asks, prompting her to look up at him. “Veronica asked me to go with her.” He almost sounds confused, like he isn’t sure if he’s supposed to be taking her or not.

“Veronica?” Her eyes are wide and she’s blinking a thousand times per second; the news clearly caught her off guard. “Um, I don’t really know yet. Why?”

Veronica - who is now the River Vixens’ newest flyer, no surprise there - has been an unlikely but steadfast friend. Betty’s mounting attraction to her aside, she’s actually really enjoyable to be around, which is a tad shocking because they’re more or less polar opposites. The irony lies in the fact that it’s their differences that make them so compatible; Veronica is keen to know everything about small town life and Betty’s intrigued by the lifestyles of the formerly rich and currently infamous.

It turns out that the one thing they do have in common is their desperation to escape their parents’ reputations - Betty with her overbearing mother and Veronica with her scandalous father. While Veronica is adamant that the allegations against Hiram are false, she says his arrest opened her eyes to the errors of her ways - “her ways” being the archetypical spoiled heiress Betty read about online. The death threats and constant stream of negative comments she and her parents received in the wake of the scandal floored her and forced her to face the truth: She was a terrible person who did terrible things to undeserving people. Their apartment in Riverdale is the only thing the feds can’t take away from them, as it’s under her mother’s name, which is why the pair moved here after Hiram was taken away; Veronica confided in Betty about her desire to use her new life here as an opportunity to reinvent herself and start over - a desire Betty knows all too well.

Are reinvention and starting over the recurring themes this year? It seems like everybody’s trying to escape a former version of themselves.

“Betty?” She looks up and notices they’re standing in front of her house.

The blonde shakes her head; she isn’t sure if Archie said anything while she was lost in thought, but she’s going to go out on a limb and assume he wants her to say something about Veronica being his date to the dance. “Oh, uh - it’s great that you’re taking Veronica. You’ll have a lot of fun; she’s really nice.” Her chest tightens at the thought; she knew this was going to happen eventually, but she can’t help it. It wasn’t like Veronica was planning to ask her.

“Huh?” Archie blinks. “I asked if you wanted to come with us - as friends. A group of friends. A group of friends…going to the dance together.” He looks baffled by his own words.

“Wait, what?” Betty blinks back.

“Well,” Archie’s eyes shoot upward and his hand is ruffling the back of his hair. “It’s her first dance at Riverdale, and she should have people to go with. I already asked her if it was okay if I asked you, and she said yes.”

Well, this is unexpected. Is Archie really proposing that the both of them take Veronica to the dance? “Um, sure. I’ll tag along, I guess.” She’s trying her best not to sound confused, but the she can’t help it.

“Great, I’ll tell her that you’re coming.” He smiles and half-turns towards the street, jerking his head towards his own house. “Anyways, gotta go. Gotta finish up a couple more demos tonight.”
Alright,” She frowns as he begins to make his way home. “Talk to you later.” She doesn’t move from her spot until he disappears behind his front door.

What the hell just happened?

She’s so focused on trying to answer the question that she nearly misses Alice’s scathing comment on her new attire when she steps inside the house. “What is that?” Her eyes flit from her hat to her jacket.

Betty, already irritated with failing to figure out what Archie’s true intentions are, nonchalantly shrugs her shoulders before ascending the stairs to her room. “I made the softball team.”

“Betty,” Alice begins, her tone hard, “Remember what I said ab-”

“Mom,” The younger Cooper pauses halfway up to glower down at her mother. “If girls aren’t supposed to play sports, why does Riverdale High have girls’ softball, basketball, soccer, volleyball, lacrosse, swim, tennis, and rugby teams?” She sighs. “Besides, you said that extracurriculars are important - and I think you’d rather have me on the softball team than the cheerleading squad.”

“I never said girls weren’t supposed to play sports. What if you get injured? It’ll slow you down, it’ll impede on your stellar progress.” Alice doesn’t want to admit that her daughter has a point; Betty can see it on her face. “I won’t allow this. Take those things off right now.”

This is it. She squares her shoulders and sucks in a breath. “No.”

Alice’s eyes narrow. “What did you say to me?”

“I do everything for everyone,” Betty spits back. “Everything - to be perfect. The perfect daughter, the perfect sister, the perfect student.” She can’t help but think about Polly as she’s saying all of this; she hopes she’s making her proud, wherever she is. “You can’t tell me what I can and can’t do anymore. I’m doing things for me this time, not you.” She huffs and shoulders her bag before resuming her trip up the stairs.

“Where do you think you’re going?” She hears Alice call after her, and she wants to keep walking but another part of her is aching to get the last word.

“I’m putting my new softball stuff away, and then I’m going to buy a dress.” She shouts back as she finally enters her room, dumping her bag on the floor. “I’m going to the dance this Friday, and I’m going with Archie and Veronica.”

“Wait,” There’s a pause as Alice rushes up the stairs; in seconds she’s standing by her doorway, her stare even more menacing than it was before. “Hermione Lodge’s daughter? You know that girls like her don’t-”

“I don’t want to hear it, Mom.” Betty’s voice is even louder now; she can feel her eyes glazing over but she forces herself to push onward. “She’s trying to be a good person, and she has been so far. She’s my friend, and Archie’s my friend too - and you can’t do anything about it.” She unzips a pocket in her backpack, pulls out her wallet, and shoves it into the pocket of her jeans. “It’s happening whether you want it to or not.” And with that she pushes past her mother, leaving her room and storming down the stairs.

When she slams the front door behind her she closes her eyes and lets out a shaky breath. That was the most terrifying thing she has ever done in her entire life, and she feels…good.

Betty inhales slowly, and the rush of cool air swelling in her lungs feels new, refreshing. So this is
what it feels like to be free.

She smiles to herself.

“Well, it’s not the Met Ball.” Veronica’s looking up at the streamers hanging over their heads; there’s a giant banner of Jason in his Bulldogs uniform smiling back at the three of them as they trample into the gymnasium together. There’s music thumping in their ears and numerous bodies are swaying to the beat. Archie and Betty have been awkwardly silent since they agreed to pick up Veronica together at the Pembrooke; the brunette has been filling in most of the conversation, but she doesn’t seem to mind. “Why don’t you guys get started while I go get some punch?”

“Huh?” The blonde and the redhead turn to face her at exactly the same time.

Veronica smirks, but says nothing more and swivels on her heel to disappear into the crowd. Archie shrugs and holds out his arms; Betty relents, moving to place her hands on his shoulders. She stares at his green bowtie and frowns. This isn’t how the night is supposed to go; Veronica’s supposed to be tugging him to the dance floor while she goes and gets the punch.

“Y’know, varsity’s going to take up a lot of my time.” Archie finally speaks, but he’s not looking at her. “I think I’m going to have to choose between football and music.”

Maybe that’s why he’s been so quiet. “When do you have to make a decision?” The song ends and a sadder, slower one begins to play.

“Coach Clayton’s giving me until the weekend, but…” Something over her shoulder catches his attention, and he lets go of her waist. “Betty, will you give me one minute? I promise, when I get back, I’ll be a better date. Okay?”

He sounds like he’s in a hurry; he’s already brushing past her when she nods, but when she turns around to see where he’s going he’s already melted into the throng of other students. He’s been acting really weird lately, but she figures it’s because he’s caught in between wanting to follow his passion and wanting to follow what his dad wants for him. Archie feels that music is his life calling, but football paves the way for a scholarship and a good education. What does he want more: fulfillment or security?

Most importantly, though: Who did he just ditch her for and how is this person going to help him make a decision?

“Hey,” Veronica comes back just as Cheryl takes the stage to announce that the Pussycats are about to play a song. “Where’d our ginger Casanova slip off to?”

Betty accepts her cup of punch and downs it in one gulp; all of this awkwardness is making her thirsty. “He said he had to head off somewhere for a bit.” She tosses her cup into a trash bin, missing by a wide radius; she sheepishly picks it up and drops it in. *Good thing you didn’t try out for the basketball team.*

The brunette frowns as she sets down her and Archie’s cups on a nearby table. “Well, that’s hardly acceptable. It’s ungentlemanly to leave a girl on the dance floor.”

Josie begins to strum her guitar, and Valerie’s synth echoes throughout the room. Archie’s still
absent, and neither girl has a dance partner. Betty clears her throat and begins to search the crowd, hoping she’ll miraculously find Kevin in there somewhere. “Wherever he ran off to, it seemed important.”

“Nonsense,” Veronica’s heel clicks as she takes a step closer, and Betty swallows. “Nothing’s as important as dancing to a song Cheryl and Jason Blossom were apparently conceived to.” She makes a disgusted face, and the taller of the two can’t help but laugh. Veronica extends a hand and throws her a sly smile. “Well, in that case - Betty Cooper, will you do me the honour of being my first dance partner in Riverdale?”

Suddenly Betty wishes she hadn’t finished that punch so fast. “Um, sure?”

When Veronica closes the space between them and throws her arms around her neck, she hopes to whatever deity’s listening that her skin isn’t as hot and sweaty as it feels. Lavender overwhelms her senses as Veronica sways against her; this is the first time Betty’s seeing Veronica’s beauty at such a close proximity and she swears if this is the last thing she sees before she dies, she would die happy. Veronica’s eyes are unfeasibly dark under the swinging lights and her skin is so smooth that it takes a herculean effort for the blonde not to reach out and stroke her cheek with the back of her hand. Her lips are curved upward in that impish smile that she’s already grown so accustomed to, yet every time she sees it it’s like steel bands are wrapped around her chest, constricting so tight her ribs feel like they’re going to splinter and her lungs are screaming for air. Archie’s never made her feel like this before, and she’s known him most of her life. Brad’s never made her feel like this before and she was her first real romantic partner.

She can feel at least a dozen pairs of eyes on them, and she’s sure Cheryl is one of those dozen pairs. Veronica probably senses this too, because she rolls her eyes and says, “It’s the 21st century; if people aren’t okay with two girls dancing together then that’s a problem for their narrow minds to solve. It’s not our fault our date ditched us - and you know, I think I’m having more fun this way anyway.” Her grin returns, and the steel bands tighten.

“R-right.” Betty nods; her hands are on the curves of Veronica’s waist and that’s all she can think about right now. She’s just so damn close. “Uh, are you sure it isn’t weird that I came with you and Archie? I know you’re…interested in him.” She’s asking this partially because she’s desperate to find something else to talk about and partially because she genuinely wants to know why.

“Oh c’mon, Betty,” The shorter girl chortles, and the taller one tilts her head in confusion. “I know you guys aren’t dating but it’s kind of obvious to see that you’re endgame.”

And she thought tonight couldn’t get any weirder. “What?”

“You really don’t know, do you?” One of Veronica’s perfectly sculpted eyebrows is quirked upwards. “You don’t see the way he looks at you, the way he literally melts when you’re around him? You don’t notice how his voice kind of changes when he talks to you?” When Betty fails to answer, the brunette’s other eyebrow rises. “Really?”

“Really.” Betty looks absolutely mortified; she’s not right, is she? There’s no way she can be right. Archie has been strictly platonic with her all these years, even when she thought she was destined to be with him. He wouldn’t just suddenly fall in love with her, right? No, Veronica’s definitely looking too much into things. She’s just unaware of the close bond that she and Archie share. They’re like siblings, or even closer than siblings.

“Archie’s head over heels for you, girl.” Veronica shakes her head. “Honestly, I should have figured it out sooner - well, I kind of had a feeling, but when he asked me about bringing you along tonight everything just fell into place. He wants to be with you.”
“I…” What is she supposed to say to that? Oh, but I’m not into him like that. Actually, I’m not into guys at all. “Veronica…”

“Is it so impossible to imagine?” The brunette squints in thought. “You’ve lived across the street from each other all these years, you’ve been in every class together since kindergarten, you’ve been best friends forever. If this doesn’t scream fate, I don’t know what does.” She laughs, and it’s so silvery and musical; Betty wants to listen to her laugh forever. “Get your Taylor Swift song ending, Betty. I think it’s time.”

The song ends, and the blonde reluctantly untangles herself from the brunette. When she turns to face the stage to applaud the Pussycats, she’s met with Archie, who’s standing just a few feet away from her. He looks like the wind has been knocked out of him; has he been there the whole time?

This newfound knowledge melts the steel bands wrapped around her chest; a burning kind of ache flickers within her now, and she tears her gaze away from him and forces herself to stare at the stage as she mechanically claps her hands.

Veronica’s wrong.

Right?

The night wears on and Betty finds herself wedged in between Archie and Veronica on an old couch in the Blossom’s ancient living room. Cheryl showed an uncharacteristic generous side and invited all three of them to her afterparty; Archie and Veronica were obvious choices, but why her?

“It’s game time at Chez Blossom, kiddies.” Cheryl’s standing in front of a musty brick fireplace with an empty beer bottle. “We’re going old school tonight - Seven Minutes in Heaven.” Her eyes sweep the room and her lips curl into a scheming simper. “Who wants to tryst in the closet of love first?” Reggie begins to raise his hand, but she ignores it and turns her head to stare at Veronica. “My vote is for the new girl.”

“Even better.” Reggie beams and leans back a little too quickly, spilling his beer on his shoes. The River Vixen sitting next to him rolls her eyes and scoots farther down the couch. Veronica sighs in defeat.

“Alright,” Cheryl bends over to place the bottle on the coffee table. “Let’s see who gets to pop her Riverdale cherry.” She flicks her wrist, and the bottle begins to spin.

Betty’s knuckles are white as they grip onto her clutch for dear life. As the bottle starts to slow down, her pulse quickens. What if it lands on Archie? What if it lands on her? She clamps her eyes shut, deciding that this is too much for her to handle. She can’t watch this. She doesn’t want to know.

“Oh,” Reggie’s boorish laughter forces her eyes open. “No way.”

The mouth of the bottle is gaping at her, almost like it’s shocked itself.

“It’s clearly pointing to Blandra Dee.” Cheryl looks even more evil than before. “This should be fun.”

Betty can see Archie’s discomfort from the corner of her eye. Her heart is beating so hard she
fears it’s going to crash right through her bones. “I’m not doing this.” She shakes her head.

“I never agreed to this either.” Veronica adds, leaning forward to glare at the person responsible.

“This is basically your initiation, Veronica - you have no choice.” Cheryl rolls her eyes. “As for you, Betty - that’s on you, but if you’re not going to do it house rules decree the hostess gets to take your turn.” Reggie lets out a whoop, and she smiles. “So, what’ll it be?”

“There’s no losing in this!” Reggie’s hysterical.

“Shut up.” Archie grunts, and the edge in his tone makes Betty even more uneasy but she knows that Cheryl’s backing her into a corner on purpose. It’s either she goes in with Veronica and hurts Archie’s feelings, or she forces Veronica to put up with Madame Satan herself. Reggie’s wrong: Both options are losing ones.

“C’mon.” Veronica’s hand is on her wrist, tugging her upward; Betty shoots Archie a withering look before following the smaller girl into the closet. The helplessness in his stare weighs on her as Veronica closes the door behind them.

The tiny room barely has any space for the both of them; Veronica’s so close her forehead is mere millimetres away from Betty’s lips. The blonde tries her best not to think about this as she searches the place for something else to stare at.

“I know her brother died and everything,” The brunette begins; her breath is warm against Betty’s neck and she instinctively presses her palms against her skirt to keep them from sweating. “But Cheryl Blossom is truly the antichrist.” Her face is illuminated; she’s holding her phone in her hand, keeping track of the time. “Was she always like this?”

“As long as I can remember.” Betty responds, keeping her eyes trained on the stack of old board games behind the shorter girl. “She’s always been mean but she seems to pick on me more than the others, for some reason. I’ve never been able to figure out why.”

“Six minutes, twenty seconds.” Veronica nods at her phone. “Okay, your turn - ask me a question. It’ll kill time.”

Normally, a game of twenty-one questions would be fun, but under current circumstances it makes Betty want to scream and tear her hair out. “Uh, okay.” She pauses, wracking her brain for something to ask. “Do you miss New York?”

“It’s been less than a week,” The smaller girl shrugs, “But yes, I do.” Her eyes drop to her screen. “Five minutes, forty-five seconds.” She glances up, and all of the oxygen in Betty’s lungs suddenly disappear when they make eye contact. The glow of her screen shines into her irises; they’re a deeper, warmer shade of brown - not like Archie’s or Cheryl’s. It’s like it’s a completely new spectrum of colour, and it’s beautiful. “You and Archie have been weird around each other all night.”

The blonde gulps. “He’s just worried about his football-or-music dilemma. My turn.”

“I didn’t ask my question yet.” Veronica points out, and Betty swallows again. “Are you guys really just best friends?”

She really doesn’t want to talk about this right now. “Yes. We’ve been friends forever.” Veronica raises an eyebrow, but Betty chooses to ignore it. “My turn.” This time the brunette doesn’t object, and the blonde is thankful for that but now she has to think of a question to ask. She decides to blurt out the first one that comes to mind: “Did you have a boyfriend in New York?”
She wants to beat herself over the head for asking that. Veronica’s brow furrows in thought, like she has to really think about the question before answering it. “No.” Her voice is soft, almost doubtful. “My turn. Could it ever possibly become something more?”

This girl isn’t going to let this go, isn’t she? It’s starting to get on her nerves. “Are you asking for Archie?”

She laughs in that same quiet, uncertain tone from before. “Of course I am. Who else would I be asking for? And you didn’t answer my question.” She quickly peers at her phone. “Four minutes, seven seconds.”

There’s no use avoiding it; the more evasive Betty is, the further Veronica will probe. The blonde sighs. “I… I felt something for him once, but I realized that maybe I felt like I was supposed to feel that way because everyone expected me to. It makes perfect sense - like you said, we grew up together, we’ve been through everything together, we’re best friends. It’s only natural that we fall in love and live happily ever after, right?” She throws up her hands, careful not to hit Veronica as she does so. “But it didn’t end up that way. I don’t feel whatever it is I’m supposed to feel with him, and I don’t think I ever did.”

That was an answer Veronica wasn’t expecting; she moves back a bit, her eyebrows raised and the hand holding her phone limp by her side, the time completely forgotten. “So that means something must’ve happened to make you come to this realization.” Her eyes flutter half-closed and she leans in again, somehow ending up even closer than they were before. Betty can count her eyelashes. “Have you felt it with someone else?” Her voice is even lower now, and softer.

The answer escapes Betty’s lips faster than she can stop it; she doesn’t even realize she asked a second question, but it doesn’t matter anymore. “Yeah.” Her blood is pumping noisily in her ears; her hair falls over her face as she unconsciously begins to lean in. “Have you?”

There’s a heavy pause; Veronica’s eyes quickly flit downwards - is she staring at her lips? - before returning to her face. “Maybe once.” She leans back again, and Betty chases her, nearly lurching forward and colliding with her. “You’re not as next door girlish as I thought you were.” Her mouth is enticingly close, curved upwards in a teasing smile. “There’s a lot more to you than meets the eye.”

Veronica’s straight, right? “You have no idea.”

The shorter girl chuckles at her answer. “Your turn. Ask me a question, Betty.” Her voice is barely above a whisper at this point, and her eyes are so large, so beautiful. “Ask me anything you want.”

Betty dips her head, and the tips of their noses briefly brush. Veronica’s breathing is fanning her cheeks as she cranes her neck up to touch her forehead with her own. This is happening. It’s actually happening.

But then her conscience kicks in at the last minute, and Archie’s devastated face flickers behind her eyes for a split second. If Veronica’s right, if what she said is true, if Archie really does love her, then… “We shouldn’t do this.” She murmurs, but she’s already taking a step closer.

Veronica’s eyes are already closed. “We definitely shouldn’t be doing this.” Then she leans in and presses her lips against hers.

There’s a soft thud as her phone drops to the floor; Betty can feel the brunette’s hands sliding up her neck, the pads of her thumbs resting on her cheeks as she gently grasps her face. All Betty can think about is how Veronica tastes like the wine she was sipping earlier and how soft she feels against her;
her arms are tingling, but she forces them to wrap around the smaller girl’s waist, pulling her closer. Veronica hums into her mouth, running her tongue along Betty’s bottom lip before parting her own lips to skillfully slip her tongue inside. Betty breathes in sharply through her nose, completely caught off guard; the shorter of the two senses this and grins before shifting her hands back, tangling her fingers in honey blonde tendrils. She can feel her chest completely pushed up against hers and her hips pressing into her skirt, and she honestly doesn’t even know how she’s still standing at this point because she can’t feel her legs.

Suddenly Veronica’s phone goes off and they jump at the noise, their mouths separating but their arms still around each other. Seven minutes are up.

Both of them turn to face each other, their chests heaving and their faces flushed. Both of them know what they want to say, but they don’t know how to bring it up.

So, Veronica isn’t straight either.

When they emerge from the closet (Betty dryly thinks about how Kevin would have a stupid joke for this), Archie’s gone and Cheryl’s standing in front of them with a hand on her hip.

“Awesome.” Reggie’s in awe.

“Where’s Archie?” Betty asks as she frantically searches the room for him.

“The poor thing spiralled and fled.” Cheryl answers casually; she tosses Betty a napkin, and the blonde’s eyes bulge when she realizes why she’s giving it to her in the first place. “I would’ve never pegged him for the sensitive jealous type.”

“You shady bitch,” Veronica hisses as Betty frenetically wipes the brunette’s smudged lipstick off her mouth. “What do you possibly expect to gain from all of this?”

“Oh, haven’t you heard?” The redhead tilts her head, feigning innocence. “Betty, why don’t you tell Veronica about your sister and my dear brother?”

The blonde’s insides grow cold and she drops her napkin. “She already knows they were dating.”

Cheryl scoffs. “I bet you’re in pieces over your poor sister’s disappearance. Jason’s probably the reason why she had a nervous breakdown and decided to run away from home, right?”

The entire room is staring at her. Betty folds her hands in front of her, trying to keep them from shaking. “That’s what my parents think.”

“So,” Cheryl smirks. “What do you have to say about that?” She raises her arms, spreading them wide. “Go ahead, the floor is yours. Whatever you’ve been dying to spew about Jason and how he treated Polly…unleash it.”

Betty’s hands drop to her sides, curling into fists. They tighten with every new sentence Cheryl throws at her.

“Destroy me.” Her nails begin to dig in.

“Tear me a new one.” They break through the skin and a stinging pain begins to pulse in and out of
her palms.

“Rip me to shreds.” She can feel the first few drops of blood seeping through, wetting her fingertips.

“Annihilate me.” The pain is throbbing now, creeping up her arms.

“I just…” Betty finally loosens her fists, letting them rest against her thighs as she struggles to find the right words. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry - about what happened to Jason.” She really isn’t, but she knows it’s what Cheryl wants her to say and she’s leaving her no choice but to say them. “I can’t even imagine what you and your family must be going through.”

The redhead drops her head momentarily. “Finally.” She sighs; for a second she looks genuinely despondent, like she’s about to tell Betty that she knows what it’s like to be a grieving sister who misses their sibling - but then she looks up and she’s back to the frighteningly cold and callous demeanour from before. The transition is automatic, seamless, like she’s done this millions of times. “Well, that was fun. Are we ready for round two? Betty, why don’t you spin the bottle this time?”

“Wait,” Veronica steps forward, “What the hell was that all about? You couldn’t bully Betty into being a bitch, so you’re going to make her suffer again?”

Cheryl shrugs. “I knew Betty wouldn’t be able to do it. She’s not like you or me; she doesn’t have that kind of fire. Actually, I don’t even think she knows who she is.” Her eyes dart over to Betty for a split second; there’s a hidden meaning to her words and Betty’s pulse begins to hammer as to what it might be.

“Oh, but I know who you are.” Veronica takes another step, and the centre of attention immediately shifts from Betty to her. “You would rather people fear than like you so you traffic in terror and intimidation. You’re rich, so you’ve never been held accountable.” She crosses her arms, and her voice raises a few decibels and fills the entire room. For someone so small, she can be so loud. “But I’m living proof that certainty, that entitlement you wear on your head like a crown…it won’t last.”

Reggie lets out a low, “Oooooh,” And Betty wants nothing more than to cross over and smack him upside the head. This is the first time someone’s standing up to Cheryl Blossom, so this is kind of a big deal - and Veronica’s standing up to Cheryl for her, for Betty Cooper, for the girl she just frenched in a closet five minutes ago.

“Eventually,” Veronica’s just a couple of steps away from Cheryl now, “There will be a reckoning.” Another step; the room is deathly quiet, eagerly awaiting for the climax of this exchange. “Or, maybe that reckoning is now, and maybe that reckoning is me.” They’re so close that it looks like they’re about to kiss, and Betty would believe it if Cheryl wasn’t on the verge of tears. It’s a bit cruel, but it’s nice to see that she’s the one being picked on for once. “You pick on Betty Cooper again and I swear I will make you regret it.”

Wait, what did she just say? The blonde can feel that familiar, uncomfortable warmth spreading to her cheeks again and she drops her head in embarrassment, biting her lip.

“You wanted fire?” Veronica sneers. “Sorry, Cheryl Bombshell, but my speciality’s ice.”

The redhead actually looks kind of scared. She backs off, exhaling sharply, and briskly turns to leave the room. The other patrons exchange dumbstruck looks before quickly shrugging it off and moving to grab another drink.

Reggie’s staring at Veronica like she’s the messiah. “That was even hotter than the closet.”

Ignoring him, the brunette returns to the blonde’s side and takes her hands in her own, gently prying
open her palms. “Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah.” The blonde chokes, overwhelmed with emotion. Veronica’s tenderly brushing her thumbs over her wounds, melting away what’s left of the anxiety Cheryl instilled in her earlier. The gesture is so sincere and loving that it’s nearly driving Betty to tears; Polly’s the only person who knows about this little bad habit of hers, and knowing that Veronica - a girl she’s only known for a few days - pays enough attention to notice that she’s doing this to herself speaks volumes about her character. Archie’s known her since they were four years old and he never mentioned this habit of hers, not once.

Speaking of which, “We have to find Archie.” Betty makes her way over to the couch and snatches her clutch, ripping it open and pulling out her phone. She dials Archie’s number but she’s taken straight to voicemail. “Shit, his phone’s off.”

“I’m getting an Uber.” Veronica’s swiping through her phone as the pair dash out of the room, making their way through one of Thornhill’s many hallways. “You have to find him on your own, Betty. The last thing he wants and needs right now is us tracking him down together.”

She has a point there. “Alright, but where am I supposed to start looking?”

The shorter of the two shakes her head. “You’d know better than me. It’s late - where would he be able to run off to at this hour?”

Of course. Betty should’ve figured this out sooner. “I know where to go.”

The door chimes as Betty bursts into Pop’s, still wearing her pink dress. The diner’s completely empty save for Pop himself, who’s busy in the back kitchen, and a figure wearing a beanie hunched over a laptop in a booth in the far corner.

“Hey, Jughead,” The blonde approaches the boy, wringing her hands. “Have you seen Archie, by any chance?”

His face darkens at the mention of the redhead. “No, sorry.”

Which means there’s only one place left to look, and that’s Archie’s house - but after taking a second to breathe, she realizes that she isn’t ready to find him just yet, and she nods to the empty seat across from her friend. “Do you mind if I sit here for a bit?” When he shakes his head, she slides in and sighs before running her hands through her hair. “I messed up, Jug.”

His expression is blank, hard to read. “I’m assuming you want me to ask what you messed up.”

“Sorry for dumping all of this on you, but…” She leans back against her seat, sighing again. “I may or may not have lost my best friend tonight, and I’m terrified.”

Jughead begins to type away at his laptop. “Is it because of Veronica Lodge?” He doesn’t even bother to look up as he says this.

Her green eyes widen. “Wait, how did you-”

“I’m working on a new novel.” He announces, and her brow crinkles with confusion as she tries to
figure out how this is relevant. “It’s about this summer and Jason Blossom. In order to get material for it I have to do a lot of listening and watching. I observe people, Betty - it’s my way of connecting to the world, if I have a connection at all. If you two didn’t meet just a few days ago I would think you were in love with her.”

Hearing Jughead talking about connecting to people and having feelings is so foreign that Betty can’t help but laugh. “No offence, but you’re strictly anti-love. How would you know what it is if you don’t care for it?”

“I am, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know what it looks like. I’ve seen it happen to other people before.” He’s still typing, not making eye contact with her. “It’s interesting, actually - the way you’re so in tune with each other.”

“In tune?”

“It’s like when she’s around, she becomes your centre of gravity.” Jughead pauses to take a bite out of the half-finished burger sitting on a plate next to his computer. “You shift with her, you move when she does. She’s a magnet and you’re…I dunno, a paper clip or something. You’re not like this with…” His expression darkens again. “Archie. You never were.”

First she’s unaware of Archie’s feelings for her, and now she’s unaware of how attracted she truly is to Veronica. Apparently the lesson for today is that she’s pathetically oblivious to anything related to relationships. “I don’t think any of that matters anymore - none of this is worth it if it hurts him. He’s still my best friend. I still want him in my life.”

“So do I.” Jughead mutters, his tone bitter; there’s clearly something up with him and Archie, but Betty feels it’s inappropriate to ask. “Look, just talk to him. You know I hate talking to people, but even I can admit that it goes a long way when you’re trying to mend things.” He takes another bite of his burger. “I know it would’ve went a long way with me.”

“You’re right.” She frowns. “I hate that you’re right, but you’re right.”

He smirks before wolfin down the rest of his burger. “So, I heard you finally made the softball team. Varsity, nice.” He picks up a fry and dips it into his ketchup. “And isn’t your uptown girl a cheerleader? How much more Nicholas Sparks can you get?”

Betty grasps her skirt in her hands as she blushes and drops her gaze to her lap. Her mind wanders back to the kiss, and she bites her lip. “I wanted to start off the new school year by doing things for myself, because I want to do them - not because someone else wants me to. At first I thought it was a good idea, but now that I know that it has the potential to hurt the people I care about I’m not so sure.”

“Of course it’s a good idea, Betts.” Jughead finally makes eye contact with her, his blue eyes glinting red underneath the diner’s neon lights. “If all good things were easy to achieve, they wouldn’t be worth striving for. Just talk to him - if he really does love you and value what you have with him, he’ll understand and eventually things will go back to normal. Then you and Veruca Salt can ride off into the sunset together.”

She can always count on Jughead to make her feel better. “Thanks, Juggie, but I don’t think she feels the same way.” The kiss forces her way back into her memory, as if to tell her she’s dead wrong, but she shoves it to the far recesses of her mind. She can’t give herself false hope, not now - not when a relationship should be the last thing on her mind. Not when the prospect of a relationship with Veronica could mean the end of her friendship with Archie.
He shrugs. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

She quirks an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“Honestly, Betty, you’d think I’d be talking to Archie with how blind you are right now.” And just like that, he’s back to typing on his keyboard.

“Really? That’s all you’re going to tell me?” She huffs and crosses her arms.

“This is the part where I tell you that you have to figure it out for yourself.” Jughead shrugs again. “Go and talk to Archie. You won’t be able to sort things out with Veronica if things with him aren’t sorted first.”

She knows she won’t be able to get anything else out of him, so she gives up and rises from her seat to leave Pop’s. Again, he’s right. And she hates that he’s right.

The air has gotten chillier, and she didn’t bring a jacket; she hastily rubs her upper arms as she begins to walk back to her and Archie’s street.

Archie’s bedroom light is still on.

She hopelessly stares up at his window, her teeth clicking together in the cold. “Arch,” She calls out to him. “Can we talk? Please.”

Minutes later Archie’s front door creaks open and he steps through, still dressed in his blazer. He slowly makes his way to her, walking to the edge of his front porch. “I just want you to know something.” He pauses, absently scuffing the floor with his shoe. “Betty, you are so perfect. I’ve never been good enough for you and I’ll never be good enough for you.”

Perfect is her least favourite word. It’s what her mother wants her to be, what she’s been struggling all her life to become so she can feel like she’s worth something to someone. To hear Archie using this word to describe her pushes hundreds of needles into her chest; he’s the last person she would expect to think of her that way, to see her as the flawless, well-rounded, all-American perfect girl next door her mother groomed her to be. He knows she isn't like that. He knows that's not who she wants to be.

And maybe he would have known if she would just suck it up and tell him the truth already, but she still can’t bring herself to do it even though he’s pouring his heart out to her right now, and she hates herself for it. If this isn’t the perfect opportunity to rip off the proverbial bandaid, then she doesn't know what is - so why can’t she do it? Why doesn't it feel like the right time?

“A lot happened this past summer while you were away, and it put a lot of things into perspective for me. It helped me see things that were there this whole time, but I was too stupid to notice them before, and I’m scared it might be too late.”

Oh, God. Veronica’s right. “Archie”

She gazes at him, and her heart breaks at how torn he looks. “But first thing's first: You're my best friend. I want to be there for you no matter what, because you've always been there for me.” He takes a step forward. "Betty, if there's anything you want me to know, you'd tell me, right?” His eyes
are pleading with her, and it intensifies the ache in her chest. "You'd tell me right away, because we're best friends and we don't."

Her phone goes off, because apparently the universe doesn’t want her to have nice things. She glances at the screen, and her heart jumps to her throat when she sees Polly’s name flashing back at her. “I’m so, so sorry Archie, but we have to continue this later. Polly’s calling me.”

“Polly?” He steps over to her and peeks at her screen; now that he knows she isn’t using her phone as an excuse to avoid talking about his feelings, his expression changes. “Answer it.”

Bless him; now she really feels terrible for not reciprocating his feelings. She has to hold her phone with both hands because they’re shaking so bad - partially from the cold, partially from anxiety. She keeps her eyes locked on Archie as she speaks; despite everything, his presence still soothes her, and while she wishes this were happening under drastically different circumstances she can’t imagine wanting anyone else to be by her side.

“Hello?”
“Betty,” Polly sobs through Betty’s speakerphone; her voice sends a rush of emotions and Betty has to bite her lip to keep herself from crying, “Oh my gosh. It’s really you.”

“Pol,” She chokes; she can feel Archie’s hand pressing on her shoulder, and she leans into him. “Where are you? Are you safe?”

“I’m fine,” Her sister replies; Archie slides his hand across her back, wrapping his arm around her and gently pulling her to his porch swing, where they sit down together. “We’re fine. We all are.”

“We?” Betty echoes; she glances up at Archie, who looks just as confused as she does. “Who are you with?”

“Is that Betty?” There’s a new voice; both Betty and Archie’s eyes widen when they realize who it is. “Does she know if my sister’s okay?”

“Jason?” Archie gapes. “Is that you?”


“You’re surprised?” Betty grits her teeth. “You’re supposed to be dead, Jason. You drowned in Sweetwater River. We had a memorial for you and everything. Sheriff Keller’s still looking for your body!” There are at least a million things running through her head right now. “The both of you better have a good explanation for this.”

“Gee,” Jason mutters, “Thanks for showing your concern.”

There’s a heavy pause; Betty can hear Polly taking a deep breath. “Jason and I aren’t in Riverdale,” Polly’s speaking agonizingly slow, like she’s trying to build up anticipation, “Actually, we aren’t even in the country.”

“What?” Betty shouts, and Archie anxiously hushes her. She shakes her head before continuing in a significantly lower voice. “What do you mean, we aren’t even in the country?”

“Canada,” Jason replies easily. “Montreal, to be exact. If I knew this was going to happen I would’ve paid more attention in French class.”

He and Polly’s nonchalant approach to their current situation is only making Betty more annoyed. “Can you tell me why you’re in Montreal? Can you tell me why everyone thinks you’re dead when you’re clearly not, and can you tell me why my sister ran away from home?”

“Okay, before we explain everything,” Polly sounds hesitant, “Betty, promise me you won’t freak
“Telling me not to freak out is only going to make me freak out.”

Her sister sighs. “It was worth a try.”

“You know how our parents don’t like us together?” Jason explains, “Well, one day, they gave me a choice: I leave Polly, or they disown me.”

“And you clearly chose the latter.” Betty dryly cuts in.

“Betty.” Archie scolds; she sighs and closes her mouth.

“Actually, Jason tried to break up with me first.” Polly presses on. “He didn’t want to do it, but at the same time he didn’t want to leave Cheryl alone with their parents - so he figured that if he pretended to break up with me, he could still have the both of us.”

“She saw through me, naturally,” Jason mutters, and Polly giggles. “And then she told me she was pregnant.”

Archie has to clamp his hand over Betty’s mouth to keep her from screaming again. “Pregnant?” The redhead blinks rapidly as he tries to take in this new bout of information; meanwhile, his best friend is angrily writhing under his hand. “That’s…” He trails off, unable to find the right words to describe how he feels about this.

Betty finally wrenches Archie’s hand off of her. This night just went from terrible to completely insane. “Polly,” Her voice softens when it hits her; her sister is going to be a mother. Her sister is having a baby with someone she loves. They’re going to be a family. “You’re…”

“Please be happy for us, Betty.” Polly pleads. “I’m sorry I didn’t call sooner. We didn’t want to risk contacting anyone until we were sure it was one hundred percent safe.”

“I am happy,” The blonde can feel the tears glazing over her eyes, but this time she doesn’t stop them from flowing. “And don’t be sorry - I tried asking Mom and Dad where you were, but-”

“What did they tell you?” Her sister asks wryly, “That I went crazy because I couldn’t deal with Jason’s death? That I was on drugs? Alcohol?”

“They didn’t say anything.” Something angry and bitter begins to bubble up inside of her, and her free hand closes into a fist. “It doesn’t even look like they’re searching for you. They’ve been so casual about you missing, and I hate it.”

“Figures,” Polly scoffs, “When they found out, all they wanted was for me to go away - so I gave them just that.”

“Wait, they know you’re pregnant?” Her fist tightens. “They didn’t even tell me.”

“Of course they wouldn’t - they knew you’d only be more compelled to look for me if you knew about it.” Polly sighs. “First they tried talking me into getting an abortion. When that didn’t work they threatened to send me to a group home. When that didn’t work, they told me that I was no longer their daughter. They realized they couldn’t control me, so they cut me off just like that - like I meant nothing to them. That’s when Jason and I realized that our only option was to leave Riverdale and never come back.”

“The only person in my family who approved of us other than Cheryl was my grandmother.” Jason
picks up where Polly left off. “She gave us her blessing, and then we started planning our escape.”

“Wait,” Betty says cautiously. “She gave you her blessing? Blessing for what? The baby?”

“Er,” Polly’s hesitates, and Betty narrows her eyes. “Our engagement. She even gave me her ring.”

The blonde breathes in deep and closes her eyes. This is too much.

Jason gracelessly clears his throat. “We stashed an old car off of Route 40 - y’know, that old road that no one uses - and I made a deal with the Serpents-”

“Serpents?” Archie sounds wary. “As in the Southside Serpents?”

“We needed money, so I agreed to make a run up to Montreal for them. It was just a one-time thing: I go to Montreal, do the deal, I get the money, I wire some to the Serpents, I keep the rest, then Polly and I can stay here where it’s safe.” This story is getting crazier and crazier; Betty’s head is spinning so quickly she fears it’s going to topple off. “Cheryl came up with the idea of faking my death-”

“Cheryl came up with this?” Betty splutters; Archie lunges forward to silence her again but she smacks him away. “You mean she knew about you two all this time?” She can feel her nails biting into her skin and she grits her teeth; is that why Cheryl’s been meaner than usual lately?

“She doesn’t know about the pregnancy or the engagement,” Polly confides, “But yes, she came up with everything - the boat, the car, all of it. We promised to contact her in a month, but like I said earlier we didn’t want to risk it until we knew we were completely safe.”

“I wanted to tell her first,” Jason adds, “But Polly felt that you deserved to know since you were away while all of this happened.”

“Well,” Betty sighs, “I’m glad I know now, and I’m even more glad to know that you guys are safe.”

“Can you tell Cheryl for me, Betty?” Jason asks. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to contact her so it would be best if you told her everything. I know she’s worried. Tell her I’m sorry and that I’ll find a way to reach her soon.”

She briefly wonders if Jason would still be concerned if she told him about what happened a few hours ago. “Okay.” She breathes; as much as she hates Cheryl, it wouldn’t be fair to keep this from her. Cheryl loves Jason just like she loves Polly, and if she were in Cheryl’s position she wouldn’t want to be left in the dark. “I’ll tell her.”

“Thanks,” His voice relaxes with relief. “I know you and Cheryl don’t always get along but I really appreciate this. Anyways, we better go - we shouldn’t be on the phone this long.”

Betty’s chest begins to ache; she’s already missing her sister and they haven’t even hung up yet. “When will we hear from you again?”

“I don’t know,” Polly admits, “But it probably won’t be through the phone - it’s too easy to trace. Just keep an eye out, okay?” She sniffs, and Betty can feel her own tears returning. “I love you, Betty. I promise I’ll talk to you soon.”

The massive influx of new information nearly made Betty forget that she has her own life updates she wants to give her sister. She wants so badly to tell Polly that she has a lot of things to talk about, but with Archie being here it just isn’t possible, so instead she chokes on a sob and blubbers, “I love you too, Pol. Please be safe.”
The call ends, and Betty drops her phone to her lap. She stares at the blank screen as she tries to process everything that just happened: Jason is alive, they’re engaged to be married, they ran away to Montreal to escape their families, Jason dealt drugs for the Southside Serpents so they can have money to live off of, and they’re going to have a baby.

“Wow.” Is all she can say as she reaches up to wipe her tears.

Archie flops back against the swing and runs a hand through his hair. “Yeah.”

The blonde turns to him and smiles ruefully. “Thank you for sticking around. I don’t think I would’ve been able to get through all of that on my own.”

“Like I said, I want to be there for you no matter what.” He smiles back. “Best friends, remember?”

Now she’s remembering their conversation from earlier, the one that was interrupted by Polly’s call. “I know, and I’m sorry I haven’t been a very good one lately. It’s just…a lot happened. A lot is going on. I don’t really know where to start. It’s all just one big giant mess and I hate that it’s hurting you but—”

“Hey, hey,” Archie hushes; he leans towards her and places his hands on her shoulders. “It’s okay, Betty.”

She sniffles, and suddenly she feels so stupid. “Really?”

He nods, and her chest aches for him. Why couldn’t things end up the way they were supposed to? Why can’t she love him back? “Until you find the right words, I’ll be here waiting - and whatever it is you’re going through right now, I’ll be there every step of the way.” He stands up and begins to make his way towards his front door. “Get some sleep. It’s been a long night.”

Betty can feel the tears coming for the third time; she lets out a breathy, sad laugh, and nods before swiping at her eyes. “Okay.” She rises and moves to the end of the porch, but before she takes a step further she half-turns to look at him. “You’re wrong, you know.”

The redhead raises a thick eyebrow as he turns the knob. “Hm?”

She smiles through her tears. “You’re the one who’s perfect.”

“That is simultaneously the craziest and most romantic story I’ve ever heard, but I still don’t get why you’re suddenly deciding to play Matchmaker when A: You’re super heart eyes for this girl, and B: Said girl is obviously bi for you.” Kevin shakes his head in disbelief when Betty tells him everything the following Monday. After taking the weekend to digest everything, Betty knows what she has to do: Find everything in her power to make sure her parents and the Blossoms don’t know anything about Polly and Jason’s whereabouts, figure out how to have a civil conversation with Cheryl, and make sure Archie and Veronica are endgame.

“Archie sat through the entire conversation, Kev - he was there for all of it. Then, after that, he told me not to feel pressured to talk to him right away. He knows I’m hiding something from him but he also understands that I need time to figure out how to tell him.” Betty opens her locker and reaches for a textbook. Her bottle of Adderall is sitting on the top shelf, and she can see it out of the corner of her eye; she pushes it farther back, out of sight. “He’s just been so good to me and I don’t deserve
any of it. He should be with someone who can love him back. Someone who can make him happy.”

“Yeah,” Kevin mutters as Betty closes her locker and turns to make her way down the hallway, “He’s Prince Charming: Gen Z Edition. Still don’t get how you’re going to pull this off, since y’know, like I previously mentioned - you’re in love with the girl you’re trying to set him up with.”

“I’m not-” She starts off hollering, then abruptly drops her voice to an angry murmur, “-in love with her.”

“You just spent five minutes talking about your closet make out session in excruciating detail.”

“It was relevant to the story, okay?” Betty growls, though she can feel her cheeks burning. She turns and makes her way into reception. “Besides, none of that matters anymore. I’m going to make sure they end up together and that’s the end of that.”

“Because forcing people to fall in love always yields good results.” Kevin raises an eyebrow as he follows her inside. “Do you mind telling me why we’re here?”

“Apparently someone left something for me.” Betty glances around the room.

“Oh my God, those are gorgeous.” She whirls around and spots Kevin gaping at a bouquet of yellow roses sitting on the end of the receptionist’s desk. There’s a small card protruding from the flowers; Kevin snatches it. “Dear Betty, please forgive me, XOXO…V’? Who the hell is V?”

Betty’s heart begins to race, and she reluctantly raises her head so she can meet her friend’s eyes.

“Veronica.” They answer at the same time; a third voice answers with them and they turn towards the doorway to see the dark haired culprit sheepishly grinning back with a white box clutched in her small hands. Her adorable expression only makes Betty’s heart beat faster.

“The yellow’s for friendship.” The brunette points to the bouquet. “I also had Magnolia cupcakes flown in from New York-” She gestures to the box, “-because, as my mom likes to say, there’s no wrong the right cupcake can’t fix.”

What wrong is she talking about? “Veron-”

“Also, I-I booked us hers-and-hers pedis at Chez Salon. Blowouts, too.” Betty’s never heard Veronica stutter before; it doesn’t suit her at all, and the fact that she feels guilty enough to make her trip over her words like that - even if she is guilty over a problem that may or may not exist - tugs on her heartstrings. “I am so, so, sorry, Betty. I should’ve bitten the bullet and let Cheryl walk in through that closet with me instead. It was selfish and also such a basic bitch move.” Her large brown eyes drop to the floor, and she exhales shakily. “It was such an Old Veronica move.” She swallows and returns her gaze to Betty’s, and the hurt in her expression is almost too much for the blonde to bear. “I will never, ever, do anything like that to you again. I swear on my mother’s pearls. Just…can you please give me one more chance?”

She looks at Kevin; he shrugs his shoulders. Betty bashfully chuckles and shakes her head. “There’s nothing to be sorry for, Veronica. Archie and I, we sort of talked last night. We didn’t say everything we needed to say but we said enough for now, and we’re okay.” She frowns at the box of cupcakes. “You didn’t have to go through all of this for me.”

“Of course I did.” Veronica pouts; Betty gulps and tries her best not to stare at her lips (But she fails miserably, as per usual). “I nearly sabotaged your relationship with Ginger Boy Wonder.”

“Archie and I are fine,” The blonde insists as she takes the bouquet; the three of them leave the office
and walk back to Betty’s locker. She reopens it and places the flowers inside. “And we’re fine too.”

“What?” When Veronica lights up, the taller girl’s chest contracts. “Really?” There’s a childlike eagerness to her voice, and Betty can’t help but think about how unfair this is. How is she supposed to set her up with Archie when every single little thing she does makes her feel like there’s fireworks going off in the pit of her stomach? “Awesome. I’ll take it and you won’t regret it.” She gestures to the box again before half-turning to leave. “And I’ll bring these to lunch so we can celebrate.” She scurries off to wherever it is she needs to be, but not without half-turning to glance over her shoulder and utter a quick, “Bye,” before disappearing into the crowd of students.

Betty’s shoulders depress in a sigh as she watches Veronica depart; she’s completely unaware of the faraway look in her eyes and the dreamy smile hovering over her lips.

“So,” Kevin raises an eyebrow and pokes her, rousing her out of her trance. “Any idea how you’re going to force yourself to fall out of love with her? Because you have to do that first before you can set her up with Archie.”

“Stop saying that.” Betty groans; she sounds more defeated than threatening. “Once I get them together this stupid… whatever it is will go away and we’ll peacefully co-exist as acquaintances who only see each other every now and then.” She closes her locker. “I’ll only have to be around her out of obligation because she’s my best friend’s girlfriend. She’ll probably forget my name and Archie’ll have to remind her every single time we hang out.” She shrugs. “We’ll nod to each other as we pass in the hall, but that’s it.”

Kevin expression is dull, deadpan. “Are you trying to convince me or yourself?”

She’s going to pretend she didn’t hear that.

“Seats, everyone.” Betty’s Biology teacher shouts as he hurriedly makes his way into the room. “Pair off, gloves on, scalpels up.”

Archie’s hopefully gazing at her, but when Veronica pipes up with, “I wanna be with Betty!”, his shoulders slouch in defeat and he moves to sit next to Cheryl.

Kevin, whom Betty is currently sitting next to, cocks a knowing eyebrow as the blonde unsuccessfully tries to hide her blush behind her textbook. “Bi for you.” He whispers mischievously just as Moose heads over to rest a gigantic hand on his shoulder.

“And Keller’s with me.” He lets his hand linger for a few seconds longer before slowly pulling away to sit at a table in the far back.

Speaking of being bi for people… “Mind telling me what that was?” It’s Betty’s turn to raise an eyebrow, but Kevin frantically shakes his head before scrambling to follow his lab partner. She twists around to glare at him, and he mouths a quick Tell you later just as Veronica arrives to take the seat he was occupying just moments before.
“Once again,” The childlike eagerness from this morning apparently never faded away, “Fate throws us together.”

Betty chuckles as she reaches for her gloves. “You volunteered to be my…” She clears her throat and tries to keep a straight face. “Partner.”

“That’s besides the point.” There’s a sharp snap as Veronica pulls on her own pair of latex gloves. “Look, I still feel really lousy about—”

“Water under the bridge, Lodge.” The taller of the two smiles; she’s forcing herself to stare at her textbook because she knows if she looks at Veronica again she’s definitely going to go into cardiac arrest. “Like I said, Archie and I talked and we’re good.”

“Correction: You said you sort of talked.” Apparently Veronica’s memory is as sharp as a thumbtack. “What exactly did you mean by that, if you don’t mind me asking?”

If she can find a way to tell Veronica everything without giving away the reason why she can’t fall in love with Archie, maybe she can help her figure out how to set them up (Assuming Veronica hasn’t already figured out why, seeing as they did make out in a closet less than twenty-four hours ago and Betty showed obvious signs of enjoying every single second of it). “He told me how he felt about me.”

The brunette took the bait. She leans in, her interest piqued. “And?”

“Polly called right in the middle of it.” Veronica already knows too much about the situation with her sister; she might as well know everything else. Betty presses on as her lab partner’s eyes widen with shock. “I know, it was terrible timing - but I couldn’t ignore the call either. Archie insisted I pick up, anyway.”

“How chivalrous.” The brunette sighs, and Betty swallows. “So, where is she? Is she okay?”

“She’s hiding out in Montreal,” Betty dramatically lowers her voice, keeping her eyes trained on Cheryl to make sure she doesn’t hear. “With Jason.”

“What?!” Veronica hisses, hunching over their table and leaning closer towards Betty so she can speak in a voice only she can hear. “So he’s not—”

“No,” Betty answers firmly as she reaches for the scalpel, “And to make things even more interesting: They’re engaged and expecting a baby.”

“What episode of The Young and the Restless is this?” The brunette actually looks kind of impressed. “And Cheryl doesn’t know about any of this?”

“Her brother wants me to tell her,” The blonde reaches for the tray containing their specimen. “But the problem with that is Cheryl and I never had a conversation that didn’t end with an argument. I don’t know how to approach her with this, and what if she doesn’t believe me? I don’t have proof to show that I’m telling the truth.”

“Evidence doesn’t matter.” Veronica scrunches her nose in disgust as Betty makes a clean incision down the frog’s stomach. “She should know that you wouldn’t joke about something like this, even if you do hate each other’s guts. Why don’t you take her to the salon for that pedi?”

Betty whips around to gape at her. She knows she shouldn’t be startled by this offer, but she is anyway and she hates herself for it. “But that’s for you and me.”
The smaller girl shrugs. Betty’s secretly hoping Veronica would somehow talk her out of this. “Yeah, but you have to find a way to break the news to Cheryl and this would be the perfect opportunity to do so. The safety of your sister and her brother are more important than making up over a stupid game of Seven Minutes In Heaven.”

And then it dawns on Betty: She and Veronica kissed last night. They kissed in Cheryl’s closet. Betty knows what Veronica tastes like, how she feels under her touch. Betty knows that Veronica likes to tuck her thumb under the chin of the person she’s kissing. Betty also knows that Veronica likes to play with the other person’s hair while they kiss. Betty Cooper knows what it’s like to kiss Veronica Lodge.

Betty Cooper is the first person Veronica Lodge kissed in Riverdale.

“No,” She fumbles as she struggles to retain at least a semblance of coherency, “I want to go with you. I want to, uh, do those things with you.” Betty finds sudden, intense interest in the half-dissected frog sitting on their table. “I’ll find a way to talk to Cheryl. Don’t worry about it, Veronica.”

There’s a look of relief on the brunette’s face, and Betty can’t help but feel relieved too. She wouldn’t trade a spa date with Veronica for anything in the world. So much for keeping your distance, Cooper. “I was half-wishing you’d say that.”

And her face begins to burn again. The blonde clears her throat and tries to concentrate on taking notes on the frog’s anatomy. “They always say to be careful what you wish for.”

This prompts a grin from the smaller girl. “So what happened after? Did you tell Archie about how you feel?”

“Not exactly,” Betty admits, “But he told me that he understands there’s a lot going on right now and that he’s willing to wait until I’ve got things more figured out.” She glances up; Archie is hunched over at a table a couple rows ahead of them, absentmindedly poking at his frog with his tweezers while Cheryl prattles on about something he doesn’t appear to be very interested in. “He’s always been really thoughtful like that; putting other’s needs ahead of his own has always been sort of his thing.”

“Riverdale’s very own Clark Kent.” Veronica’s tone is faraway, almost yearning; it’s exactly the kind of reaction Betty was both hoping for and dreading. “If only he had eyes for anyone else but you.”

This is where her matchmaking skills come into play. “I wish I could give him the answer he wants. He deserves better than me, someone who’ll treat him right.” Betty tilts her head and peers at her lab partner from the corner of her eye, trying to look as casual as possible. “I can’t give him any of that, but I know there has to be someone who can.”

Their teacher begins to make his rounds around the class and Veronica pokes around the inside of their frog with her scalpel so it looks like she’s doing work. “You’re insinuating that I’m that someone, aren’t you?” When Betty nods, she laughs. “How are you so sure about this? What if he and I start dating and you fall in love with him later on?”

“Trust me, that’s not going to happen.” Betty mumbles quickly. “Just give this another chance, Veronica. No strings attached, no falling in love with him later on. I promise.”

The smaller of the two frowns as she mentally weighs out her options; after a few seconds, she shrugs and drops her scalpel. “Oh, alright.” She pulls off her gloves and opens her binder, flipping
through a couple of pages; her writing is small but neat, almost like typing. Betty doesn’t get why she finds this so fascinating. “But only because you’re so weirdly fixated on making this happen, for some reason.”

“I just think you guys compliment each other, that’s all.” Betty shrugs, trying very hard not to look like she’s trying to hatch some kind of master plan to set up her best friend and the new girl. It’s simple: Once Archie and Veronica start dating, she’ll get over Veronica and Archie will finally have someone who’ll make him happy. Everyone wins. It’s completely foolproof. What can possibly go wrong?

Softball season doesn’t start for another few months, but tryouts are held at the start of the school year because the coach is insane and insists that practice needs to happen all year round in order for the team to at least skim her expectations. Betty’s teeth are clicking together as she helps her teammates gather their equipment; they just spent two hours practicing on the field in nothing but their practice uniforms, which consists of a pair of shorts and a very thin baseball t-shirt - clothing that is far from appropriate for the chill of early fall. Coach insists that practicing in these conditions will “harden them” for actual games; Betty thinks half of the team will die of pneumonia before the first one.

She’s the last one to leave the equipment room because she’s very particular about the way the bats are organized. Betty makes sure the door is locked before spinning around to cross the gymnasium, where the doors are, but when she hears the boom of music rumbling nearby she cocks her head and begins to follow the source of the noise. It’s coming from the other side of the large partition that sections off a third of the gym for private team practices.

Curious, Betty shuffles over to the partition and flattens herself against it, craning her neck towards the doorway so she can peek at what’s happening on the other side. The River Vixens are practicing a routine, probably for the upcoming pep rally. Veronica’s in the centre of it all, sashaying her way down a makeshift aisle created by the other Vixens before popping her hip and winking at an imaginary audience. Veronica stands out even when she’s in line with the other cheerleaders; her moves are significantly more fluid and natural, like she’s been doing this all her life, and the way her thighs look in those shorts is downright unfair.

“Having fun with your little peepshow, L. Betty Jeffries?” Cheryl is suddenly blocking her view with a hand on her hip and a menacing twinkle in her eye. “Sorry, but Vixen practices are closed to the public eye.”

Would this be a good time to bring up Jason? “I was just-”

“God, you’re like a kicked puppy or something.” Cheryl crosses her arms, and the scathing edge to her tone forces Betty’s hands to tighten into fists. “Did Polly take your backbone with her when she ran away from home?”

It was Cheryl’s idea to fake Jason’s death. It was Cheryl’s idea to get Polly to run away. This is all Cheryl’s doing. She knows she’s lying right now, and it only makes Betty angrier. “Is there any particular reason why you’re being bitchier than normal, Cheryl? I can’t even leave the gym without you breathing down my neck.”

“Actually, there is, you dumb cow.” Cheryl takes a step closer and her eyes harden. “My brother is
gone and your crazy tweaked-out sister-"

“Everything alright, ladies?” Veronica materializes out of nowhere, stepping in between them with an innocent smile. The blonde and the redhead back away immediately, turning their heads away from each other; Cheryl’s nose is turned upwards and Betty is glowering at the ground.

“Peachy.” Cheryl’s smile is wide, blinding, completely fake. “Practice is over for today. I’ll see you tomorrow.” And with a whirl of flaming red hair, she’s gone.

Veronica reaches for Betty’s hands and uncurls them, just like how she did on the night of the dance. She frowns at the little red indents and timidly brushes her fingertips over them; the sensation renders Betty’s legs to overcooked noodles and she leans against the partition wall for support. “Cheryl wasn’t harassing you over your sister again, was she?”

“Kind of.” Betty tries to keep a straight face as she watches Veronica caress her wounds. “But you came just in time. I really need to start standing up to her.”

“Well, until you do, you have me.” The brunette smiles, and Betty’s chest feels like it’s going to cave inwards. “Walk me home after I get changed?”

She can almost hear Kevin whispering bi for you in her ear. “Sure.” There’s no harm in walking her home, right? They’re just two friends, two people with a platonic relationship, walking home together from school. Nothing wrong with that.

Except that Betty’s only supposed to be casual acquaintances with her, and last time she checked casual acquaintances don’t walk each other home - but by the time she comes to this realization she’s already out the door and making her way across the street with Veronica, who didn’t bring a jacket despite it being incredibly chilly and is only clad in a black dress.

“How gentlemanly of you.” The smaller girl laughs as Betty shyly throws her varsity jacket over her shoulders. It’s way too big on her; the sleeves are drooping off her hands because her arms are too short for them and the hem nearly reaches her knees, but Betty’s positive she’s never seen anything more adorable. Veronica’s grin, wide and goofy, is infectious - and the blonde finds herself mirroring it.

She’s totally blowing this whole casual acquaintances thing. “Consider this as a thank you for getting me out of another Cheryl-related mess.”

“I’m assuming you didn’t tell her yet.” Veronica’s pushing back the sleeves over her hands.

“I tried,” Betty frowns, “But like I told you before, we can never have a conversation that doesn’t involve us biting each other’s heads off. Something was a little off today, though - usually I’d have to give Cheryl a reason for her to confront me like that, but I was literally just finishing up in the equipment room and-” She remembers peering in on the Vixens’ practice and not-so-subtly ogling the way Veronica moved around in those shorts (Seriously, it should be illegal for her to wear shorts that short), and she can feel the heat returning to her cheeks. She pauses to clear her throat. “-uh, leaving the gym when she runs into me and decides it’s a good time to grill me on Polly again.”

“It sounds like she’s taking something out on you.” Veronica suggests. “She’s probably frustrated over not knowing what happened to her brother.”

“Jason did say that he planned on contacting her a month after the fake drowning, but Polly convinced him to tell me first.”

“Then that’s probably it.” They round a corner towards what Betty would call “Downtown
Riverdale”, which is really just a short strip of small office buildings, the one fancy Italian restaurant in town, that “tragic” gay bar Kevin mentioned the other day, a nightclub called the Roving Eye, and an apartment building so bougie it sports its own name: The Pembrooke. “She’s worried he hasn’t contacted her like he promised. It doesn’t excuse what she’s doing to you, but at least it provides an explanation.”

“You’re right,” Betty agrees as they walk past Riverdale’s city hall. “But this is only going to make things harder. How am I going to talk to her when she’s like this?”

“My offer for Chez Salon still stands,” Veronica adds, but is quickly silenced when Betty vehemently shakes her head.

“You scheduled that hers-and-hers pedis for us, and it’s going to stay that way.”

The brunette cocks an eyebrow, and the blonde’s collar suddenly feels like it’s closing in on her neck. “You’re really adamant about keeping this little date between us, aren’t you?”

_She knows, she knows._ Betty’s palms are beginning to itch and she shoves them into the pockets of her jeans. “You’ve…you’ve just been so nice to me, and you really didn’t have to go all out to get me to forgive you - but you did anyway, and I just…want to show my appreciation for it, that’s all.” She heaves a sigh and shrugs her shoulders. “Honestly, you’re a clean break after years of torment from Cheryl. I…” Her cheeks are beginning to burn. “I know you’ve explained why, but I still don’t get it. Why do you always stick up for me? I know the crowd you ran with in New York. Why are you being so…nice?”

It’s Veronica’s turn to sigh. “Well, since we’re being honest - it’s because I see myself in her, and it’s not a very easy mirror to stare into every day. Seeing the way she treats you…” She pauses, her dark eyes dropping to her shoes (Only Veronica Lodge would wear stilettos after two hours of cheer practice, Betty wryly thinks to herself), “It’s a harsher wakeup call than when my dad got arrested. It made me realize that everything those trolls were saying about me and my family were right - that I’m this spoiled, rich bitch ice princess. I was like Cheryl - I was worse than Cheryl.”

It’s a stupid question to ask, but she wants to ask anyway. “Would we have been friends if you were still like her?”

The smile on the shorter girl’s pretty features is grim. “I think you already know the answer to that.” Betty lets out a short laugh before she continues. “When my mom said we were moving to Riverdale, I made a pact with myself: To use this as an opportunity to become, maybe, hopefully, a better version of myself.”

“It’s a lot of pressure,” Betty mumbles. “To live up to your own expectations of yourself - to admit you made mistakes and hurt others because of it, and to try to change and improve yourself so that you don’t repeat those mistakes…” She swallows, unsuccessfully attempting to get rid of the lump caught in her throat. “But for what it’s worth, I think you’re doing a good job so far.”

_You were only supposed to be acquaintances._ She ignores her conscience and glances up; the Pembrooke looms over them, its sandstone bricks almost glowing in the late afternoon sun. The street number - 330 - is elegantly painted on a glass panel fitted above its double wooden doors, and black iron grills shield its front windows. This place has been unoccupied for years; it’s strange to see light coming from the inside.

“First you walk me home, then you end the walk with a compliment.” Veronica warms at Betty’s words. “You’re as sweet as they come, Betty Cooper.” She leans in and presses a feather-light peck to Betty’s cheek before shrugging out of her varsity jacket and handing it back to her.
The sudden show of affection nearly knocks Betty off her feet - quite literally, as she takes a step back to steady herself and tightens her grip on her jacket so she doesn’t drop it and make herself look even dumber than she is now. She fumbles as she slips her arms into the sleeves; she can feel Veronica’s eyes on her, waiting for her to say something back. “Uh, thanks. I guess.”

Somewhere out there, Kevin is laughing his ass off.

Veronica giggles, and Betty’s overwhelmed with the need to do something stupid just so she can hear her laugh again. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” She half-turns, pummelling Betty’s senses with her lavender shampoo (Or perfume; she still can’t figure it out), and makes her way towards the Pembrooke’s front doors. A butler greets her - because of course there’s a freaking butler - and she sneaks Betty another smile before disappearing inside the building.

All Betty can think about as she walks home is how she really sucks at this whole acquaintances thing.

Betty jogs towards the bleachers with her jacket thrown over her head; it’s pouring rain on the night of the pep rally, to the point where the grass makes unpleasant squelching noises every time her sneakers sink into it. To make matters worse, she had another argument with her mother before coming here - this time about Polly and Jason’s relationship. She asked why her parents were so against them being together, only for Alice to reply with a cryptic, *Everything that family touches, it rots*. What the hell is that supposed to mean?

Then she tried scolding her for coming home late the other day, and when Betty explained it was because she walked Veronica home her mother barrelled into a tirade about how she keeps letting the wrong people in and how she’s just going to let herself get hurt over and over again. She knows Alice has unrealistic expectations for people but she seems to have a special kind of hatred for the Blossoms and the Lodges, and Betty wants to know why.

She spots Archie and Jughead talking by the bleachers - have they reconciled? She approaches them, squinting through the gloom and the rain, and when Archie whirls around to face her she’s shocked when she’s met with an ugly bruise blotted over his left eye.

“Oh my God, Arch-” She instinctively reaches out to him, but he shrinks away. She had only seen him a few hours ago at school; this must have happened recently.

The corner of his mouth twitches, like he’s just about to smile but decides not to at the last second, and brushes past her to join the rest of the football team. An ache begins to form in Betty’s chest; she’s been so caught up in her own problems that she didn’t stop to think that Archie might be going through a few of his own - problems that aren’t just about choosing between music and football.

“If you’re wallowing in your guilt about not being a good enough friend to him,” Jughead’s dry tone cuts through her train of thought and she turns to face him. “Don’t. He’s a big boy, he can take care of himself.”

“I take it that you and him are friends again?” She asks as she follows him up a few steps on the bleachers.

“Ah, so you noticed.” He takes a seat and tries his best to wipe the spot next to him with his sweater; she thanks him and sits. “I’m assuming you want to know what happened.”
“Sort of.” She admits.

“If you can recall, we were supposed to take a road trip together this past summer during the Fourth of July,” Jughead reaches into his pocket, pulling out a burger from Pop’s. It’s completely unscathed, like it came fresh from the grill instead of the pocket of a teenage boy’s jacket. How did he manage to fit the damn thing in there without crushing it, or at least squishing the bread a little? “But Archie backed out at the last minute and never gave a reason why.”

Betty furrows her brow; she vaguely remembers overhearing Archie and Jughead plan this trip last year. They spent months mapping out the route; why would Archie suddenly cancel without warning?

“Anyways, Reggie was being his usual jackass-y self earlier today - tried to convince everyone that I somehow killed Jason, even though there’s absolutely no evidence to show that he was murdered at all - and Archie stepped in, which earned him that beautiful shiner. We talked a bit, and we’re not completely there yet but we made the first steps towards rebuilding our friendship.”

“That’s wonderful, Juggie.” Betty smiles as Mayor McCoy takes the stage to announce the River Vixens and the Pussycats. Josie breaks out into song as the Vixens perform their routine; Veronica saunters to the front and slowly bends over, her hand skimming down her shin to her ankle, and Betty not-so-subtly ogles every curve, every contour of her body. She can feel Jughead’s eyes on her and she mutters a quick, “Don’t start,” Before he lets out a snort.

The performance ends, and Coach Clayton takes the stage to announce the arrival of the Bulldogs as Riverdale applauds. Archie’s the first to tear through the giant yellow flag, grinning at the crowd and waving as he makes his way down the track. The bright gold nine on his jersey flashes beneath the bright lights, and for the first time Betty realizes he’s wearing Jason’s number.

Jason used to be number nine.

She glances towards the stage, where she sees Cheryl dropping her microphone and scampering across the field back towards the school. She doesn’t know why, but she gets up, rushes down the bleachers, and follows her all the way.

Maybe all of that training in the frigid autumn air was worth it after all, because Betty manages to catch up to her just as she breaks down in the girls’ change room. Cheryl’s sitting on the edge of a bench, sobbing into her hands, and even though this girl has done nothing but give her hell all her life Betty can’t help but pity her. Jason was all Cheryl had - he was the only person who truly cared about her, and now she thinks he’s gone forever.

“Cheryl,” The blonde takes a few cautious steps forward, “What is it?”

Surprisingly, instead of pushing her away with a snappy remark the redhead gives her a legitimate answer. “Jason,” She chokes through her tears, “He’s gone.”

Betty takes a seat next to her and awkwardly places a hand on her shoulder. She knows she won’t get a more perfect opportunity to talk to her about Jason and Polly; it’s now or never. “Cheryl-”

“He was supposed to come back.” The redhead blubbers, sniffling and rubbing her nose. “He said he’d talk to me in a month-”

“Polly called me on the night of the semiformal.” Betty interjects. “She’s safe in Montreal with Jason. He’s alive, Cheryl. He’s okay.”

Cheryl whirls around to gape at her, her eyes wide and her jaw hanging. “What?”
The blonde reaches up to wring the rainwater out of her ponytail, trying to appear as calm and collected as possible despite her thumping pulse. “I wanted to tell you earlier, but I couldn’t figure out how. Polly called me after I left Thornhill, and she and Jason explained everything. Your plan for them worked out.”

“So why didn’t he contact me like he promised he would?” The redhead’s eyes narrow. “Jason would never break a promise to me.”

“Look, I know you’ve hated me since the dawn of time and I’m giving you absolutely no reason to believe anything I’m saying, but a part of you has to know that I wouldn’t make any of this up just to spite you.” Betty sighs. “He wanted to contact you like he said he would but Polly convinced him to contact me instead because I was away while all of this happened. He…he wanted me to tell you that he’s okay, that he’s sorry, and that he’s going to reach out to you as soon as possible.”

Cheryl softens, and Betty sighs again but this time out of relief. “You’re not lying.”

“Like I said, I wouldn’t make any of this up.” The blonde wipes her hands on her jeans. “But here’s what I don’t get: This whole thing was your idea. They wouldn’t be in Montreal right now if not for you. You knew where my sister was this entire time, you knew why she ran away, and you never bothered to tell me.”

“And I’m sorry for that, I really am, but I wanted to wait for confirmation that they were okay before I told you anything.” Cheryl’s voice is uncharacteristically sincere and it’s kind of freaking Betty out. “I didn’t want to give you false hope.”

“That’s…” The blonde blinks a couple of times, incredulous. “Actually kind of considerate.”

Cheryl wipes the rest of her smudged mascara away and runs her hands through her hair. She’s slowly starting to look like herself again, but she retains the sincerity in her voice. “I know that what you feel for Polly is the same in what I feel for Jason. If there’s one thing we have in common, it’s the unconditional love we have for our siblings.” She drops her stare to her lap and begins to fiddle with her hands; she looks almost childlike, and it throws Betty off. It’s like watching Jughead refuse a burger, or Archie walking two metres in front of him without tripping over his own feet, or Veronica stuttering - it’s unheard of, unprecedented. Impossible. “You told me the truth even after all the terrible things I’ve done to you over the years.”

Betty reaches out to Cheryl again and tightens her grip on her shoulder. “That’s because I know you’d do the same for me even though we’ve always hated each other - and you were going to, eventually, when it was the right time. I…really appreciate that.” She can’t believe she and Cheryl are actually making up right now. This has to be some sort of strange dream. “Polly’s pregnant, you know. They’re engaged too; your grandmother gave them her blessing.”

The redhead doesn’t look surprised, but she’s smiling. “All the more reason to get away from this place. That kid deserves to be raised in a place that doesn’t have an underbelly as disgusting as Riverdale’s.”

Now the blonde’s interest is piqued. “What are you talking about?”

“Polly being pregnant explains why Polly wanted to run away, but I think Jason had another reason.” The corners of Cheryl’s mouth dip into a frown. “He wouldn’t tell me what it was; he said it was unsafe to talk about it here and that when he’s out of town and safe with Polly he’ll find a way to contact me so he can tell me everything. That’s why I’ve been witchier than usual lately; I’ve just been so worried about him. I’m sorry for taking it out on you.”
Cheryl Blossom just apologized to her for the second time in the past five minutes. This definitely has to be a dream. “It’s okay, but what makes you think Jason’s reason for leaving has something to do with Riverdale?”

“Riverdale, specifically our families: The Blossoms and the Coopers. I know you’re not stupid, Betty - it’s obviously not a coincidence that our parents can’t stand each other. Something must have happened to ignite that hatred, and Jason knows what it is.”

“The Blossoms and Coopers have been in Riverdale for generations.” Betty hums as she wracks her brain for the facts. “They’re two of the founding families.”

“Exactly, and somewhere between creating Riverdale and this very moment, something terrible happened that caused them to hate each other. Whatever it is, it’s bad enough to make Jason fear for the safety of his unborn child, which is why he got me to help him and Polly run away.”

“Then we have to do whatever it takes to keep them safe from our parents,” Betty affirms, and Cheryl nods in agreement. “From Riverdale - and while we do that, we should get to the bottom of this stupid blood feud.”

“I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but I agree with you.” Cheryl mutters, and Betty suppresses the urge to snort. “Even though I wanted to help Jason escape a part of me wanted to sabotage it somehow so I could get him to stay. Now that he’s gone… I’m alone.” The tears well up in her eyes again. “I’m all alone.”

Betty extends her arm so that she’s hugging her shoulder. “You’re not alone, Cheryl. We’re going to work together, and before you know it Jason will be back.”

The redhead sniffles and manages a small smile through her tears. “Thanks.” She throws her arms around the blonde in an unexpected hug; Betty’s eyes pop open in surprise and it takes a few seconds for her to register what’s going on before she’s able to hug her back. Apparently she and Cheryl are friends now. This is nice.

A shuffling noise from somewhere behind her causes Betty to pull away from Cheryl so she can glance over her shoulder; Veronica’s standing by the doorway, soaked to the bone in her Vixens uniform, eyeing them with a baffled expression. Betty opens her mouth to say something, but the brunette is gone before she can get the first word in.

Veronica looked kind of… jealous.

Things just keep getting weirder and weirder.

Cheryl awkwardly clears her throat and stands up, flattening out her skirt with her palms. “We should probably head back.”

When the pair return to the field the pep rally is nearly over. Jughead and Archie are chatting by the bleachers again and Veronica’s by the stage, hoisting her gym bag over her shoulder. Her hair is plastered to her cheeks and she’s briskly rubbing her biceps to keep herself warm.

Before she knows it, Betty’s a couple of steps away from her. She anxiously rubs her palms together as Veronica whirls around to face her. “Hey.”

The brunette smiles but doesn’t meet her stare. “Hey.” Her voice is limp, almost defeated. It’s giving Betty all sorts of messages. “I saw you and Cheryl. That was very noble of you - not many girls would have done what you did. Every time I’ve had an emotional breakdown - and trust me, I’ve had my share of them - all of my so-called friends would conveniently be unavailable.”
The taller of the two shrugs. “Everyone needs a shoulder to cry on - even Cheryl Blossom.”

Veronica laughs - a full on laugh, with her head thrown back and her eyes closed - and the sharp lights make the droplets of rain clinging to her hair look like tiny diamonds. It somehow makes the sound of her laughter even more beautiful than it already is, and something warm and full begins to swell in the pit of Betty’s stomach. Does this girl know how gorgeous she is? Does she know what her mere presence does to people? Does she have any idea how infectious her laugh is, how bright her smile is, how people make the effort to stop and stare at her when she walks past them?

There’s no way Betty can be just acquaintances with her. The universe won’t allow it, and even though she still thinks Archie deserves her more, she’s not going to fight her feelings anymore - because there’s no point. The more resistance she puts up, the stronger her attraction becomes.

Archie and Veronica will be endgame and she’ll make sure it happens, but there’s no harm in holding off for just one more day.

A surge of confidence courses through her; Betty straightens her back and squares her shoulders. “If you’re not doing anything, do you wanna go get a milkshake at Pop’s?”

*But you’re only supposed to be acquaintances.*

*You’re only feeding the flames.*

Veronica’s smile is bright enough to blind. “Betty, there’s nothing I want more.”

*Then let it burn for just a little while longer.*

The waiter arrives with their milkshakes - vanilla for her, double chocolate for Veronica. Pop’s is packed with teenagers - it usually is whenever there’s a game or other school-related event - and they were lucky enough to secure their own booth by the front window. In fact, it’s the very same booth where the girls met for the first time. Maybe fate really does exist.

Just as Betty bends over to take her first sip, Veronica pipes up with, “You know, even though we’ve only just met it really feels like we’re meant to be best friends.”

“R-really?” She gulps as she forces herself to stare down at her glass, inwardly cursing the hot blush creeping onto her face and neck.

“Yeah,” She can hear Veronica sigh, “Like it’s our destiny.” She shakes her head, and right on cue the smell of lavender is fresh in Betty’s sinuses. “When I thought I lost you over what happened that night, it just felt like there was this train heading to the rest of my life and I just missed it.”

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She’s a little taken aback by the odd request, but she nods. “Sure.”

“That no matter what,” Veronica pinches her straw in between her thumb and index finger. “No boy will ever come between us again.” She lowers her head a bit, and her eyes grow even darker. “Deal?”

A part of her wants to tell her that it’s practically impossible for a boy to come between them and that there wasn’t even a boy separating them in the first place, but that probably isn’t a good idea. “Deal.” Betty raises her milkshake.

Their glasses clink together, and they share a grin before finally digging into their milkshakes. They ease into idle conversation, purposely keeping the topics light and impersonal because nothing about either of their lives is worth smiling about at the moment - and for a second things almost feel normal, like they’re two regular teenage girls hanging out after their high school pep rally. There aren’t any missing people, no scandalous relationship, no underage pregnancy, no terrible parents, no blood feuds, no fake deaths, no burdening secrets. Betty allows herself to sink into this feeling of normalcy even though she knows it’s false; for once, she wants to feel like a normal teenager. She should at least be allowed to believe she is every once in awhile.

The front door to the diner swings open, and when Betty turns to see who it is she can’t help but grin; Archie and Jughead are standing there, grinning back. She swivels back to look at Veronica, who gives her a nod of approval.

“Do you guys wanna join us?”

“Yes,” Jughead’s already making his way down the aisle, towards their booth. “But only if you’re treating.”

The girls laugh; Betty scoots down the bench to make room for Archie while Jughead hops into the spot next to Veronica.

“Veronica Lodge.” She nods at her new booth mate.

“Jughead Jones the Third.” He smirks as he rests his arm across the backboard of the booth.

“Jughead Jones The Third?” Veronica repeats, and Archie chuckles at her reaction.

“His real name’s Forsythe. Forsythe Pendleton the Third.” Betty teasingly adds.

Veronica chuckles as Jughead flags Pop down to order three cheeseburgers (For himself, of course). “My parents told me that if I was a boy, they would’ve named me after my grandfather.”

“And what’s your grandfather’s name?” Archie leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. A pang of jealousy begins to grow inside of the blonde, but she snuffs it out by taking a gigantic gulp of her milkshake; this is how it’s supposed to be. They’re supposed to be endgame. He’s supposed to be interested in her.

The brunette’s face sours. “Humperdink.”

The booth erupts in a fit of obnoxious laughter; Archie throws his head back so quickly he accidentally bumps himself against the backboard of the booth, Betty nearly gets vanilla milkshake up her nose, Jughead’s fist is banging on the table, and Veronica’s shaking her head in amusement. That feeling of normalcy, that everything’s okay, comes flooding back and Betty immerses herself in it once more; she’s just a regular teenage girl having milkshakes and burgers with her friends. Her mother never chased Polly away, there’s no blood feud that would have caused Jason to fake his
death for the sake of his and Polly’s baby’s safety, and Betty doesn’t have a secret that she’s keeping from her best friend.

Maybe, if things were truly normal, she would have loved Archie back. Maybe, in some other universe, they’re happy together, and she and Veronica are best friends and nothing more. Everything’s normal. Everything’s as it should be.

She allows herself to believe that somewhere out there, that universe exists - because when she believes in it, it somehow makes it easier for her to cope with the one she’s currently living in.
“Juggie,” Betty’s voice is wary as she steps into the unoccupied room, “What exactly are we doing in the old Blue and Gold office?” She pitifully stares at the ancient computer monitors sitting on the desks, their screens fuzzy with thick coats of dust.

“Two houses, both alike in dignity, in not-so-fair Riverdale, where we lay our scene.” Jughead plucks a magnifying glass from a pencil holder. “Your new bits of information from Polly are forcing me to completely rework my novel.”

She bites her lip. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be - this is a good thing. Sure, a murder mystery would have made for some good storytelling,” He holds up the magnifying glass, squinting into it. “But a multi-generational spat between two of Riverdale’s founding families? Now that’s a novel.”

The blonde quirks an eyebrow. “You’re not one for juicy gossip.”

“No, but I am all for helping out a friend, and if I can write a compelling story out of it then that’s just a bonus.” He dusts off a couple of the monitors and leans against one of them, crossing his arms. “You and I need to rouse the Blue and Gold from its slumber.”

“You always said that print journalism is dead and the school newspaper isn’t the right fit for your voice.” She adds, her skepticism growing. Jughead has a thing for being a little theatrical when it comes to writing. It’s kind of nice, really, seeing as the last time she’s seen him this excited was when the Cracker Barrel in Greendale was closing and they had an all-you-can-eat lunch buffet for five bucks.

“Then consider us necromancers because we’re bringing print journalism back to life - and we can tailor it so that it fits both of our voices.” He takes a step closer towards her. “Don’t you see, Betts - we can use the newspaper as a cover for your investigation on the feud between the Coopers and the Blossoms, and when we do figure out what they’re squabbling over we have a channel to spread the word. You and I both know the Register isn’t going to print a single word about it.”

“Because my parents own it.” She mutters, and he nods.

“Exactly, so they’re going to want to keep it under wraps and pretend it doesn’t exist - but with the Blue and Gold…”

“We can expose them for who they really are,” The cogs in Betty’s brain are beginning to whir. “And maybe it’ll bring Polly and Jason home.” She lights up at this revelation, and her friend smirks. “Jughead Jones, you’re a genius.”

“Jason’s ‘death’-” Jughead makes air quotations with his fingers, “-changed Riverdale, even though no one wants to admit it. Imagine what will happen when we dig up this feud. Who knows what
we’ll find - corruption, scandal, maybe a real murder-

She narrows her eyes. “Jughead.”

“Well, we could! There’s something your parents and Cheryl’s parents don’t want us to know. We’ve been living our whole lives thinking that nothing bad ever happens in Riverdale, but what if something was happening this entire time, right under our noses?” He sets down the magnifying glass. “You can do the editing, and you can choose the stories. Leave the bulk of the writing to me.”

“Wow,” She chuckles. “You’re actually letting me choose what you get to write?”

“I know, so don’t push it.” He smirks again.

“Okay, you convinced me.” She claps her hands together. “Let’s bring back the Blue and Gold. Where do we start?”

“There’s one thing I want to clarify before we really move on with this,” Jughead adjusts the shoulder strap of his bag. “On the morning of July Fourth, a single gunshot was heard by Sweetwater River. I know Jason isn’t dead so there’s a very small chance the incidents are related, but-

“The investigative journalist in you is dying to find out.” She finishes for him, and he nods. “For all we know, it could be related. Maybe Jason was being followed. Maybe someone found out about his and Polly’s plan and tried to kill him.” She thinks about the possible culprits; it couldn’t be her parents…could it? Her mother is terrible, yes, but would she sink low enough to commit murder?

“Good point.” He taps his chin with an index finger. “There was one person who was at the river that morning that no one’s talking about.”

“Dilton Doiley.” Betty answers easily. “He was on a bird watching expedition with the Adventure Scouts.” There’s a knowing look in Jughead’s eye, and Betty immediately picks up on it. “You’re giving me my first assignment, aren’t you?”

He swipes a finger under his nose. “You know me so well.”

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Betty didn’t know five simple words were capable of emotionally shattering every inch of her until later that afternoon in the student lounge.

“I’ve got a date tonight.” Veronica’s smile is impish and her pearls are glinting ominously underneath the room’s fluorescent lights.

Both Archie and Betty look like she just told them she drowned a puppy.

“You do?” The redhead splutters, his thick eyebrows high on his forehead. Betty hates that she and him are on the same page with this, but at the same time it should’ve been expected. It was only a matter of time before Veronica was going to go on her first date with a top contender on Riverdale High’s social food chain. Who else would Veronica want to associate herself with, anyway? Jailed father or not, Lodges only want whatever’s on the top shelf.

Kevin looks half-impressed, half-confused. “Which Riverdale hottie made the cut?”
As if on cue, Chuck Clayton’s deep voice booms from somewhere behind them. “Hey, V-Lo-” Betty inwardly cringes at the nickname, “-I’ll swing by The Pembrooke to pick you up at eight?”

Wait, wait, wait - this isn’t going according to plan. Archie’s supposed to be the one taking her out on a date. Archie is supposed to be the boy behind that grin of hers. Out of all the physically appealing boys in Riverdale, why did it have to be Chuck? Even Reggie would’ve been a better option - by a hairline difference, but a difference nonetheless.

Veronica leans forward in her seat and flashes him an otherworldly smile. “I’ll be waiting.”

Betty’s heart plummets to her stomach. Watching Veronica gush over Archie was one thing, but knowing she has a date with Chuck Clayton - the very definition of a jock slash douchebag - is something entirely different.

“Chuck Clayton?” Betty shakes her head in disbelief; she’s still trying to figure out if she’s jealous or concerned (It’s probably both). “He’s kind of a player.”

“Who cares?” Kevin’s hormones are getting the best of him; Betty has half a mind to stomp on his foot. “He’s the hottest of hot, and he’s the varsity football coach’s son. In Riverdale, that’s like dating a Kennedy.”

Veronica looks irritably smug; she’s clearly enjoying their reactions. Archie looks like his soul just separated itself from his body, and Betty’s sure she doesn’t look any different.

Then, suddenly, out of the blue, the blonde utters, “I’m meeting Dilton for shakes at Pop’s tonight.”

Archie springs forward in his seat. “Wait, what?” His eyes are wide; he looks even more devastated than when Veronica announced her date. “Dilton Doiley?”

His reaction is making Betty regret she ever said anything in the first place. “It’s not what you think - it’s strictly for investigational purposes.”

The redhead doesn’t look convinced, which only strengthens the ache in Betty’s chest. Veronica looks absolutely floored, while Kevin’s clearly suspicious. “Investigating what?” He asks with a raised eyebrow. His tone is suggesting another question: What in the blue hell are you doing?

“Jughead and I are looking into this so-called feud between my family and Cheryl’s, and we think Dilton might help us figure out where our first clue is.” She shrugs, casually leaning back against the sofa. She can spot Veronica out of the corner of her eye; her jaw is slightly ajar and the cup of coffee she’s holding looks like it’s going to slip from her hands at any given second. A part of her feels horrible, but another part of her - a stronger, louder part - feels…kind of good. No wonder jealousy is a sin.

“So I guess Chuck and I will be seeing you tonight.” Veronica’s smile is tight, forced. She abruptly rises from her seat and dusts off her skirt with one hand. “Who knows - maybe we can double date.”

She can feel Kevin staring at her. “Yeah. Maybe.”

The brunette smiles again, still unconvincing, and turns to leave the room. Shortly after, Archie mumbles an excuse about a meeting with Grundy and leaves too. Once the redhead is gone, Kevin scoots closer to Betty on the couch and nudges her shoulder.

“So, Operation: Varchie is obviously a bust.” He chuckles as she buries her face in her hands. “Seriously, Betty - two jealous not-so-secret admirers? You’re killing it.”
“I’m not giving up on them just yet - my plan is just taking a little detour right now.” She grumbles in between the spaces of her fingers. “I didn’t mean to hurt Archie’s feelings. I don’t even know why I brought Dilton up.”

“Two words-”

“Don’t say it-”

“Veronica Lodge.” Kevin smirks, and Betty groans. “You got jealous because she’s going on a date, and you brought up Dilton because you wanted her to get jealous too.”

“But it’s not a date,” Betty whines. “I’m literally going to have one milkshake - a milkshake that I’ll be having on my own, by the way - and ask him a few questions about July Fourth. That’s it. There’s nothing romantic about it!”

“That doesn’t matter,” Kevin retorts. “The mere thought of you having a milkshake at Pop’s with someone that isn’t her was enough to upset her.”

“I was talking about Archie, Kev.”

“This can apply to both of them.” He replies nonchalantly. “Look, Riverdale’s very own Blair Waldorf is super into you, and you’re obviously super into her. You can’t deny it any longer.”

“I’m not going to deny that I’m…” Her eyes shift around the room, checking if the coast is clear. “Drawn to her. Yes, she’s pretty, and smart, and really sweet, and her arsenal of vintage pop culture references is at least twice as big as Jughead’s and that’s a lot more attractive than I want to admit, but-”

Kevin’s eyes narrow. “I swear, Betty, if you’re going to tell me she isn’t into girls one more time-”

“Do you have proof that she is?” She cocks an eyebrow. “Did you creep her Instagram again?”

“She jammed her tongue down your throat.”

“You can kiss someone and not mean it-”

“Because she would totally french someone she just met in a closet just for kicks, right?” Kevin’s tone is snide, and Betty groans again. “Seriously, Betty, you’re only making things more complicated. I know you want Archie to be happy, but don’t you think there’s a better way of making that happen? Forcing him to fall in love with the girl you’re in love with-”

“For the last time - I’m not in love with her.”

Kevin effortlessly continues over Betty’s feeble rebuttal. “-so you can squash your growing attraction to her isn’t going to give you the end result that you want. I actually think it’s just going to hurt everyone involved.”

A part of her agrees with him, but she doesn’t want to admit it. “So what else am I supposed to do?”

“If I knew the answer I would’ve told you a long time ago.” Kevin gets up and shoulders his bag. “You’re in a tough spot, hon - you should only come out to him when you feel the time is right, but at the same time you know that the longer you make him feel like you’re keeping something from him the worse things are going to get.”

He’s right. Again. “Tell me about it.”
“And I know this is easier said than done,” He makes his way towards the door, “But try not to think about it too much. I think things will fall into place eventually. You just have to wait it out.”

“Plus,” Betty gets up and joins him; they leave the student lounge and make their way down the hall towards homeroom. “I have other things to worry about - Polly, to be specific.”

“Exactly, so focus on that for now - and before you know it, the time will come for you to tell Archie the truth.”

“Like you said,” She grumbles, “It’s easier said than done - and don’t think you’re off the hook about what happened with Moose. I’m still going to interrogate you on that.”

“But it has to be done eventually, whether you like it or not. As for Moose, I swear I’ll tell you everything ASAP.” He hastily promises as he opens the door to their classroom for her. Betty trots inside and makes her way towards one of the desks in the middle row; Veronica raises her head from her seat to glance at her, but when they meet eyes she quickly drops her gaze and pretends to skim through her textbook. Kevin throws her another knowing glance, and Betty rolls her eyes before taking a seat.

Betty thought it was going to be a challenge to get Dilton to talk, but it turns out they have one common interest: Cars. Dilton looks at them as an experiment - parts he can continuously assemble and disassemble so he can scrutinize and analyze every single detail, and she can relate to that (To a certain extent). Aside from Archie and Reggie, he’s the only person she can have a full-fledged conversation with on the subject.

“Alright,” He pulls away from his onion rings to adjust his glasses. “As enjoyable as this evening has been, I know there’s a reason why you wanted to meet me here, Betty, and it isn’t to argue over whether or not the Demon has more horsepower than the Hellcat.”

The sound of laughter temporarily pulls Betty’s concentration away from Dilton; Veronica and Chuck are sitting across the aisle and two booths down from them, and they look like they’re having the time of their lives. The fist sitting on Betty’s thigh unconsciously tightens, and she clears her throat. “I think you know what that reason is, Dilton.”

Veronica reaches out to playfully brush her hand against Chuck’s, which is resting on the table next to his plate. Betty suppresses the urge to flip her and Dilton’s own table.

“You want to know what happened on the morning of July Fourth.” Dilton’s voice barely brings her back to their conversation. She can hear Chuck cracking some sort of lame joke, and Veronica throws her head back in exaggerated laughter. The blonde grits her teeth; it’s like someone’s rubbing a cheese grater against her skin.

“Yes,” She speaks through a strained smile, “That’s exactly it, if you don’t mind me asking. Jughead and I are restarting the Blue and Gold and we’re looking for stories. I know Sheriff Keller’s doing all he can with the search for Jason’s body but we wanted to conduct our own investigation and see if we can find anything. We figured we’d start with what happened that morning by the river, since that’s where it all started.”

She can hear Veronica saying something, but her voice is too low for Betty to make out the words. Whatever it is, it got Chuck to smile, and even though the brunette’s back is facing her she knows
She’s smiling too. Her nails begin to dig into her skin, and she’s clenching her jaw so tight her gums are starting to ache.

“Sheriff Keller already asked me about this.” Dilton replies stiffly, folding his hands atop the table. His voice begins to waver a bit, and his expression is hesitant. “I told him that my scouts and I didn’t see or hear anything weird - just Cheryl sitting by the river, soaking wet.” He pauses to clear his throat. “But that’s not completely true.”

She knows she should be fully paying attention to Dilton, but it’s just so damn hard when Veronica Lodge is sitting a few feet away from her, flirting with King Douchebag. “You lied to him?” Her voice is airy, distracted, but thankfully he doesn’t seem to notice.

“I was in the possession of a firearm that morning,” He admits, “But I didn’t fire it. If anyone finds out I was holding a gun without a permit, surrounded by minors, my life would be ruined. I’d be banished from the Adventure Scouts and it would leave a blight on my permanent record.”

Veronica’s laughing again, but Betty tears her eyes away from her so she can gawk at Dilton. “Why were you holding a gun?”

“I was going to teach my scouts how to shoot targets.” Dilton explains anxiously. “Someone needs to teach them how to protect themselves.” He leans forward and dramatically drops his voice. “Look, if I tell you what I know, promise me the gun stays between us.”

Betty nods and uncurls her fist so she can close the notepad sitting next to her milkshake. “You have my word as a journalist. The gun stays off the record.” She can hear Veronica and Chuck murmuring in the background - pay attention, pay attention, pay attention…

“I saw something at Sweetwater River,” Dilton voice doesn’t go any higher than a whisper, “Something nobody else saw.”

Now Betty’s interest is piqued. She raises both of her eyebrows and leans towards him so she can hear him better. “What did you see?”

There’s a long pause. “Miss Grundy’s car by the river’s edge. She was there.”

The bell hanging by the front door chimes, causing Betty to jump in surprise; Chuck and Veronica are just leaving Pop’s. She can see him opening the door for Veronica out of the corner of her eye. “Grundy?” She echoes; what on earth would their high school music teacher be doing by Sweetwater River on the morning of July Fourth?

“That old Beetle of hers is pretty easy to spot,” Dilton explains. “But it was empty, and she was nowhere to be found.”

Betty can see the faint outline of Chuck and Veronica sitting in his car. Jealousy prickles inside of her, but she can’t let it get the best of her right now; she’s working, she’s carrying out an investigation. She can’t be distracted. “Thanks, Dilton. This is exactly what I needed.”

“No problem, Cooper.” He throws a few bills on the table and stands up, adjusting his glasses again. “I hope this helps.” He slips out of the booth, but pauses to glance at her over his shoulder. “By the way, if you were going to use me as a cover to spy on Chuck and Veronica, you should’ve told me in advance.”

The blonde’s eyes widen. “I wasn’t-” But he’s already halfway out the door, and she heaves a defeated sigh before flopping back against her seat.
“Grundy’s car?” Kevin raises an eyebrow when she meets him and Jughead by her locker the next morning. “That’s an interesting twist.”

“Right?” Betty agrees as she pushes her bottle of Adderall aside so she can reach for her math textbook. “But she couldn’t have been the one to fire that gun, could she?”

“No,” Jughead answers quickly, “There’s no reason for her to even carry a gun in the first place. It was probably just a coincidence.”

“So Grundy parking her car by the river’s edge on the morning a gun goes off and Jason fakes his death is a coincidence?” Kevin raises an eyebrow, and Betty can’t help but relate to his skepticism. It’s not like Jughead to shut down a theory so quickly; he’s a dedicated practicer of deductive reasoning. “What would she be doing there?”

“I don’t know,” Jughead shrugs and shakes his head, “Maybe she-”

Whatever he had to say next, Betty will never know, because right at that moment Veronica comes strutting towards them looking like she solved the mystery herself. “Morning, all.” Her grin is even more dazzling than usual; clearly she and Chuck had a good time last night.

“How was your date with Chuck?” Kevin asks excitedly; Jughead’s shoulders depress with relief and he happily sinks into the background.

The brunette chuckles. “Chuck has muscles for days, but his conversation is not the stuff of Oscar Wilde - or even Diablo Cody.”

Betty suddenly feels ten pounds lighter. “So…it didn’t go well?”

“Oh, it did,” The shorter of the two replies, her tone casual, “But it wasn’t anything special. We have absolutely nothing in common. If it’s not about football or comic books, Chuck doesn’t have much else to say. He was nice, though,” Her smile suddenly becomes a lot more mischievous, “And a good kisser.”

And those ten pounds immediately rush back to crash down on the blonde’s shoulders. Kevin gapes and Jughead rolls his eyes. Veronica shrugs and leans against the locker adjacent to Betty’s. “What about you, Betty? How’d your date with Riverdale’s Beautiful Mind go?”

Betty opens her mouth to tell her that it wasn’t a date, that it was an interview for the Blue and Gold, but she’s interrupted by a girl walking past them. “Hi, Veronica.” She smiles sweetly, looking up from her phone; the girl walking alongside her is mirroring her expression. “How was the sticky maple you had last night?”

The blonde’s insides grow cold; she glances at Veronica, whose brow is furrowed in confusion. “The what now?”

“The sticky maple Chuck gave you - how was it?” The second girl giggles, waving her phone in her hand before disappearing into the crowd of bustling students.

The brunette blinks. “We had a brownie sundae, if that’s what you hyenas mean.”
Betty and Jughead exchange weary looks as Kevin digs his phone out of his pocket. “Oh my God.” He utters just as Veronica snatches his phone from him.

Betty doesn’t need to peer over her shoulder to see what it is - anyone who’s native to Riverdale knows about the stupid sticky maple fiasco the jocks like to throw on the girls they play around with. Many have fallen victim to it but she was lucky enough to avoid it throughout the years (Mostly because she was “in love” with Archie and wasn’t interested in anyone else). The thing is, whenever it did happen most girls would lie down and take the public shame that came with it.

Veronica Lodge isn’t like most girls.

“What the hell is a sticky maple?” The shorter girl’s tone is hard; Kevin swallows, and Betty sucks in a breath. Even Jughead looks a little intimidated.

“It’s kind of what it sounds like.” Kevin mumbles, unsure of how to word his answer so that Veronica doesn’t get any angrier. “It’s a Riverdale thing.”

“No, Kevin,” Veronica’s brown eyes are wide as she scrolls through his phone. “It’s a slutshaming thing - and I’m neither a slut, nor am I going to be shamed by someone named - excuse me - Chuck Clayton.” Jughead snorts, but Veronica throws him a glare and he immediately looks away. “Does he really think he’s going to get away with this? Does he not know who I am?” Her voice is growing louder, and the bits of the person she used to be - the person she’s been trying so hard to escape - are beginning to bubble through the surface. “I will cut the brakes on his suped-up phallic symbol.”

“Or we can go to Principal Weatherbee.” Betty feebly offers, and Kevin nods in agreement.

“About the coach’s son?” Veronica lets out a dark laugh. “Who is also captain of the football team and Riverdale High’s resident golden boy?”

Okay, she has a point there. “Jughead and I can expose him in the pages of the Blue and Gold?” She meekly turns to Jughead for help, who’s pretending to look like he didn’t hear what she just said.

The brunette scoffs. “Spoken like a true good girl who always follows the rules.” She shoves Kevin’s phone into his chest, pushing him against the lockers and storming down the hall. “Well, I don’t follow rules - I make them,” Betty scampers down to follow her, struggling to keep up with her pace; how can she walk so fast in those damn heels? “And when necessary, I break them.”

There’s something about angry, pushy Veronica that Betty really likes. She tries not to think about this too much.

“You want to help me get revenge on Chuck, Betty? Awesome,” The shorter of the two briefly glances over her shoulder. “But you better be willing to go full dark, no stars.” She stops in front of the door to the boys’ change room. “What do you say? In or out?”

What the hell does she mean by that? Before she can give her an answer, Veronica grabs her by the hand and pushes the door open. If it weren’t for current circumstances, the contact would’ve forced Betty into cardiac arrest.

They’re greeted by a thick blanket of hot steam and the football team dressed in nothing but white towels loosely tied around their waists. Betty’s eyes go wide and she shields them with her free hand as Veronica tugs her through the change room. There are bulging muscles at every turn and it’s making the blonde extremely uncomfortable; if she needed a confirmation that she wasn’t attracted to boys, this must be it.

“Move,” Veronica orders, and the boys immediately part for her. “Excuse me.” Meanwhile, Betty is
just trying to get through the next few minutes without dying of embarrassment.

“Veronica! Betty!” She hears Archie yelp in surprise; she glances up and immediately regrets it - Archie is standing in front of them, clumsily wrapping a towel around himself. His damp hair is falling over his face, partially covering his black eye. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Don’t worry about it.” The brunette replies casually and tries to move past him, but Archie remains rooted to the ground. She places a hand on his chest and pushes him so hard he’s nearly knocked off his feet. “I mean it, Andrews - hit the showers and stay out of my way.”

Watching Veronica shove a boy nearly twice her height is kind of hot.

Wait, she has to focus. You’re supporting your friend. She’s been slutshamed and you can’t stand for that.

When Veronica finally finds Chuck she clears his throat to grab his attention. “B and V - ménage à right on, ladies.” He licks his lips and rubs his hands together; Betty feels sick to her stomach.

“This,” Veronica holds her phone up, showing the offending photo, “Is disgusting. Take it down.”

“Why are you so wound up? It’s a badge of honour, and you’re not exactly virgin territory after your closet date with…” He steals a glance in Betty’s direction, and the blonde glares back (Though she can feel a blush creeping up her neck and she hates herself for it). His eyes drop to their joined hands; Betty immediately lets go of Veronica and she clears her throat.

“Oh,” She’s starting to feel a little more invigorated now that Chuck has thrown her into the mix. “That’s beyond irrelevant, Chuck. You’re not allowed to go around humiliating girls for any reason under any circumstances, you…” She pauses, trying to think of a sufficient insult. “Jerk.”

Good one, Cooper.

She wants the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

Chuck lets out a barking laugh. “Look, I get I’m…not your type, but hey - if you change your mind and wanna ride the Chuck Wagon, that can be arranged.”

Betty’s eyes widen at his implication, and for a second she panics over the possibility that he knows her secret, but she wills herself to calm down. He’s making assumptions based on what happened that night after the dance. Everyone knows about her and Veronica’s tryst in the closet; it doesn’t mean anything. He’s just being a stupid boy.

“Let’s keep this simple so your preppy murderer half-brain can grasp it.” Veronica throws her hands up in exasperation. “Take this the hell down.”

Chuck looks like he’s just about to concede, but he squares his shoulders and takes a step closer so that he and Veronica are inches apart; he even squats down - way down - so he can meet her eye-to-eye. “Okay, that high-toned bitch attitude may have worked on the betas you dated in New York, but you’re in Bulldog territory.” Moose barks, and Betty rolls her eyes as Veronica twitches. “But please, fight back. You’ll only make it harder on yourself.” He returns to full height and brushes past her, and the rest of the team follows.

When the girls finally leave the change room, Veronica glares at her phone one more time before pushing it into the deepest recesses of her Givenchy bag. “This isn’t over until I say it’s over.” She looks up, meeting eyes with Betty; her expression softens into something softer, more vulnerable - she’s never seen Veronica like this before. It brings an ache to her chest, though she can’t figure out why. “I’m not expecting you to fall any further down the rabbit hole with me, Betty-”
“Hey,” She reassures, timidly reaching out to place a hand on her upper arm. “I’m not going to make you go through this alone.”

Veronica lights up at this, and Betty can’t help but smile. She must have gone through something similar back in New York, except that she didn’t have anyone to turn to. “Even if things get really hairy?”

There is no corner of this earth Betty wouldn’t follow her to. “Wherever you go, I go.”

“Hey…Betty?” Archie’s sitting close by, strumming random chords on his guitar. The pair are sitting in the music room, passing the time through a spare period together. The redhead has been nothing but saintlike to her since the year started, and all she really wants is to repay the favour somehow. She wants him to know that she still loves him - not in the way that people want her to be, but in a way that still mattered, that still counted. He will always, in a sense, be her first love - and that’s something not even Veronica can take away from him.

(And no, that wasn’t a confession of love for Veronica Lodge. Shut up, Kevin.)

“What’s up, Arch?” She glances up from her math homework and notices how tired he looks. His eyes, usually so warm and friendly, are dull with sleep deprivation. Something’s been eating away at him, and it kills her to know that she hasn’t been around to help. “Is everything alright?”

“Huh?” His head rises to meet her eyes, blinking incredulously. “Oh, yeah, everything’s fine-“ His tone is unconvincing, but she doesn’t know whether to not to probe him for the truth. “-it’s just, I dunno, I was kind of thinking about stuff to write for a new song, and I wanted to know your opinion on a few things.”

The blonde chuckles and sets her binder aside, rising up from her seat so she can sit across from him. “I don’t know how much help I can give you, seeing as I have zero songwriting experience, but I’ll try my best.”

He hesitates for a moment, biting his bottom lip and dropping his gaze to his guitar. “Do you think there’s one person out there for each of us? Like…this whole other person was created just for you? And you and this person were meant to be together, no matter what - like there’s no one else out there for you except that person. Does that make any sense?”

The weight of his questions are pushing on Betty’s shoulders so hard she fears she might slump over. “You mean like soulmates?”

He brightens at her suggestion, and her heart begins to ache. “Yeah, something like that.” He chuckles ruefully. “I was thinking of asking Jughead first but I already know what his answer will be, so I thought it would be better if I asked you instead. I know you’re not, like, a romantic or anything-”

“No, no,” She reassures him, shaking her head. “I like that you came to me about this. If you went to Jughead he’d probably dismiss it as Nicholas Sparks-inspired propaganda or something.” He laughs, and she smiles, though the ache in her chest is ringing louder. A part of her is deathly afraid that he’s trying to steer the conversation towards the nature of their relationship, and that he’s going to confess that he’s loved her this entire time and he was an idiot for not seeing it until now - which means that she would have no choice but to tell him that she no longer loves him like that, and maybe she never
really did, which will lead to breaking his heart and ultimately destroying their friendship forever.

She can hear Kevin scolding her in her head, reminding her that while it’s important to come out in her own time, she can’t keep leading him on like this, and she wants to tell him more than anything - but how?

“So…you think soulmates exist?” He asks her tentatively, peeking at her from beneath his eyelashes. It’s adorably childish, and it only made her wish she still loved him the way he wants her to.

“Honestly,” She cants her head to the side, finally giving the subject some actual thought, “I’m not really sure. I mean, I guess it would be nice to know that there’s someone out there for everyone, because that way none of us are truly alone…” She frowns and crosses her arms. “But at the same time it just sounds so restrictive, y’know? So what if there is that one person out there who was meant to be with us - does that mean we’ll automatically like them when we finally meet them? Is it a ‘love at first sight’ kind of thing? What if you’re destined to be together, but you end up not liking each other? What if you meet your soulmate and end up hating their guts? What if we meet someone else who’s just really, really great, but they’re not the person we’re supposed to be with? What if our souls…I dunno, get it all wrong?”

She would really like to know where this bout of pessimism came from, because she would very much like to make it go away. Her answer came out a lot less supportive than she would have liked, and her chest contracts as she dreads Archie’s answer - but she’s pleasantly surprised when he merely nods in agreement.

“I never thought about it that way.” His shoulders seem to depress with relief, like she actually gave him the answer he was looking for. He smiles at her and strums another chord. “See, I knew coming to you first was a good idea.”

She apparently dodged another bullet. Betty grimly wonders how much longer this lucky streak is going to last. “I don’t think I was that helpful, but I’ll take it.”

Archie clears his throat as he plucks a few notes. “Do you think you and Veronica are soulmates?”

The question nearly throws Betty off her chair. She isn’t sure whether to laugh at the ridiculousness of it or scream at what it’s implying. “We’ve only known each other for a couple of weeks, Archie.”

“I guess,” He shrugs, “But don’t you think that when you meet your soulmate…you’d just know that they’re the one? I dunno, you look at them and it just feels…” He frowns as he tries to come up with an answer. “It feels like home. You look at them and you know that’s where you belong.”

“I don’t know if I feel that way when I look at her,” She drops her head; she regrets not bringing her math homework with her because now she doesn’t have anything to hide behind. “But I will admit that it’s been awhile since I’ve really connected to anyone before. Other than her, I only feel that way about you, Jug, Polly, and Kevin.”

Archie tilts his head, and a few wisps of rusty hair flop over his bruised eye. “I just hate what’s happening to her right now.” He clenches his jaw; the muscle twitches angrily beneath the skin. “Chuck…he, he hasn’t….done anything to you, has he?”

She’s kind of relieved that he changed the subject; she just wishes the subject he’s changing to was a lighter one. “No, but-”

“I wish I could do something.” He lets out a sharp exhale. “He shouldn’t be allowed to get away with this. I don’t care that he’s the coach’s son. What he did was wrong and there needs to be a
consequence for it.”

“I know. I wish I could help too,” She sighs, “But there’s not much we can do. Like you said, he’s the coach’s son. He can probably get away with murder.”

“You and Jughead are bringing back the newspaper, right?” Archie gestures towards her with his guitar pick. “Can’t you do something there - like, write an article about it?”

She shakes her head. “I could, but I need hard evidence to back up my claims. Otherwise he could accuse me for defamation.”

“But you could get hard evidence.” The redhead points out. “We all know Chuck is known for being a player, which means he must’ve done something similar to other girls. What if you could, I dunno, interview them or something? Get them to talk about their experiences so you can show everyone what a creep this guy is. If you get more people to speak up, he’ll be outnumbered, and there’ll be no way he can deny all of those accusations.”

Betty’s eyes widen. How did she not think of this before? “Arch, that’s an amazing idea. This could work - this will work.” She leaps up from her seat and bends over to wrap her arms around his neck; she’s awkwardly leaning over him so that the guitar sitting on his knee won’t get in the way. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Archie chuckles and pats her back. “You helped me, so I figured I’d do the same in return.” When Betty finally separates herself from him he glances up at her once more. His cheery expression from just seconds earlier is all but gone now, replaced with a strange kind of uncertainty. “Um, Betty?”

This is it. He’s going to tell her how he feels. She’s going to be forced to turn him down. “What is it, Archie?” Her words are breathy, fragile.

His eyes lock onto hers. She’s finding it hard to swallow. “I have to tell you something.”

Her heart is beating so hard it feels like it’s splintering the rungs of her ribcage. “Tell me.”

He leans over his guitar; his face is inches apart from hers. “On the morning of July Fourth, by the river, I-”

A knock at the door scares them apart. All three Pussycats are standing by the entrance; Josie’s eyebrow is cocked, and her arms are crossed. “Are we interrupting something?”

“No, no.” Betty quickly shakes her head and turns on her heel. “I was just leaving.” She stuffs her math work into her bag and hoists it over her shoulder; she glances at her redheaded friend, her cheeks burning. “Um, I guess I’ll see you later?”

Terrible timing seems to be a recurring theme for their relationship lately.

Archie’s bashfully rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah. Later, Betty.”

“Come in, Veronica.” Betty calls out to the doorway.

Veronica walks into the Blue and Gold office, stopping just a few steps in front of a group of girls sitting in a semi-circle. Ethel Muggs is sitting in the centre; some of the other girls are River Vixens,
a couple of them are on the softball team, and a few of them share classes with Betty. The only person who looks like they don’t belong is standing at the far end, closest to the doorway - Trev Brown.

“It turns out your incident with Chuck wasn’t just a one-time thing.” The blonde gestures to the group. “I asked around to see if what happened to you happened to anyone else, and if any of them are willing to go on record.”

“I will, one hundred percent.” Ethel speaks up; she looks like she’s about to cry, and Betty’s chest caves inward for her as she reaches into her backpack for her notepad. “One day, last year, Chuck and I talked in the library for ten minutes. I helped him with a precalc problem and nothing happened,” She begins to wring her hands. “But the next day he…he started telling people that I let him do stuff to me - like, sex stuff.”

The room suddenly feels ten degrees colder. Veronica’s nodding solemnly, looking half-relieved and half-mortified over the fact that she isn’t Chuck’s only victim. Betty’s gripping onto her pencil so tight it feels like it’s going to snap in two.

“And then he,” Ethel swallows hard, “Or one of his goons, wrote ‘Sloppy Seconds’ on my locker.”

“I’m so, so, sorry, Ethel.” Betty shakes her head. “I…I don’t even know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.” She replies gravely. “Just write it all down and publish it so he won’t get away with it again. It’s about time someone put a stop to it.”

As Betty scribbles in a few lines into her notepad, Trev steps forward. “I used to be on the football team with Chuck, but I quit when I saw his playbook.”

Veronica raises an eyebrow. “A playbook?”

“It’s sort of like…an archive,” Trev nervously explains as Betty jots down notes, “Of all the girls the football team got tangled up with. They keep score - each ‘conquest’ earns them points. Once I found out about it, I had to leave. It was too sketchy for me.”

“Which was the right decision.” Betty agrees. “Seriously - a playbook? They’re ruining these girls’ lives, and to them it’s just some kind of sick game. We have to talk to Weatherbee.”

Ethel shrugs her shoulders in defeat. “I already tried. Weatherbee said that he didn’t find anything.”

“Okay,” Betty chews on the end of her pencil. “But Trev said he saw it. That’s an undeniable truth.”

“Proof of what, Nancy Drew?” Everyone’s heads whirl to face the door, where Cheryl has suddenly appeared. “That boys will be boys? And that playbook reeks of suburban legend. By the way, River Vixens practice starts in five minutes, sluts, so-”

“How would you know, Cheryl?” Veronica easily cuts her off, whirling around so she can fully glare at her.

“Because, Freida Shallow,” Cheryl crosses her arms, “My brother was co-captain of the football team with Chuck and he never mentioned it.” Her eyes flit over to Betty for a quick second, and the blonde furrows her brow in confusion. “Jason would’ve never allowed it.”

Everything starts to click together: Cheryl’s referencing Polly. If this playbook really did exist, that would mean Polly’s name would be in it somewhere - but Jason wouldn’t have worn her sister down to a stupid statistic in a notebook. He loves her - he ran away with her, he dealt drugs so they can
have money to raise their family together. He gave her his grandmother’s ring.

*Please believe me.* That’s what Cheryl’s trying to tell her. *Jason wouldn’t sink this low.*

“I may have never met your brother,” Veronica steps forward and the click of her heel echoes throughout the room. “But I’m not lying about what happened to me, and Ethel’s not lying.” Another step, another click. “And proof or no proof, book or no book, I am going scorched earth on these privileged, despicable miscreants.” Step, click. “You wanna get caught in that backdraft, Cheryl? Call me, or any of these beautiful, young, strong, intelligent women *slut* one.”

Click.

“More.”

Click.

“Time.”

They’re nearly nose-to-nose. Cheryl’s expression is strangely impressed, and she takes a step back and leaves without a further word. Betty isn’t sure if she was intimidated by Veronica or if she actually agreed with her.

Seriously, though - angry, pushy Veronica is a *lot* more attractive than Betty wants to admit; the blonde awkwardly clears her throat and dips her head, silently hoping her face doesn’t look as red as it feels.

“Um,” Trev speaks up again after a lengthy, iron-heavy silence. “I think I might know where the playbook is, if you want to find it.”

“Great.” Veronica whirls to face Betty; there’s a cunning smirk stretched across her painted lips, and it’s making Betty feel even warmer than she already is. “Looks like you and I are going to be doing a bit of sleuthing tonight.”

The thought of her and Veronica sneaking around the school at night shouldn’t be this exciting.

“Quiet,” Veronica hisses, “The security guard is going to hear you.”

“Yeah, because the clopping of your heels isn’t loud enough.” Jughead mutters under his breath. The brunette casts a scathing glare in his direction. “I do not *clop.*”

“Cut it out.” Betty sighs as she cautiously turns the corner, raising her flashlight to light the path in front of them. “We’re here for a reason, and it isn’t to pick fights with each other.”

“Plus, they’re amazing heels.” Kevin adds, which earns an eyeroll from Jughead. Veronica smirks triumphantly and moves to the front of the group, her cloak billowing around her legs.

Trev said the playbook was hidden in one of the football players’ lockers, and he knew the combination. At first it was just going to be Betty and Veronica sneaking into the school at night to search for it, but once Ethel heard that the playbook exists she wanted to look at it for herself - and then Kevin somehow heard of it, which roused his thirst for anything worth gossiping about.
Jughead was the only one who was brought here against his will; Betty figured it would be helpful if both of the Blue and Gold writers were involved in the case.

“Football players behaving badly - what else is new?” Veronica scoffs as her eyes search the lockers, “Steubenville, Glen Ridge…but the coach’s son being the ringleader? I mean, just how depraved is this town?”

“Colour me impressed.” That familiar haughty voice rings out from somewhere behind them, and all five of them nearly jump out of their skin before turning around; Cheryl’s standing some few feet down from them with her hip swung out and a flashlight clutched in one hand. “A B and E with B and V. What would your holy roller mother say about this, Betty?”

“What are you doing here, Cheryl?” Betty’s brow is crinkled with confusion; wasn’t she adamant about this playbook not existing just a few hours ago?

“And where did you get those thigh-high boots?” She hears Kevin whisper, and she rolls her eyes. “They’re amazing.”

“Trev told Valerie, who told Josie, who told Ginger, who told Tina, who told me.” Cheryl struts towards them, the light streaming from her flashlight nearly blinding them. “I thought I could help out.”

“Help?” The blonde’s head cants to the side. “Or derail our investigation?” She’s having a bit of trouble figuring out what Cheryl’s motive is. What if she does know about the notebook and doesn’t want them to find it? What if there’s a secret in that book that she’s trying to keep for her brother’s sake?

Cheryl raises her flashlight, directly into Betty’s eyes. “Get over yourself.”

“Hey guys,” Ethel thankfully interrupts them, “Get in here.” She had somehow located the locker and had just spun the lock; she pulls the door open and her eyes widen slightly as she retracts her arm, a black notebook clutched tightly in her hand. The group plus Cheryl quickly gather around her as she flips through the pages. Countless names are listed, scrawled in between the margins with at least a dozen different kinds of handwriting. Next to the names are numbers, along with a short note.

Jughead scoffs and peers over her shoulder. “Looks like we found the bro bible Trev was talking about.”

Ethel flips to the most recent page; Veronica’s name is written at the bottom. Next to it are the words New Girl Bonus, along with a +1. Altogether she tallied up nine points.

“New girl?” Veronica spits out the words like they’re bits of spoiled food. “Is that what I’m reduced to? Nine points?”

“Better than big girl.” Ethel sounds like she’s in complete disbelief over how ridiculous this is. “Seven-point-five.”

“What kind of Superbad-charged garbage is this?” Even Jughead’s in shock.

But Betty isn’t fixated on any of that. She can feel the blood rushing to her ears; she grips onto her flashlight with both hands so that her nails don’t dig into her palms.

“Polly’s in this book.”

And there it is: Polly Cooper (9) - Shy reserved girl, written in blue ink. The boy responsible for
reducing her to a mere nine points wrote his name into the left margin.

“Next to Jason’s name.” Cheryl’s voice is hollow. Betty wrenches her eyes from the book to glance at her, and when she spots the emptiness in her expression, like everything she believed about Jason just fell apart before her very eyes, she backs away from the group and moves towards the closest wall.

This isn’t right. It can’t be. She just talked to Jason a few days ago; he faked his goddamn death for Polly. He risked his safety for her, he gave up his life in Riverdale for her. How can the Jason she talked to be the same Jason who used the words *Shy Reserved Girl* to describe her sister in a stupid playbook?

“This isn’t…” She can hear Cheryl mumbling, and it’s making her blood boil. “Jason would never-”

“It’s *right* there, Cheryl.” Betty whirs around and gestures to the book in Ethel’s hands, tears clinging to her eyelashes. “Why can’t you accept the fact that your brother is-“ She remembers last-minute that Ethel is still here, and she quickly backtracks. “wasn’t perfect? This is what guys like him and Chuck think about women - we’re objects for them to abuse, and when we’re done with us they shame us into silence; they have zero remorse for the lives they they destroy.”

Jughead’s awkwardly shuffling his feet against the linoleum, Kevin’s playing with his flashlight, and Veronica’s eyes are flickering back and forth between Betty and Cheryl. The silence hanging over everyone’s heads is heavy, almost solemn.

Cheryl speaks up first, her voice hoarse. “Maybe I didn’t know Jason.”

There’s a sound of a camera lens snapping; Veronica’s holding her phone over the playbook as Ethel flips through every page. “I’ll take pictures, we’ll show them to Weatherbee, it’ll be the perfect cover for your exposé, Betty.”

*Spoken like a true good girl who always follows the rules.*

She doesn’t know it, but something inside of her snaps.

Betty shrugs and throws up her hands. It’s not about Chuck anymore. It’s not about football, or a stupid slutshaming meme, or a dumb notebook. “Yeah, but these girls deserve justice - don’t you think, Cheryl?” She half-turns to face the redhead and the brunette, both of whom are staring at her with slight confusion. “You want vengeance? You wanna go full dark, no stars, Veronica? I’m with you, and I have a plan.”

It’s going to take a lot more than a high school newspaper article to give Chuck the kind of treatment he truly deserves, and while Betty is determined to make it happen she knows she can’t do it alone. Cheryl’s standing there with her eyebrows knit together but Veronica’s lips are curved upward in a knowing smile.

“Wherever you go, I go.” The smallest girl replies, and Betty smirks back, because of course Veronica would understand.

She’s the only one who ever does.
The lipstick glides effortlessly across, leaving behind a bold trail of deep red. The coat of mascara on her eyelashes accentuates the green in her indecipherable stare and her cheeks are dusted a light pink. Her cropped top tapers off just where her ribcage ends, showing off the marble-white skin of her abdomen.

Alice’s words barely reach her ears as she continues to study herself in the mirror, touching up this and fixing up that. She hears something about how the red doesn’t suit her and Polly growing up too fast, but she doesn’t really care. Even when Alice makes her way over and forcefully wipes the lipstick away, smudging blood red across Betty’s chin and cheeks, she merely shrugs it off and wordlessly reapplies it when her mother gives up and leaves her room.

She adjusts her top one last time, unfastening another button to deepen the cut exposing her chest, and stands up.

She’s making the short trek from her house to Pop’s, staring straight ahead of her and not saying a single word. She walks past at least three people she knows, but when they turn to say hello she marches forward as if they’re invisible.

He’s here. She knows he is. Where else do kids hang out in this dead-end town?

The bell chimes as she steps inside. He’s sitting at a booth just a few feet away, quietly munching on a burger.

He’s alone.

He glances up, and Betty can’t help but smirk when she eyes the soft shock on his face.

“Hey, Chuck.” Betty runs a hand along the seat opposite from his. “Can I sit?” Her voice is delicate, high, nothing like her usual tone - almost like it’s coming from someone else.

“Not if you want to discuss Veronica.” He clears his throat and picks up a fry, absently nibbling on it as he tries his best not to make it obvious that he’s ogling her. The attention is strangely invigorating, and Betty smirks again as she lowers herself into the booth.

“Only insofar as…” She keeps her eyes trained on him. “I’ve been thinking lately,” She bites her lip, and Chuck’s dark eyes flit towards it. “How I want to be more like her.”

“You wanna be a bad girl?” His brow furrows; his meal sits neglected on the table.

She holds his stare for a few moments, deliberately allowing the silence to grow heavier. “Maybe.” She breathes; her response is not quite a whisper but it’s low enough that Chuck has to lean in to hear her properly.

He lets out a soft, almost awkward chuckle. “Like your sister Polly was?”

Something hot and angry temporarily flares up inside of her, and for a second she returns to her usual self. Betty leans back a little, caught off guard by his question, but before she can answer him he continues.

“Oh yeah, Jason told us all about Polly. Prissy prude by day, freak in the sheets by night.” He dips his head slightly and gives her a cat-like grin. “Bad girls have more fun, right?”

“Yeah.” She swallows hard, trying her best not to envision Polly as this so-called freak in the sheets he’s talking about. Why would Jason even say things like this about her - the girl who’s carrying his child, the girl he ran away with? Betty recomposes herself, breathing deep; she forces her facial
muscles to relax and tries to sink back into the sultry but detached act she was practicing just minutes before. A too-sweet grin stretches across her red lips, and she tilts her head slightly to feign innocence. “Maybe you can show me.”

“Yes.” Chuck licks his lips, and she wills herself to smile even wider. “I can do that. Um, when?”

Her reply comes quickly, automatically. “Tomorrow night.”

He fires back almost immediately. “At your place or mine?”

“Ethel’s.” When confusion flashes over his expression she suppresses a giggle. “She knew her parents would be out. She’ll leave us a key - but we’re friends, and she has a pool. And a hot tub.”

He takes a couple of seconds to mull over her offer, but as expected he takes the bait. “I’ll be there. Definitely.” His grin is back full force. “And hey, don’t worry - I’ll be gentle.”

He has no idea what he just walked into, and she loves it.

“Can’t wait.”

If you ask Betty what she’s been up to for the past twelve hours, she wouldn’t be able to give you an answer.

At most, she can recall feelings - mostly hot flashes of anger flaring up in her belly, searing her insides. She remembers being very, very angry, but she can’t remember what or who this anger is directed to.

That is, until she comes to in the middle of Ethel’s pool house wearing clothes she doesn’t remember buying and with a half-empty bottle of maple syrup clutched in one hand.

“IT’s over.” Veronica’s speaking slowly, like she’s testing her words. Testing to see if anything will set Betty off even further. “We did it. You did it.”

Betty leans back; her eyes refocus, and she can see Chuck squirming in the hot tub beneath her. Whose handcuffs are those? “You are crazy. Oh my God, you are crazy as hell!”

She takes a second to retrace her steps, but every time she tries to think back to earlier in the day she’s met with a giant black void. It’s like someone edited it out of her memory. She remembers putting on makeup and walking into Pop’s. She remembers talking to Chuck and inviting him to Ethel’s pool house. She remembers him agreeing, and how excited she was…but anything past that is a mystery to her.

She glances down at her hand, the one holding the maple syrup, then she looks over to Chuck, who’s still writhing in the hot tub. There’s a fine glaze of syrup over his head and shoulders; it doesn’t take long to put two and two together. Was she the one who handcuffed Chuck? Why is she wearing this wig? Whose clothes are these?

The hand not holding the bottle of syrup begins to sting.

“Betty.” Veronica speaks up again, her voice a little firmer this time. She’s standing not too far away in a one-piece bathing suit, and her damp hair is brushed back. The mere sight would’ve given Betty
a panic attack if she wasn’t already on the verge of having one.

“I’m fine.” She says, but she knows it isn’t true and she’s sure Veronica knows it too. She absently reaches up, mechanically brushing a strand of black hair from her face. “We’re done here.”

Chuck’s right. Cheryl’s right. Her mother’s right too.

She is crazy.

Ethel’s suddenly here and she’s freeing Chuck from the hot tub. Betty can see her lips moving, but she can’t make out what she’s saying; Veronica nods, and Ethel drags the poor boy away, presumably back to wherever the hell he came from.

“B,” Veronica’s voice is louder; she’s standing closer to her now, but still at a safe distance. “Um.” Her eyes are cast downward, towards the blonde’s fist.

Betty drops her gaze and notices the tiny red droplets squeezing out in between her fingers. “Oh,” Is all she can manage to say.

Veronica reaches forward, taking her hand in both of hers, and glides her fingertips over the blonde’s curled ones. Her hand relaxes under her touch, exposing her palm; the familiar red marks are simpering up at the both of them. “Hold on.” Veronica takes the bottle of maple syrup from Betty's other hand and strides over to somewhere by the wall, where a bar cart is sitting. Is that why she can taste alcohol in her mouth?

The brunette is back in seconds with a towel; one end is damp with vodka. She takes the soaked end in one hand and cautiously, almost anxiously, looks at her. “This might sting a little.” Betty shrugs, and Veronica frowns; she was expecting more of an answer, but what else can she give her right now?

Betty feels like she’s watching footage of herself from an imaginary security camera; she can see herself standing in the pool house with her hand outstretched, and she can see Veronica gingerly dabbing at her cuts with the towel, but she can’t smell the vodka, nor can she feel the steam rising from the hot tub. She watches the white towel gradually turn pink as it soaks up her blood, but she can’t feel the stinging of the alcohol seeping into her wounds. She knows it’s supposed to hurt - it’s supposed to hurt a lot, actually - but she can’t feel a thing. She is completely detached from the situation, and she wants to feel afraid, she wants to freak out at how unnatural this is, but it’s almost like she’s unable to. She tries to force herself to scream, to ask Veronica what the hell just happened, but that fails too. It’s like she lost complete control of herself.

“There.” Veronica wraps a clean towel around her hand. “That should do it for now.” She nervously glances upward; there’s heartbreak reflecting in those brown irises, and all Betty wants is to reach out to her and tell her that she’s scared shitless and has no idea how to fix this or where it even came from, but her jaw feels wired shut. “How are you feeling?”

You’re crazy. You’re crazy as hell. Chuck’s words bounce around inside of her, echoing louder and louder as they ricochet off the rungs of her ribcage. She feels despairingly empty, like there’s nothing inside of her except for his accusations. No heart, no stomach, no liver, no lungs, nothing - just an empty space for all of that crazy to fester and mutate.

Veronica must sense that there’s a lot more to this than the cuts on her palms, because she gives her a quick nod before gently taking her by the wrist and pulling her towards the door. Betty vaguely recognizes the interior of the Muggs home from the few times she visited as a child, but she still feels like a foreign visitor stepping into new territory; something just doesn’t feel right, like she’s misplaced.
something but can’t quite figure out what it is. She eyes her backpack sitting by the wall but doesn’t remember how it got there; Veronica softly nudges her and says something about heading into the bathroom to change, so she wordlessly abides and bends over to grab her things.

When Betty locks herself inside the bathroom the first thing she does is walk over to the sink, hunch over, and stare into the mirror. Her lips are a loud shade of red, and her eyes are wide, but flat and stony. The black bob sitting on her head completely covers her blonde hair; she can’t tell where her natural hairline ends and the wig begins. The bra she’s wearing is lacy and nothing like the rest of her wardrobe. Her reflection stares back, passive and uncaring; her uninjured hand tightens into a fist, and she draws back, ready to plunge it through the glass-

There’s a quiet knock at the door. Betty immediately drops her hand. “B? You okay in there?” Veronica’s voice, slightly muffled by the door, sounds worried sick.

Maybe she should start taking her pills again.

Betty slowly regains parts of herself as the night wears on, and by the time their Uber pulls up on the Cooper house’s driveway she feels normal enough to protest when Veronica insists she stays the night to make sure everything’s okay.

“Ohay,” The brunette replies warily as the blonde crouches out of the car, “But I’m calling you the nanosecond I get home and you’re staying on the line until you fall asleep.”

She wasn’t kidding; when Betty shoves the wig under her bed, hopefully never to be seen again, her phone vibrates, and she almost wants to laugh at how prompt Veronica is. She keeps her on speakerphone as she boots up her computer, explaining that she doesn’t feel tired and she wants to get this exposé out as soon as possible so she can bring the justice Veronica, Ethel, and so many other girls deserve. It’s unsettling how quickly she transitioned from revenge-bent dominatrix, to empty shell of a human being, and back to regular vanilla Betty Cooper in the span of a few hours, but she avoids dwelling on it by writing and editing throughout the night. By the time she’s satisfied with what she’s written the sun is beginning to poke its head over the horizon; despite being awake for more than twenty-four hours she feels invigorated and ready to tackle the rest of the day.

By the time Betty arrives at school hard copies have already been distributed to the student body. She’s stacking a few copies in the foyer when she hears Veronica’s heels clicking in her direction.

“Quite the exposé.” The brunette holds up a copy of her own, grinning triumphantly. She looks exhausted but her voice is so vivacious that it’s hard to tell if she actually is. “Did you really have to stay up all night to write it?”

The blonde shrugs. “You didn’t have to stay up with me, you know.”

Veronica’s eyes narrow. “Yes I did, and you know why.” Her expression softens, and she lets out a sigh. “Betty, you came through for me in a way that no one else ever has before…but can we talk about what happened?”

Her heart stops momentarily; her hand is suspended mid-air, hovering over the stack of newspapers. “What do you mean?” Feigning innocence is pointless and she knows that, but she can’t think of a better reply.
The smaller of the two crosses her arms. “The wig and everything - how far were you gonna take it?”

That unsettling feeling of detachment is creeping back. “Chuck deserved it.”

Veronica raises an eyebrow. “You called him Jason.”

And that’s when Betty’s insides grow cold. Her eyes widen and she forces herself to swallow. She has absolutely no recollection of that ever happening, and she knows Veronica wouldn’t make this up. “I did?” She shakes her head as she turns on her heel to make her way towards her locker; she furrows her brow and forces herself to remember, but once again she comes up with nothing.

“Yeah, girl - you did.” Veronica leans against the locker next to the blonde’s. “You called yourself Polly. It was like Doctor Jekyll, Mistress Hyde. You became another person.”

Betty spins her lock and wrenches her locker door open; she claws at the upper shelf, searching for her pill bottle, and when she finally finds it she pops off the lid and shakes one little white pill into her open palm. She can feel Veronica’s eyes on her as she tosses it into her mouth, knocking her head back so it goes all the way down.

“Betty?” Veronica speaks up again, her voice a lot quieter than it was before. “Is…everything-”

“I don’t know.” Betty admits as she anxiously rolls the little orange bottle in her bandaged hand. “I don’t really know what to say because I don’t remember much of what happened. All I can recall is waking up in Ethel’s pool house with Chuck smothered in maple syrup, handcuffed to a hot tub.” She begins to talk a little faster, and now both of her hands are fidgeting with the bottle. “I try to think back, I try to picture myself calling him Jason and pouring the syrup on his head… but I can’t. It’s like there’s this… wall, a really thick, tall, wall - and it’s barricading me from this, like it doesn’t want me to remember.” Betty’s eyes begin to sting, and she swallows again. “Like it’s trying to tell me that I wasn’t there when it happened… like it’s someone else’s memory, not mine, and that scares the hell out of me, V, because this never happened before - or, well, I mean… I don’t think it happened before, maybe it did, I don’t know, I’m one hundred percent crazy and if you-”

“Hey, hey.” Veronica steps forward, wrestling the bottle out of her hands; she sets it back on its spot on the top shelf of Betty’s locker and takes her hands in her own, gently prying them open. Her thumbs are rubbing soothing circles on her palms, careful not to press too hard. Her movements are so gentle, so affectionate, and if Betty wasn’t on the verge of tears before she definitely is now. “It’s okay if it doesn’t make sense to you right now. We don’t have to figure it out right away.”

The blonde sniffles. “We don’t?”

“No, we don’t.” The smaller girl throws her a comforting smile. “Look, you don’t have to tell me everything, and I’m not expecting you to - but just know that I’m here if you ever feel like you do need to talk, okay? Whatever it is that’s bothering you, you don’t have to face it alone. I’m there for you every step of the way.”

Please, for the love of God, do not start crying. “V, I-”

“Wherever you go, I go. Remember?” She can feel every bit of Veronica’s thumbs brushing over her wounds, and it steadies her. Veronica’s touch roots her firmly to the ground, reminding her that she is here, she’s alive, she exists, she is a part of this world.

Suddenly, she doesn’t feel so afraid anymore.
Justice is served not too long afterward, with Chuck getting suspended and booted off the football team. The entire school got to watch as he stormed out of school property with the other disgraced Bulldogs trailing behind him.

Cheryl joins her later that day outside by the batting cage, where there’s a giant oil drum filled with discarded popcorn boxes and grease-stained paper plates. Betty tosses the infamous playbook into the trash and squeezes half a bottle of lighter fluid on top. Cheryl completes it by flicking open a lighter and dropping it in.

As the contents of the drum incinerate before them, the blonde turns to the redhead. “We have to talk to them.”

Cheryl doesn’t look away from the growing flames. “I know. I want answers too…but promise me one thing.”

Betty cants her head to the side. “What?”

The redhead finally turns to face her, her dark eyes rimmed with unshed tears. “We have to protect them. We need to keep them as far away from this place as we possibly can.”

That’s a promise she can get behind. “Agreed.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I am watching Season 2, and it's only making me more motivated to keep writing. Don't worry.
It comes to Betty at nearly three in the morning. She had a long day and was exhausted; after classes she had two hours of softball practice, and then she had to stay another two hours at the Blue and Gold with Jughead. By the time she got home it was nearly nine, which barely gave her enough time to squeeze in a small dinner before holing herself up in her room for the rest of the night to catch up on some homework.

It’s almost one when she finally crawls into bed, and she thought she’d be able to fall asleep immediately but instead her thoughts meander over to Archie, which is a little strange because the last time she saw him was when they hung out in the music room during a spare period a few days ago. She remembers how he was the one who gave her the idea to find other girls who’ve been terrorized by Chuck and his bro posse, and how he wanted her input on soulmates, which led to a heartfelt conversation between the two - something that hasn’t happened since the night before the school year started.

“I have to tell you something.” She can picture Archie’s face, clear as day, exactly the way he looked when they were last together. She remembers the uncertainty in his expression, like he wasn’t sure how to tell her, or if he should be telling her anything at all. She had been so caught up in the fiasco with Chuck, tracking down Jason and Polly with Cheryl so they can find out why her sister’s name was in that stupid playbook in the first place, and the fragility of her mental state that she didn’t have the time to think about Archie and what he almost confessed to her that day - not until now.

What exactly was he trying to tell her?

“Oh the morning of July Fourth, by the river, I-”

She knows he was by the river that morning, but when Sheriff Keller interviewed him he said he was walking his dog and working on some songs by himself. Sure, it seemed a little strange - because why would a teenage boy be up so early in the morning on a holiday just to write songs in the middle of a forest, all alone - but she didn’t think much of it. Archie can’t have anything to do with Jason’s “murder”, seeing as Jason isn’t dead, and even if he was, Archie would be the last person she’d suspect. That boy is so pathetically clumsy that the only person he’s capable of hurting is himself.

Groaning, she rolls over and mechanically reaches for her phone on her nightstand. It’s a little past two-thirty; she’s been lying here for an hour and a half thinking herself into a dead end.

But wait - remember what Dilton said?

“Miss Grundy’s car by the river’s edge. She was there.”

Archie’s one thing, but what business does Miss Grundy have at Sweetwater River on the morning of July Fourth? What would their high school music teach-

Wait.
High school *music* teacher.

Archie said he was working on some *songs*.

Could it be that the both of them were by the river that morning…together?

But why would they be together in a secluded area at such a weird hour of the day just to work on some music?

Unless…

*No.*

Betty bolts upwards, her eyes wide and her jaw hanging.

“Oh my God.”

That can’t be right. She’s just overthinking.

Archie Andrews - her best friend since forever, the boy who gave his little league baseball trophy to a kid on the losing team because he felt bad, the boy who broke his arm falling out of a tree in fourth grade because he promised Ethel he would climb it to rescue her cat, the boy who offers to shovel his neighbour’s driveway for free every winter because she’s old and he doesn’t want her to hurt herself - would never get himself tangled in a totally *not legal* relationship with his music teacher.

Right?

Betty’s phone vibrates, scaring her out of her reverie. She pulls it from her pocket and tucks it underneath the table she’s currently sharing with Kevin, Veronica, and Jughead at Pop’s; it’s another text from Cheryl, asking if she heard anything from Polly. She texts back the same reply she used for the last seventeen texts Cheryl sent her in the past couple of days - *No, not yet* - and shoves her phone back into her pocket so she can resume half-listening to Jughead ranting about the Twilight Drive-In closing down for good.

“That can’t be right. She’s just overthinking.” Kevin holds up his hand, anguish stretched across his features, “No more Quentin Tarantino references.” Next to him, Veronica’s not-so-subtly chuckling to herself and fiddling with the straw poking out of her glass of water, and Betty can feel a smile forcing its way onto her lips. Kevin’s too caught up in his argument with Jughead to catch it, which gives the blonde a brief moment of reprieve; she can finally think about how cute Veronica is without the threat of being made fun of.

“Right, Betts?” Jughead’s looking at her, expecting an answer. Never mind, there’s no reprieve.

“Totally.” She answers at least ten seconds too late, but Jughead’s too angry to notice. Kevin’s brow is knit together, but he quickly laughs it off and returns to his conversation with Jughead; Veronica, however, looks a little concerned. The brunette’s been a little protective of her since the pool house incident; every time she catches Betty doing something unBetty-like - such as falling into sudden bouts of silence or staring into space - she’s by her side in seconds, taking her hands in her own and checking to see if fresh new marks have bitten their way into her palms. The blonde appreciates the gesture - a part of her even admits that she looks forward to it - but Veronica’s got it all wrong; as
concerning as that night was, Chuck is old news, and there are more important things to worry about.

Archie’s tryst with Miss goddamn Grundy, for instance.

“You guys should all come to closing night.” Jughead’s voice has finally lowered to a normal level, though he sounds a bit defeated. “I’m thinking American Graffiti, or is that too obvious?”

Veronica squints up at the ceiling and tilts her head to the side - a habit she practices when she’s really thinking about something, and yes, Betty notices and adores this. “I vote for anything starring Audrey Hepburn or Cate Blanchett.”

“Or The Talented Mr. Ripley.” Kevin offers before turning to face the blonde. “Betty - your choices?”

Again, Betty is forced to pull herself out of her train of thought; she blinks a few times, like she had just woken up from a long nap, and stares at everyone through bleary eyes. She’s caught in between trying - and failing - to wrap her head around her childhood friend running around with a woman nearly twice his age and fawning over the girl sitting across from her.

“Everything okay, B?” Veronica’s eyes soften and they drop somewhere below the table, where Betty’s hands are resting on her thighs; she’s checking in again. Are you okay?

“Yeah, yeah,” Betty nods, laughing dismissively and shaking her head; she holds Veronica’s stare for a split second - I’m fine, don’t worry. “I’m just…thinking.” She is the world’s worst liar. “Um, maybe…The Graduate?”

Is that too obvious?

The corner of Veronica’s mouth twitches, but she doesn’t smile. Something’s wrong and you’re not telling me.

Jughead’s eyes widen by a fraction; Veronica and Kevin don’t seem to notice but the brief panic shadowing his face is easy for Betty to read, and her brow furrows as she tries to figure out why her suggestion elicited such a reaction. Wait, does he-

“Here you go, kids.” Hermione Lodge swings by, fully decked out in a Pop’s waitressing uniform and hands full with a basket of onion rings and a plate of burgers (For Jughead, of course). Even though her apron’s stained with grease and her hair is hastily done up in a loose ponytail, she’s probably one of the most beautiful people Betty has ever seen; her skin is smooth and flawless even after working all day in a diner, and her eyes are large and dark - exactly like Veronica’s. Alice, of course, had a barbed word or two once she found out her old classmate went from sipping cocktails on a yacht in the Maldives to scraping food off plates in a small-town diner, but Betty thinks it’s admirable. It must be so humiliating to crawl back to your hometown with your tail between your legs, especially when you’ve fallen from a height as great as one of the most prominent apartment buildings in New York (“The Dakota?” Jughead blurted when he found out a little more than a week ago, ”You mean the place where John Lennon lived and died?”), but Hermione sucked it up and did what she had to do in order to provide for her family. Getting back up on your feet again after falling on your face requires a herculean amount of strength and courage, so Alice’s spiteful remarks mean little.

“Thanks, Mom.” Veronica whispers, and Hermione places a hand on her daughter’s shoulder before leaving to tend to other customers. The gesture was small, almost invisible, but it spoke volumes; it’s easy to see the two are close. It’s a relationship Betty secretly envies. What’s it like to have a mother who doesn’t go out of her way to make your life a living hell?
A bell chimes as the front door swings open, and Kevin raises an eyebrow at the new guests. “Now that’s an odd combo of people.”

Betty glances over her shoulder to see what he’s talking about, and her eyes widen when she spots Archie, his father Fred, and Miss Grundy standing awkwardly by the entrance to the diner. She can tell Archie knows she’s there, because he’s trying very hard not to make eye contact with her by pretending to look for a booth on the opposite side of the room.

She wants answers, and she wants them now. “I’ll be right back.” She rises to her feet and marches down the aisle. She can hear Jughead protesting somewhere behind her, but she doesn’t have time for that.

“Hey, Betty.” Fred grins up at her from his seat, completely oblivious to the situation. Betty pities him.

“Hi, Mr. Andrews.” She throws him a quick smile and turns to the woman sitting across from him. “Miss Grundy.” Her eyes flit over to her redheaded friend, who looks terrified - and rightfully so. “Archie, can I talk to you?”

“Sure,” He answers a little too quickly, swallowing hard. “I’ll call you later?”

Is he really trying to get out of this? “No, actually - now.” She can see Grundy staring at him out of the corner of her eye with a similar mortified expression, which only confirms her suspicions. “Just school stuff. Outside?” She jerks her head towards the door, and when Archie finally relents and gets up she smiles to herself before leaving Pop’s.

When they’re far enough from the diner, she spins around and sighs. “Archie, we’re best friends… right?”

His eyes narrow as he tries to figure out where she’s going with this. “Yes?”

“And we promised that we’d talk to each other if we ever had something important to say, right?”

It’s Archie’s turn to sigh. “Just get to the point, Betty.”

“Miss Grundy’s car was seen by Sweetwater River on July Fourth.” She swears Archie has gotten paler. “Were you with her?”

He gapes at her for a few seconds, but when he finally opens his mouth to answer her it’s far from what she expected. “Did Jughead tell you?”

The blonde takes a second to glare at the window closest to the door, where she can see the faint outline of that stupid beanie. He’s going to get an earful later. “Jughead knows about this?”

Archie swallows again. “It’s not what you’re thinking.”

Betty raises an eyebrow. “So it’s platonic.”

There’s a pregnant pause as Archie desperately scrounges for something to say. “Okay, well… maybe it’s a little like what you’re thinking-”

She wanted, so badly, for him to tell her that this was all just a misunderstanding and she was overthinking - but she can never have nice things, can she? Betty groans and pinches the bridge of her nose as she tries to make sense of all of this. “Archie, are you and Miss Grundy, like…together? Like, romantically?”
“Oh my God,” Veronica is suddenly here, looking both shocked and impressed. Her presence is relieving; at least she doesn’t have to face this realization alone. “You and your music teacher are having an affair?”

The redhead helplessly shifts his gaze between both girls. “We are…together.” He tries to speak over their protests but to no avail. “Look, I know that sounds bad, but—”

“Bad? It sounds scandalous.” Veronica looks like she’s trying to hold in a laugh. It’s actually kind of irritating how she isn’t taking this seriously. This is basically - no, it is statutory rape. There are so many things wrong with this and she’s having the time of her life right now.

“It sounds like jail time to me.” Betty splutters. “Illegal!”

Archie practically looks like he’s withering. “Betty, don’t go there.”

Completely livid at this point, the blonde begins to flail her arms. “Well, I’m already there!”

He turns to Veronica, utterly defeated. “Ronnie, a little help here?”

The smaller girl does that thing again - the thing Betty loves so much but hates to admit that she loves it so much - where she squints and tilts her head. “I mean, technically Betty’s right - and, ethically, what is Grundy to you anyway? Your girlfriend?” She lowers her voice and leans in a little, pausing for dramatic effect. “Your…booty tutor?”

Archie shrugs and shakes his head. “I dunno, I don’t know what to call her.”

“Do you love her?” Veronica crosses her arms.

“I…” Archie throws Betty a sideways glance, and the blonde’s heart begins to race. Why did he do that? “I don’t know. I don’t know what to call it. We’re just…kind of taking things as they come. Look, I can’t really explain why right now, but she needs me, okay? You don’t have to understand it, but I’m asking you to trust me.” He fully turns to face Betty this time, and his expression is desperate. “Please.”

Guilt suddenly crashes into Betty. Maybe this could have been prevented if she stayed home instead of flying off to Los Angeles - actually, a lot of things could have been prevented if she turned down that internship. Polly could still be here, and Jason might not have needed to fake his death to be with her. Things could have been so much easier if she wasn’t so selfish. Maybe her mother was right after all - maybe it’s best she did things for others, instead of trying to please herself. Maybe it’s better that way for everyone.

“You said you were at the river alone.” She isn’t in the mood to argue anymore, but she presses on anyway. “You lied to Sheriff Keller, to all of us. Why? To protect her?”

“Geraldine-”

The brunette wrinkles her nose in disgust. “Oh, you’re on a first-name basis now, wonderful—”

Archie continues to talk over her. “-believed in me when no one else did.”

“Uh, hello?” Veronica extends an arm, gesturing towards Betty. “Have you forgotten about your ride or die circa 2004? Betty’s been there for you more times than the Sheba Hart sitting with your dad right n—”

“Betty was gone for an entire summer,” Archie fires back, and the words twist into the blonde’s sides
like knives. “And while she was gone Geraldine helped me figure things out about my life - she helped me see things that have been there this whole time, things I never knew existed.” He throws Betty another split-second glance, and her chest painfully contracts. “I wouldn’t have found my passion for music if it weren’t for her.”

The brunette rolls her eyes and crosses her arms again. “If making out with your teacher in secret in the middle of nowhere is your idea of making music, I can’t imagine what the resulting songs sound like.”

Okay, that was a little funny. Betty clears her throat to suppress her laugh. In all honesty, she’s miserable - and Archie dumping all of these mixed messages on her (Is he blaming her absence for his relationship with Grundy? Is he insinuating that his relationship with Grundy made him realize he was in love with her this whole time? She doesn’t want to know the answer to either of these questions) is only making it worse, but Veronica’s sense of humour - as inappropriate as it can be, sometimes - is making her feel a little better.

“Betty,” Archie turns to face the blonde, but she can’t meet his eyes. “I swear I was going to tell you about this. I just haven’t had the chance. I was waiting for the right moment, just like how you’re waiting to tell me about what’s been bothering you.”

The end of his sentence is what finally gets Betty to look - well, more like gawk - at him. His eyes widen when he realizes what he just did, and it looks like he’s just about to apologize for nearly divulging something that’s strictly meant to stay between the both of them when the brunette reacts.

Veronica raises both eyebrows and whips around to face the blonde, alarmed. “Wait, what’s bothering you? What’s wrong?” Her voice begins to waver a bit, and the guilt comes back full force. The sound of screeching tires prevents Betty from giving her an answer; Alice abruptly pulls up next to them and lowers her window. How did she know she was here? Then again...this is Riverdale. Now that the Twilight is closing, Pop’s is literally the only hangout spot. “Get in the car, Betty. Now.” She narrows her eyes at Archie and Veronica. “What have I told you about those two?”

She’s never been so relieved to see her mother. The blonde hurriedly ducks into the passenger’s seat, willing herself not to look over her shoulder as she does so; one peek at Veronica’s face and she knows she’ll be pulled back in. “Can we just go?”

“Betty?” She can hear Veronica murmur, but she keeps her eyes trained on her lap as Alice steers the station wagon out of the parking lot. Her fists rest on top, her fingertips twitching over her palms.

“Betty,” Jughead warns her for the umpteenth time the next afternoon in the Blue and Gold office, “I really don’t think this is a good idea.”

She glares at him from her desk, and he gulps. “You’re still on the chopping block for keeping this from me. I can’t believe you knew about it this whole time!”

“What was I supposed to do?” He throws up his arms before moving to lean against one of the filing cabinets. “Archie made me promise not to say anything. I was doing a favour for a friend.”

“Plus, I think he lied to my dad about it because not only would telling the truth expose their relationship,” Kevin’s sitting at the desk adjacent to Betty’s. “But that would also make them prime
suspects in Jason’s case.”

“So?” Betty shakes her head as she reaches into her backpack for her notepad; she cleverly set up an interview with Grundy later for the newspaper under the guise of a feature article on teachers. “The fact of the matter is that Archie has himself caught in a relationship with an older woman who also happens to be his teacher. Not only is this illegal, but there’s…something else not right about it, and I need to find out what it is.”

Veronica, who’s sitting on the corner of Betty’s desk, turns her head to glance at her with a raised eyebrow. “Are you sure you’re doing this for him, or for you?”

She can feel Kevin and Jughead’s eyes burning holes into her. “What are you talking about?”

The brunette lets out a quiet chuckle. “You’re obsessing over this, B. Look, I get why this is on the shortlist for Scandal of the Century, but don’t you think this is something Archiekins can handle himself? He’s a big boy.”

“That’s probably the exact reason why Grundy can’t keep her hands off him.” Kevin mutters under his breath, and Jughead snorts; Betty throws a venomous glare in their direction and both of them immediately drop their eyes to the floor.

“That’s probably the exact reason why Grundy can’t keep her hands off him.” Kevin mutters under his breath, and Jughead snorts; Betty throws a venomous glare in their direction and both of them immediately drop their eyes to the floor.

“Archie’s my best friend. It’s only right that I help him get out of this mess.” She replies indignantly before rising from her seat and hoisting her bag over her shoulder. It’s time for her interview with Grundy. She turns to face Kevin, who’s anxiously looking back at her. “Walk me to the music room?”

His expression is utterly confused, but he nods and gets up anyway. When Betty closes the door behind them and turns on her heel to make her way down the hallway she smiles, which only further terrifies him. “Is there a particular reason why you decided to isolate me, Betty?”

“Well,” She holds her notebook to her chest, innocently canting her head to the side. “I’ve been really busy these past few days-”

“With serving vigilante justice to douchey ex-football stars?”

She clears her throat and decides not to respond to that. “-and I realized that we still haven’t had that talk about you and…” She takes a second to glance around, checking if the coast is clear. “Moose.”

If Kevin was terrified before, he’s scared shitless now. “Oh. That.” He blinks a couple of times as Betty patiently waits for him to continue. “Uh, what do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

He sighs. “I knew you were going to say that, yet I foolishly hoped otherwise.” They turn a corner. “Here’s the TLDR version, because I know you’d want me to spare the details: We hooked up one time - I repeat, one time - after the back-to-school semiformal…by Sweetwater River.”

How many secrets does that stupid river have? Betty’s eyes widen at this revelation and she gawks at him, her jaw dangling. “Seriously? Moose is…”

“Bi as hell,” Kevin gestures with his hand, reminding her to keep her voice low. “But also so deep in the closet he might as well be in frigging Narnia. He paired up with me in Biology that day because he wanted another rendezvous that weekend, but I turned him down.”

Betty shakes her head. “Why? You’ve spent the past four years complaining about your lack of
choices in Riverdale, and now you finally have an opportunity.”

He shoulders his bag as they round another corner; the door to the music room is at the end of the hall. “Trust me, deprived closet cases like him only want one thing, and it isn’t a meaningful relationship.” He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “You’re lucky Veronica isn’t like that.”

Her face suddenly feels fifty degrees hotter. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He stops by the entrance to the music room, his eyes dull. “You know, the whole I’m in denial that I actually have a chance with this girl thing was cute the first twelve times, but now it’s getting a little stale.” Before Betty can even think of a rebuttal, he places a hand on the doorknob and twists it. “Now go in there and ruin Grundy’s life, or whatever it is you’re supposed to be doing.”

She glowers at him before pushing the door open and marching inside, where Grundy’s already sitting. She’s wringing her hands and shifting around in her seat, which gives Betty the impression that she knows the real reason why they’re doing this interview - and, in a sense, that’s a good thing. Betty wants Grundy to know she’s onto her. She wants her to know that she knows her secret.

“Thank you for taking the time, Miss Grundy.” Betty smiles as she takes a seat directly across from her, flipping her notebook to the nearest blank page. “Like I said, the Blue and Gold is doing a series of articles spotlighting teachers and you’re our first.” When Grundy gives her a forced, awkward smile that actually looks more like a grimace, Betty grins and crosses one leg over the other. “Let’s begin - uh, you joined the faculty last year. Where did you move to Riverdale from?”

Grundy replies almost immediately - like she rehearsed this, or answered this question one too many times in the past. “Here and there. I was just…mostly on the road.”

Betty innocently blinks at her. “But you taught at other schools, right?”

Grundy bursts out in a fit of laughter - “Oh, yeah - of course!” - but she doesn’t follow up with anything else. Her vague answers and reluctance to elaborate are interesting, to say the least.

Betty presses her thumb on the top of her pen, and its sharp click echoes throughout the room. “Can I get their names?”

“Seaside High, Centreville High…” Grundy trails off; the blonde scribbles in a note to Google these names later.

“What made you leave?”

“They were temporary placements - just filling in for maternity, sabbatical, things like that. This is my first permanent position.” Another swift, practiced answer. Grundy must’ve realized this because she chuckles and hastily adds, “Word of advice: If you want a stable, consistent career, don’t get into teaching.”

Betty forces a smile before jotting down another line of notes. “So you’re working with Archie Andrews on an independent study.” She notices the way Grundy’s face falls at the mention of Archie’s name - got you now. “Have you ever done this sort of thing before?”

There’s barely a breath of a pause before Grundy answers her question. “Yes - last year, with Tomoko Yoshido…and Jason Blossom.”

The tip of Betty’s pen hovers just millimetres above the paper; the mention of Jason’s name wiped every trace of thought from her brain, and now she can’t remember what she wanted to write down. Jason was involved with Grundy too? Was he also in a relationship with her? Was he with her at the
same time he was also with Polly? “Jason? Before…”

Grundy nods and lowers her head a little, possibly to feign remorse. “Such a tragedy. He was an inspiration.”

Betty wasn’t hoping she had to resort to this, but apparently Grundy is really good at avoiding questions. She leans in and lowers her voice so it’s just above a whisper, her lips curling back over her teeth in a mischievous grin. “And pretty cute, right?”

…She just vomited in her mouth a little. Oh, the things she does in the name of investigative journalism.

There’s a split-second of sheer terror on Grundy’s face, but it quickly disappears. “I don’t think of my students that way.”

“No, no - I didn’t-” Betty reels back, and she gets the reaction she wants when Grundy clears her throat and begins to stand up.

“I’m sorry, but I really should prepare for my next class.” She scrambles for the stack of papers sitting next to her, not even bothering to pick up the few loose leaves that slip out of said stack and flutter to the floor before rushing out of the room.

Betty leans back in her seat, satisfied with the results but also mortified at the revelation of Jason being in Archie’s position a year ago. Maybe Jason faked his death and left Riverdale for a completely different reason, and he’s just using Polly as a coverup.

But he wouldn’t do that to her, would he? She’s pregnant with his goddamn child - which could also be a happy and convenient accident, from his point of view. Ugh, this is so confusing. Jason ditched this town with a lot of unanswered questions, but as much as she wants answers she has no way of contacting him. She doubts Polly would have her phone on her now that she already used it to call her that one night after Cheryl’s party, and it’s too risky anyway.

So what is she supposed to do now?

________________________________________________________

“Call her.” Cheryl orders. “Now.”

“She told me to wait. Both of them told me to wait.” Betty wrenches open her locker door and pulls out her gym bag; softball practice and River Vixens practice just so happened to end at exactly the same time today, which obviously means this is a perfect opportunity for the redhead to corner her in the girls’ change room. “I’m not risking their safety over-”

“Over what, Betty? The fact that our school hired a cradle snatcher to teach music? The fact that my brother - the father of your future niece or nephew, by the way - is one of her victims? The fact that-”

“I get it,” The blonde rolls her eyes, “But there’s not much we can do. They have to contact us first.”

Cheryl flattens her palm against the locker door and slams it shut, forcing Betty to jump in surprise. “No, you don’t get it. We don’t have time to do any more waiting! There’s a cello-playing predator prowling the halls of Riverdale High and your first instinct is to wait until she strikes again?”
Gritting her teeth, Betty adjusts her baseball cap with both hands because she knows if she doesn’t keep them busy they’ll be curled into tight fists. “I have no way of contacting them—”

“Call the number Polly used to call you.”

“And risk having it traced?” Betty leans in a little, her voice rising. “Cheryl, I don’t think you understand where Polly and Jason are coming from. When people run away, it’s usually because they don’t want to be found. They don’t want someone following them.” She angrily shoves her practice uniform into her bag. “Trust me, I’m as frustrated as you right now, but we have to be patient. We have to trust them. Jason trusted you when he agreed to fake his death - when he agreed to follow through with a plan that you came up with. Why don’t you have the same kind of faith in him?”

Cheryl’s eyes soften slightly. “I, I didn’t mean it like—”

“We will get answers.” Betty reassures her as she throws her bag over her shoulder. “We won’t be getting them when we want them but we’ll get them eventually. Like I said - trust them. They’ll get back to us soon.” When she eyes the devastation on the redhead’s face, she sighs. “I know you’re anxious to hear from him, Cheryl. I’m sorry this has been so hard on you… but I promise, the second I hear something from them, you’ll be the first person to know. Okay?”

“Okay.” Cheryl’s voice is so soft it’s nearly impossible to hear, even though there’s no one else in the room. Betty can’t help but pity the poor girl; Jason’s the only person Cheryl feels like she can fully trust, and to not have that sort of presence by her side must be harrowing. Everyone deserves to have at least one other person they can feel comfortable and safe with, even if they’re as nasty as Cheryl Blossom.

She watches the redhead quietly leave the change room, and she’s just about to follow her out when a familiar voice pipes up from somewhere behind her. “Did I just witness Betty Cooper tame the untameable Blossom lioness?” When did Veronica come in? Was she here this whole time? She and Cheryl made sure the change room was empty before they decided to talk about their siblings.

Smirking, Betty whirls around to give Veronica a snarky reply, but when she comes face-to-face with the smaller girl her brain short circuits and she suddenly forgets how to string coherent sentences together. The brunette is halfway finished with changing out of her practice uniform; she’s still dressed in the usual dark blue shorts but her top is nowhere to be found, leaving her in nothing but a lacy black bra. Betty’s eyes run over Veronica’s bare shoulders, the pearl necklace stretched across her collarbone, her chest (Her eyes hover there at least five seconds longer than they should), the smoothness of her exposed midriff, and the peaks of her hipbones poking out of the waistband of her shorts.

But what really catches Betty’s attention is the tattoo underneath Veronica’s right breast; there’s a line of small text, but the underwire of her bra is covering some of it so she can’t read what it says. A part of her tries to imagine what those words are, but the bra would have to be removed in order for that to happen, and, well…

“Uh,” The blonde is slow to react, still trying to pick her jaw up from where it tumbled onto the floor. “Well, I, um. Well. Uh.” Veronica raises an eyebrow, and Betty swallows hard as she tries to force the lump out of her throat. “Cheryl…Cheryl’s, she…she’s just upset. Right now. She’s upset right now, yeah, and I’m trying to help.”

So this is how she dies: Out of mortifying embarrassment.

“I could hear her banshee wailing from the showers.” The mental image of Veronica using one of the
change room’s showers forces Betty to look away in a pathetic attempt to hide the redness on her face. She knows the brunette can’t be that oblivious; she has to know what she’s doing to her right now. “You still haven’t heard anything?”

“N-no.” Betty clears her throat and tightens her hands on the strap of her gym bag. “And Cheryl’s getting impatient - which, I mean, I can understand,” Veronica crosses her arms, pushing up against her chest, and the blonde’s eyes immediately drop to her cleavage. “But, uh, I’m trying to tell her that we don’t have any other choice but to, um, wait.”

“Trust me, when you’re as rich as Cheryl Blossom and are accustomed to getting things exactly when you want them, patience is a hard-learned virtue,” The shorter of the two cants her head, and her black hair flows with her movements. “But she’ll learn. She’ll have to. Now that her brother isn’t around to keep her in check, that duty’s sort of fallen to you, hasn’t it?”

The blonde sighs and leans back against the wall of lockers, tearing her eyes away from Veronica so she can actually speak like a normal human being. “I guess so. He never really said it out loud, but I think Jason wants me to look after her, for his sake.”

“And for the rest of the town, because letting Cheryl run free-range can only mean disaster.” Both girls chuckle at the joke, though Betty manages to avoid looking in Veronica’s direction. She knows that if she so much as peeks at her from the corner of her eye, she’ll be struck dumb again. “Speaking of upset girls, are you…okay, B?”

The sudden melancholy dip in Veronica’s tone tempts Betty to look at her, but she stays put. “Of course I am. Why do you ask?”

She can hear Veronica shuffling closer towards her, and she nearly jumps out of her skin when she feels the warmth of her hand on her bicep. Betty has no choice but to look at her, now that she’s standing so close, and the combination of her half-nudeness and the scent of her lavender shampoo (Or perfume, she still can’t figure it out) almost knocks her off her feet. “What happened the other night, at Pop’s, when we were with Archie?” Her brown eyes are filled with worry, and guilt begins to painfully echo between the rungs of the blonde’s ribcage. “He said something was bothering you.”

“It’s just,” Betty quickly wracks her brain for a believable excuse, “I dunno, I’m still…kind of…” Veronica affectionately squeezes her arm and she loses footing for the billionth time in the past ten minutes. “Uh…”

“It’s okay,” The brunette is thankfully misinterpreting her bashfulness for reluctance. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

“I-I know.” The taller girl mumbles. “It’s…I still think about what happened with Chuck. I still can’t remember any of it, and it terrifies me, V. I don’t know what to do, I don’t know what to think of it. What if I’m…crazy? What if there’s something inside of me, something so dark and twisted, that the only things keeping it from taking over completely are the bottles of Adderall my mom keeps forcing me to take? What if she knew about this all along, and the reason why she’s such a monster is because she’s trying to keep me from becoming one too?” It’s a good excuse because it’s partially true; she does think about the incident from time to time, albeit not as much as she’s making it seem - probably because she’d rather not think about it at all. She tells herself that there are more pressing matters - Jason and Polly, and more recently, Archie and Grundy - but didn’t she promise herself that she was going to try to do things for herself more? Wasn’t this year supposed to be different?

But now she’s learning parts of herself she wished she never knew existed, and suddenly the idea of putting herself first doesn’t sound so great anymore.
Veronica hums for a moment as she thinks of what to say, but she doesn’t take too long. She skims her hand up her upper arm to her shoulder and gently tugs until they’re fully facing each other. The blonde doesn’t notice the tears in her eyes until Veronica reaches up to lovingly brush them away.

“You’re not crazy, Betty. You are so, so, so smart, and strong, and resilient - and I’ve never been so lucky to meet someone as stellar as you.”

She has a knockout body and a way with words. This girl really is going to be the death of her.

“Ronnie…”

The brunette pouts, and Betty inwardly groans at how perfect she is. “Don’t Ginny me, Betty Cooper. You definitely have your share of demons, and while you may not understand all of it just yet that doesn’t mean you’re past the point of no return.” Her expression softens. “We’re going to figure this out together, okay? And when we do, you’ll get the help you need, and you’ll get better. You’re not a monster. You never were and you never will be.”

Betty sniffles. “You mean you aren’t scared? You don’t think I’m a nutcase or anything?”

“Well, I’m not going to say you don’t have a problem, because you most assuredly do - but no, it’s not enough to ward me off.” The shorter girl’s thumb absently brushes the skin under Betty’s eye, and the lump that was previously lodged in the blonde’s throat magically reappears when she realizes Veronica’s hand has been pressed against her cheek this entire time. “Can I be honest with you for a second?”

“Yeah, sure.” Betty breathes; her head is swimming, and she has to fully press her back against the lockers because her legs are too wobbly to hold her up. Veronica’s hand cupping her face, Veronica’s bra just out in the open for her to gape at, Veronica’s lavender shampoo-or-perfume-or-whatever-it-is wafting into her airways, Veronica telling her she’s there for her no matter what, just Veronica simply existing and being in Betty’s orbit is delightfully overwhelming.

“In the past, when it came to comforting loved ones, I’d panic and flee the first chance I got.” Veronica finally drops her hand, but Betty isn’t out of the woods just yet; it returns to its spot on her arm and she can feel goosebumps rippling all the way down to her wrists. “Dealing with anything that even remotely involved emotions was too much for me, but…” Her eyes lower to the floor for a moment, but when she glances back up Betty’s chest caves in when she sees the affection practically bursting from her expression. “You make me want to try. You make me want to do better - to be better.”

Her heart is pounding, and she hopes Veronica can’t feel it. “You make me feel the same way.” Her response slips from her tongue so easily, almost automatically. They hold each other’s gaze for a moment, and all of a sudden it’s like time no longer exists. They’re suspended in this moment, in this old high school change room that kind of smells like mildew, but Betty can’t imagine herself wanting to be anywhere else right now.

After the heaviest fifteen seconds of Betty’s life, the brunette finally breaks the silence. “We make quite the pair, don’t we?” Veronica grins and quickly pulls away, and Betty’s able to breathe and function like a human being again. She doesn’t know what she meant when she referred to them as a pair, but if she puts any more thought into it she might get an aneurism. “Anyways, are you going to tell Archie about Jason and Grundy?”

That was a sudden change in topic; Archie’s apparently not the only one giving the blonde mixed messages. Betty clears her throat and tries to ignore the nagging voice in her head that suspiciously sounds a lot like Kevin. “I think it’s the right thing to do. It might get him to realize that Grundy’s just using him for whatever weird and probably messed up purpose she has.” She nods towards her bag. “I have a bit of a lead from that interview I had with her earlier. I’m going to do a bit of research
tonight and I’ll see what I can come up with.”

“I’ll help.” Veronica spins on her heel and makes her way back to her locker, and just when Betty thinks she’s finally going to put on a shirt she bends over and pulls her shorts down, revealing a pair of black panties even lacier - and therefore more translucent - than the bra. Betty steps back in surprise and the back of her head collides with the locker she was previously leaning against; she groans in pain as Veronica reaches into her gym bag for her skirt. She’s either the most oblivious person in the world or she’s too nice to point out how big of a fool Betty’s currently making of herself. “Lurking on social media is kind of a hobby of mine.”

“You need better hobbies.” The taller girl grimaces, reaching underneath her hat to rub the sore spot.

Veronica laughs as she steps into her skirt. After what seems like ages, she finally grabs her top and pulls it on - but now that Betty knows what she looks like without most of her clothes, does it really make a difference? “Are you sure you’re doing this for Archie, B? No offence, but you’re awfully fixated on a problem that has very little to do with you.”

Betty rolls her eyes as Veronica reaches for her heels. “Why do you think I’m doing this?”

“I think you already know the answer.” The brunette closes her locker and wraps her black cloak around her small shoulders. Both girls leave the change room together, walking down the hall towards the entrance of the school. “You said you weren’t going to catch feelings for him.”

“I haven’t caught anything!” The blonde exclaims as she opens the door, stepping aside so her companion can walk through first. “I’m just really worried about him. He’s my best friend, V, and aren’t friends supposed to help each other when they’re in a bind?”

“Yes, but he told you to trust him.” The shorter girl begins her descent down the front steps. “What you’re doing right now is the exact opposite of that.”

“Archie’s been getting himself in messy situations for as long as I’ve known him, and Jughead and I are usually the ones helping him get out of each and every one of them.” Betty explains as she buttons up her varsity jacket. “This is, by far, the messiest situation he’s gotten himself in - so it’s up to me to set things straight.”

Veronica raises an eyebrow. “Are you sure you don’t feel obligated to help because a part of you feels guilty for not being there over the summer, when it all started?”

Her words hit hard, and Betty’s thrown off for a second. She blinks twice, completely at a loss for words.

When she fails to answer in time, the shorter of the two smirks victoriously and crosses her arms. “I know how you work, Betty Cooper - much more than you think I do. So don’t even try to pretend that isn’t why you’re doing this, because I can sniff out your lies quicker than Jughead can sniff out a rancid burger patty.” She turns around with a flourish, designer bag swinging from her elbow. “I’ll let you know if I find any dirt on Grundy.”

She leaves Betty alone, standing by the sidewalk with her jaw slack and a terrified look in her eyes. If Veronica knows her better than she thinks, then that must mean she’s aware of the high-key ogling she was doing in the change room.

Goddammit.
“So,” Archie leans back against his seat, his eyes flitting between the blonde and brunette sitting across from him. “Are you guys going to tell me why you wanted me to meet you here at Pop’s after school?”

“Miss Grundy showed up in Riverdale a year ago out of thin air.” Betty gets right into it, leaning forward and opening the folder sitting on the table. “There’s no record of her before that - Facebook, her LinkedIn account…they were all created one year ago. Before that, she’s a ghost - she doesn’t exist.” Archie takes a few pages from the file and skims through them, but he doesn’t look convinced. Betty reaches into the folder and takes out an old newspaper clipping. “The only Geraldine Grundy I could find is an old woman who died seven years ago.”

The redhead squints at the article. “How…where did you find all of this?”


“And did you cyber-stalk Miss Grundy before or after you interviewed her for a fake article?” Archie’s eyes narrow. “Why are you doing this, Betty? I’m not in any danger.”

The blonde sighs. “You don’t know that.”

“Yeah, I do. I’m with her.” His tone hardens. “I know what we have, and you don’t.”

“She taught Jason Blossom.” Betty is getting more annoyed by the minute. Has this woman ensnared him so tightly in her grasp that he can’t see how obviously sketchy this whole situation is? “Did you know that?”

He shrugs his shoulders, completely unfazed. “She taught a lot of people, Betty. What’s your point?”

“My point is you don’t know anything about her, Archie. Doesn’t that worry you?” Her voices falters slightly, and she can feel Veronica’s eyes on her. “It worries me.”

His stare softens for a second, but it’s over as quickly as it comes. He shakes his head and gets up from their booth, dusting off his varsity jacket. “Betty, let this go. Don’t you have more important things to worry about, like your sister?”

She hates that he’s being so short with her, but she knows she has to keep trying. “Archie, please—”

“If you’re really my best friend, you’ll let this go.” He tosses a couple of bills on the table before storming out of the restaurant.

She can feel her eyes stinging with tears and her hands instinctively begin to tighten into fists, but Veronica catches her before any damage is done; the smaller girl reaches for her hands underneath the table and skims her fingertips across her palms - a silent reminder to calm down, to breathe. “Well, that went as smoothly as I expected.”

Betty lets out a watery laugh and she temporarily pulls away from Veronica to to wipe her tears. “Maybe he’s right. Maybe I should stop digging.”

“Now that doesn’t sound like my Betty at all.” Veronica shakes her head and immediately rejoins their hands after Betty’s finished; this, plus my Betty is more than enough to push the blonde dangerously close towards a panic attack. “You were right about her, B - there is something weird
about this. You did the research, you have the facts - Grundy’s clearly not who she claims to be, yet he refuses to face the music.” Unable to help herself, she grins. “Pun intended.”

“I wish I could talk to Jason.” The taller girl sighs; she can still feel Veronica caressing her palms and it’s causing her heart to flutter uncontrollably. “There are so many questions I need to ask him.”

“You can ask him when he gets back to you. I know it’s hard, but you have to be patient.” The brunette reassures her. She finally lets go of Betty’s hands and reaches for the basket of cheese fries sitting on the table. “This place has more plot twists than my mom’s telenovelas. You need a break from all of this drama, girl - Lord knows I could use one.”

Betty props her elbow on the table and rests her cheek against her palm. “Tell me about it.”

“Cheryl caught my mom talking to a Southside Serpent behind Pop’s one night.” Veronica suddenly blurs. She’s poking around the fries but not actually taking any of them. “I talked to my mom about it, and she managed to sidestep all of my questions.”

“What?” Sometimes Betty forgets that Veronica has her own share of problems, and every time she’s reminded of that she feels like the worst human being on the planet. This girl has been there for her more times than she can count, and how does she return the favour? “Ronnie, Southside Serpents are dangerous, they’re-”

“Kevin told me about them, yeah.” The smaller of the two heaves a sigh and runs a hand through her obsidian hair. “Having a criminal for one parent is one thing, but two criminals? I don’t know how much more I can handle.”

“We don’t know for sure yet.” Betty’s hand twitches; she doesn’t know if she should reach out to her or not. “Do you know what they were talking about?”

Veronica shakes her head. “No, and my mom won’t tell me. I’m beginning to suspect that there’s more to my dad’s arrest than I was led to believe. What if she was involved in whatever the hell he did that landed him in jail in the first place?” She groans, leaning back against the booth and closing her eyes. “I really wanted to believe that him getting arrested was a mistake and that he would come get us and we’d all go back to New York, picking up where we left off…but now I’m not so sure. Maybe they ran away to New York because back in Riverdale everyone knew all of their dirty secrets.” She laughs humourlessly. “There’s a very large possibility that my entire pre-Riverdale life is just a big, fat lie, and I honestly don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about it.”

Betty sucks it up and extends her arm, her fingers cautiously skirting Veronica’s wrist. The brunette doesn’t seem to mind, so she goes further and places her hand on top of hers. “You have every right to feel that way, Veronica, but I wouldn’t say your life in New York was a lie. There was no way you could’ve known what your dad did.”

“No, there wasn’t.” She agrees defeatedly. “Daddy never let me in on what he did when he was at work, and the office he kept at the Dakota was always off-limits. He’d stay there all night sometimes with the doors locked so I wouldn’t get in…and back then, I had no inkling he was doing anything illegal, so I never bothered to snoop around or eavesdrop.”

Betty’s never met Hiram Lodge in person; what she knows of him comes from the tidbits Veronica gave her and from the articles she read about him. Once one of the world’s most influential businessmen, he’s currently holed up in a penitentiary in Yonkers for fraud and embezzlement. Saying that he fell from grace is sugarcoating it, really; the FBI stormed into their luxury penthouse suite on the evening of their annual Fourth of July party and arrested him on the spot, right in front of his peers and his family. Newspapers all over the world had his mugshot as their front page the next
day, and the world hasn’t been kind to the Lodges since.

“Is there anything I can do?” Betty feebly offers. It’s not like she can reverse time or anything, but there has to be something.

“Just…” Veronica sighs dramatically, leaning in to rest her head against the taller girl’s shoulder; Betty stiffens at the contact, but it’s out of shock rather than discomfort. “Be here. With me.” She pulls her hand away from Betty’s so she can wrap her arm around her waist. “I feel like things are unraveling faster and faster, but when you’re here everything stands still…and for a moment, it’s like I can breathe again.”

And suddenly Betty’s overcome by an insatiable urge to kiss Veronica Lodge. The fact that the feeling is mutual, the fact that both of them feel like they’re the only stable thing in each other’s lives right now, is making her dizzy for some reason. They’ve only known each other for barely a month and the brunette has already laid claim on a gigantic portion of her heart. Betty wouldn’t call it love - because she downright refuses to admit that maybe, just maybe, Kevin might be onto something here - but whatever’s blossoming in her chest right now definitely isn’t platonic, and that’s the extent of what she’s willing to confess to right now.

Kissing Veronica isn’t the smartest option right at the moment (Logic be damned, The Kevin-sounding voice quips; she responds by mentally flipping it off and shoving it to the deepest recesses of her subconscious), so she opts for shifting her head so that her cheek is pressed against the brunette’s hair. Her words - Be here. With me. - whisper themselves over and over again in her ear, and Betty feebly swallows in a shallow attempt to rid herself of the lump in her throat.

“Of course, V. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Again,” Jughead complains for the umpteenth time, “Why me?”

“Because,” Betty glances over her shoulder to roll her eyes at him, “This is considered your punishment for keeping Archie and Grundy’s relationship a secret when you should have told someone about it - like me, or Principal Weatherbee, or Sheriff Keller, or literally anybody.”

“Why couldn’t you drag Veronica with you instead - or any other person who actually wants to be here?” He mutters back, shoving his hands into the pockets of his denim jacket and hunching his shoulders.

It’s nearly midnight on a school night and the both of them are tiptoeing down a quiet street towards a rusty old Volkswagen parked by the curb. Betty came up with the wild idea earlier in the day when she and Jughead were catching up on some editing in the Blue and Gold office; if she can find something that physically proves Grundy is a fraud, Archie will snap out of it and date someone his own age - like Veronica, for instance.

“Because I’ve already gotten Veronica more involved in this than she should be, and besides,” Betty approaches the car, cautiously eyeing the house it’s parked in front of; the lights coming from the front window are dimmed, but there doesn’t seem to be anybody inside. “This is sort of practice for the upcoming investigational work we’ll be doing for your novel. Be grateful you’re getting some hands-on experience.”

She unzips her backpack and pulls out a metal ruler, which Jughead warily stares at. “What are you
“Thank God she drives an old Beetle.” Betty ducks inside, leaning over to unlock the passenger door. “And you shouldn’t even be talking - you’re grateful that I fix cars with my dad. Remember that one time your dad’s truck broke down in the middle of nowhere, and you asked me for help?”

He rolls his eyes and slides into the passenger’s seat, childishly crossing his arms after shutting the door. “Before I become a bigger accessory to this crime, can I at least ask why you’re so hung up on this? You don’t have feelings for Archie anymore.”

“I don’t need to have feelings for him in order to see that what he’s doing is wrong.” She begins to feel around the dashboard, looking for anything she can use against Grundy. “I’m doing this because Grundy has Archie under some kind of sexual spell” Jughead makes an unpleasant face at the mention of the word sexual, “and he won’t listen to reason.” She flips open the vanity mirror, but frowns when she doesn’t find anything. “We’re looking for anything that proves Grundy isn’t as clean as she says she is.”

Sighing, Jughead relents and begins to search the glove compartment. “I know there’s more to this than you’re letting on. What’s really going on here, Betty?”

Instead of answering his question, she reaches towards the backseat and pulls out a small metal box with a lock on it. It almost feels like it was deliberately placed there so she could find it, but Betty’s too excited over finding out what’s inside to think about the consequences. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a bobby pin - because you can’t go sleuthing without one - and uses her teeth to bend it in a way so that it can fit inside the lock. When the box’s lid opens, the cheeky grin from earlier returns. “I learned that from the Nancy Drew Detective Handbook.”

Jughead rolls his eyes again. “This is what Veronica finds attractive?”

That was the figurative record scratch she needed to get her to stop what she’s doing. “Since when have you become such an expert on physical attraction?”

His nose crinkles. “Please don’t use that phrase in junction with me ever again.”

“It’s not like I was referring to you.” She grumbles. “Seriously, Juggie - I expected this from Kevin.”

“Look, I may not be the go-to person when it comes to the intricacies of the heart, but I’m also not an idiot.” He glances at her from the corner of his eye. “I know you’re bent on setting Archie up with Veronica because you feel bad that you can’t return his feelings, and a part of me thinks you’re obsessed with this Grundy thing because you’re desperately looking for a way to escape the guilt.” When Betty doesn’t answer, he nods to himself and continues. “You want to see him in a happy, healthy relationship with someone because it’s something he wants with you but you know you can’t give him.”

Why don’t Jughead and Veronica get along? They share the same interests in vintage pop culture and they’re both freakishly insightful. “Jug, I-”

“And, if I may add,” He presses forward, “Your budding feelings for Veronica are also reinforcing the guilt you feel with Archie - because, after finding out Archie loved you all along, you feel like you shouldn’t be allowed to have feelings for anyone else - so you try to pair them up in an attempt
to quell said feelings and guilt. Am I right?”

She hangs her head. “I hate you so much.”

Jughead’s wearing the victorious smirk Betty had on minutes earlier. “Bet that’s something you didn’t learn from the Nancy Drew Detective Handbook.” When he eyes her crestfallen expression he softens a bit. “I get what you’re trying to do, Betts, but you can’t force people to be together for the sake of being together - and don’t you think you’re being a little selfish by forcing Veronica on Archie so you don’t have to feel bad about not returning his feelings?”

He’s right, for the billionth time. “A little.” She admits, her cheeks burning with shame.

“To be honest with you, I don’t really have any advice - because, like I said, anything that involves feelings and human relationships is not my expertise,” He adjusts his beanie before continuing. “But I think-” He stops himself mid-sentence, his eyes wide.

“What? What is it?” Panicked, Betty’s eyes dart to the front door of Grundy’s house, but it’s closed and there’s no one standing on the front steps. She looks back at him and notices his eyes are pointed downward; he’s peering into the box sitting on her lap. She reaches in and finds what he’s gawking at: A driver’s license with Grundy’s picture, but the name printed next to it is unfamiliar. “Jennifer Gibson? Who the hell is Jennifer Gibson?”

“That’s not the only thing.” Jughead’s voice is so quiet she thought she imagined him saying it.

Betty peeks into the box and gasps; she reaches in with a shaking hand, and when she pulls out the shiny revolver her eyes are as large as her companion’s. She knew Grundy was full of secrets, but how bad must they be in order for her to feel like she needs to protect them with a goddamn gun?

“The gunshot-” Jughead starts, but Betty finishes his sentence.

“Jason. July Fourth. Sweetwater River.” Her mind is running a mile a minute. “She taught Jason before she taught Archie. Maybe she was following him.”

“He might have tried to tell someone, but Grundy found out and tried to stop him before he was able to.” Jughead tugs at the door handle and motions for her to do the same. “C’mon, we need to get out of here.”

Betty clumsily stuffs the gun into her bag and tosses the box in the backseat before clambering out of the car. She and Jughead scurry down the street, firing theories back and forth as they make their way back to the Cooper house. Is this was Cheryl meant when Jason told her that there was more to him escaping Riverdale with Polly? Did Polly know about Grundy’s…preference for younger men? What else does Jason know that compelled him to escape this town?

“Shit.” Jughead’s voice pulls her back to the present; they’re standing in front of her house, but Archie is across the street, just about to head inside his own. It looks like he’s just coming back from somewhere - was he at Grundy’s?

“Oh, God.” Archie spotted them; he groans and turns away, but Betty scrambles across the street and grabs him by the arm.

“Archie-”

“Don’t tell me you’re still on this crazy witch hunt.” The redhead jerks his arm away from her. “And you got Jughead involved too? You’re better than this - both of you are.”
“It’s not a witch hunt,” Jughead jogs over to Betty’s side. “And it isn’t crazy, now that we know for sure Grundy isn’t who she says she is.”

Archie narrows his eyes. “What the hell are you talking about, Jug?”

“Before you freak out,” Betty warns, “Let us explain everything first, okay? We were just in Grundy’s car—”

“What?” Archie steps back, appalled. “You’re telling me that you broke into and entered her car?”

“Yeah, and it’s a good thing we did.” Jughead crosses his arms. “We found a gun and an ID with the name Jennifer Gibson. It’s proof she’s lying to you, man. You can’t deny it.”

Archie’s features soften; it finally looks like he’s starting to realize that he’s making the biggest mistake of his damn life. “Then…who is she?”

“What if she had something to do with Jason?” Betty shrugs her shoulders. “She taught him, she made you lie about what happened that morning. We know she was at the river. She has a gun!”

“Well, none of that matters now, does it?” Archie sticks his hands in his pockets. “Jason isn’t dead.”

“Open your eyes, Arch.” Betty implores. “Jason was her student last year. He could have left Riverdale because of what she did to him.”

Archie rolls his eyes. “Okay, whatever her name is - she’s not a killer, and she definitely can’t be the sole reason why Jason ditched this place.”

“You didn’t ask her, did you? About her name, and why there’s no record of her before last year?” Betty presses forward, her eyes stinging. A part of her is beginning to think that Archie’s in too deep, that he’s already too far away for her to pull him out. “Why not?”

The redhead’s eyes flicker back and forth between his two friends. His mouth twitches as if he’s just about to say something, but he decides against it and moves past them so he can finally head up his front steps and into his house. Betty and Jughead eye his retreating form for a moment before turning to wearily stare at each other, knowing there’s nothing else they can do.

If Polly could suddenly surprise her with another phone call, that would be great.

With Archie avoiding her like the plague, Betty’s desperate for a distraction. Homework, softball, student council, and the Blue and Gold can only keep her sidetracked for so long. She even gets up a little earlier than usual every day in the hopes that she would run into him on his walk to morning football practice, but it’s yet to happen. He’s probably taking the longer route on purpose.

She doesn’t know how she managed to make it to the end of the week, but Friday rolls around and suddenly she’s sitting in Kevin’s truck with Veronica. It’s the Twilight Drive-In’s final night; Betty really isn’t in the mood for a movie but she already promised Jughead she’d be there, and what else does she have to do anyway? If it weren’t for this, she’d be spending the late hours sulking alone in her room.

The lot is packed, as expected, but after circling the place a couple of times they get lucky and find a
relatively good spot towards the back, close to the snack bar. After Kevin parks the truck and grabs a few snacks, the three of them hop into the back and huddle together with a few blankets - Veronica in the middle, with Kevin and Betty flanking her sides.

“Hey,” Kevin points at the screen, “It looks like Jughead went with your choice, Betty.”

As if on cue, the opening guitar riff to The Sound of Silence begins to play, and there’s Benjamin Braddock shuffling onto a moving walkway at the airport. Betty can picture Jughead sitting by the projector with that stupid smirk of his plastered across his face, and she can’t help but smile to herself. If only Archie was here to see this - then again, he probably never heard of this movie. He probably doesn’t even know who Dustin Hoffman is.

“I wonder why.” Betty can hear the smirk in Veronica’s voice, and the three of them chuckle quietly together.

The movie plays on, and when Ben is desperately trying to avoid his parents’ friends at his graduation party Veronica’s head drops to rest on Betty’s shoulder. The gesture is subtle, like when she did it at Pop’s, and Betty doesn’t think much of it at first, but a little later on she can feel the brunette’s arm shift underneath the blanket to loop around hers. Again, there’s very little to interpret behind the gesture so Betty tries not to think about it too much - but her proximity is overwhelming. She can feel Veronica’s warmth melting into her, and lavender’s all she can smell; she closes her eyes for a moment, allowing herself to fall into Veronica and everything about her.

Mrs. Robinson orders Ben to drive her home, and Veronica’s fingers begin to dance down Betty’s forearm, skimming past her wrist and ghosting across the indents on her palms. The blonde hitches a breath at the sensation of her fingertips playing along her skin, and her eyes dart to Kevin for a second in panic - but she remembers that the blanket is shielding all of this from him, and he seems completely engrossed in the movie, so there’s no way he knows what’s happening. By the time Mrs. Robinson locks Ben in her daughter’s room with her, fully nude, Veronica’s fingers have slid in between Betty’s. Their hands are fully joined now, with Veronica squeezing every so often, but her head is facing the screen, and her expression is stoic, almost like she’s unaware of what her hand is doing.

Betty feels Veronica shifting again, turning her body so that she’s facing her and not the screen, and the blonde is just about to glance downwards when Cheryl pulls up in front of them in her bright red convertible. She parks, steps out of the car, and impatiently places a hand on her hip; her eyes are staring straight into Betty’s. “Make some room, outcasts.” She climbs onto the truck bed and wriggles in between Betty and Veronica, forcing the duo to disentangle themselves from each other so Cheryl can sit in between. Did she do that on purpose?

Betty sits semi-awkwardly next to Cheryl, flexing her fingers underneath the blanket. The absence of Veronica’s hand in hers is leaving a strange tingling sensation on her palm, almost like an itch that won’t go away no matter how many times she scratches it. She can feel Cheryl staring at her out of the corner of her eye, but she pretends not to notice. She’s probably here to pester her about Jason and Polly again, and Betty honestly isn’t in the mood for that right n-

“Shh!” Kevin’s glancing over his shoulder, towards the snack bar. There’s a group of Southside Serpents horsing around by the folding chairs, where people can sit and watch if they don’t have a car. A few of the older members are laughing and talking obnoxiously, chucking beer cans and handfuls of popcorn at each other; only two or three of them are actually sitting and paying attention to the film.

“Southside trash.” Kevin lingers on the group for a few seconds, ducking momentarily as the Serpents toss a few kernels his way. When he realizes his scolding has gone unheard, he rolls his
But Veronica, who apparently doesn’t know when or how to back down, abruptly stands up and twirls around so quickly the flaps of her black cloak gracelessly flop against Betty and Cheryl’s faces. “Hey!” Aside from the fact that she isn’t a single centimetre taller than five-foot-two, she’s clutching a bag of red liquorice in one hand, which makes her look even less intimidating (At least to Betty, who actually finds it kind of adorable). “You know what happens to a snake when a Louboutin heel steps on it?” She accusingly jabs a stick of liquorice in the Serpents’ direction. “Shut the hell up, or you’ll find out.”

The other cars in the lot honk their horns in appreciation, and some people even holler and clap their hands. The brunette curtsies and mumbles a soft “Thank you,” before sitting back down, pulling the blanket back over her lap and angrily chewing on the end of her liquorice stick. Betty quickly glances back towards the snack bar; the Serpents don’t look pleased, but they’re abiding by Veronica’s rules and quietly settling down in their seats.

Okay, that was pretty hot.

“I cannot believe you just threatened a bunch of gang bangers.” Kevin’s staring at her in awe; meanwhile Cheryl looks bored out of her mind.

“I’ve dealt with worse in the East Village.” Veronica answers flippantly, casually shrugging her small shoulders. “I just hate when people disrespect my cinematic experience.” She keeps her eyes trained on Cheryl for a couple of seconds before quickly flitting over to Betty, then returning to the screen. The blonde’s collar suddenly feels like it’s closing in on her throat.

Cheryl steals a rod of liquorice from Veronica and begins to suck on one end. “Hey, Kev,” She grabs the empty bucket of popcorn sitting on his side and shakes it. “How ‘bout a refill? Cherry cola, as always.” That’s Cheryl for

Kevin has no choice but to oblige, so he rolls out of the truck bed and trudges towards the snack bar. The second he’s out of earshot, Cheryl leans forward to address the two girls - but Alice’s voice suddenly cuts clear through the air like a bullet, and she’s forced to keep her mouth shut.

“Mom?” Betty’s brow knits together as her mother storms over to the truck with a baffled-looking Fred Andrews not too far behind her; Veronica’s looking at the blonde with concern, and Cheryl looks like she’s about to challenge Alice to a fight.

“Elizabeth Cooper,” Every word coming from Alice’s mouth is dripping with venom. “You need to come with me right now.”

“What’s going on?” She shakes her head in confusion as Veronica’s hand dips under the blanket and makes its way towards her wrist; the surplus of physical contact in the past twenty or so minutes would have killed her right then and there if her mom wasn’t standing a few feet away, screaming so loud that Greendale could probably hear her.

“Why did I find a gun stashed away in your bedroom this morning?” Betty’s eyes widen, and her heart rate begins to climb. How the hell did she find it? “And that’s just for starters.”

“Okay, okay.” She gently brushes off Veronica’s hand and hops out of the truck bed, eager to quell the unwanted attention the rest of the drive-in is giving her right now. “I’m coming.”

“Do you need me to go with you?” The brunette’s voice is quiet enough so that only she can hear.

“No, no,” The blonde shakes her head as she dusts off her jeans. “It’s fine - I’ll be fine.”
signal with her eyes that she’ll explain when she has the chance. “I’ll call you later, okay? Enjoy the
rest of the movie…” Her eyes dart over to Cheryl, who’s stubbornly trying to watch the movie with
her arms crossed over her chest and her bottom lip sticking out in a childish pout. She almost wants
to laugh at her. “Or at least try to.”

“If you need me-” She can hear the brunette offer eagerly, and Betty calls out to her before her mom
drags her away.

“I know, V. I know.”

The tires on Alice’s station wagon skid to a stop by the front steps to the school. “Out. Let’s go.” She
orders briskly before pushing the car door open.

Betty, who hasn’t gotten a single word of an explanation since she was pulled away from the drive-
in, is trying to piece everything together. So her mom found Grundy’s gun in her room - okay, that’s
kind of a big deal, but why are they at school on a Friday night?

Alice tears through the main hallway, and Fred and Betty break out into a jog to catch up with her.
They turn a corner, and when Betty sees the door to the music room her heart almost stops. “Mom,
why are we-”

“Hold on, Betty.” Her mother wrenches the door open, barging straight inside, where Archie and
Grundy are just pulling away from each other in surprise. “Well, well, well - there they are.” Alice’s
grin is cat-like as she gestures towards Fred. “What did I tell you?”

Grundy looks like she’s about to faint. “Can someone tell me what’s going on here?”

“Of course.” Alice is more than happy to oblige; she turns to the redhead, whose jaw is practically
dangling from shock. “Archie, would you like to share with us what you and Mrs. Robinson have
been doing during your music lessons?” She makes quotation marks with her fingers as she utters
music lessons. “And please, don’t leave out any of the lurid details, because Betty here keeps a very
meticulous diary.”

Betty can feel the tears and the shame rushing upwards as she helplessly watches her mother ruin
everything yet again. She regrets suggesting The Graduate for the Twilight’s final movie, breaking
into Grundy’s car, and not listening to Archie when he repeatedly told her to let this go. How much
more damage is she going to cause? What is it going to take for her to realize that every time she tries
to help a loved one, she ends up ruining their life? What will get her to see that she leaves a blemish
on everything she touches?

She begins to tug at the sleeves of her flannel shirt because it’s the only thing keeping her nails from
digging into her palms. She silently mouths I’m sorry towards her best friend as her eyes well up,
and Archie helplessly glances back at her before swallowing hard and squaring his shoulders. He
opens his mouth to say something, but Alice speaks up again.

“Never thought that I would live to see the day.” She steps closer towards Grundy, her eyes
narrowing. “I thought the one thing we could keep our Riverdale safe from was child predators.”

“Miss Grundy’s not a predator,” Archie moves to stand beside Grundy, and the pain on Fred’s face
only makes Betty’s tears flow faster. “She’s a good person.”
“Archie, you don’t have to defend me.” Grundy, Jennifer, whoever the hell she is, mumbles.

“No,” Fred finally speaks, “He doesn’t.”

“Well, they’re not denying it, are they?” Alice is having a field day, and it’s making Betty sick to her stomach. Her mother is a monster. This is where she comes from. This is where she gets it. It’s hereditary, isn’t it? “They’re clearly guilty - we should take this to Sheriff Keller and let the wheels of justice take over.”

“Dad,” Archie pleads. “You can’t let that happen.”

“Son, it’s complicated.”

“She didn’t force me to do anything. I went after her.” Alice scoffs as Fred turns to gawk at her, and Betty can’t blame him. Why would she say such a thing? What is she implying?

“Why are you doing this, Mom?” She finally finds her voice, but it’s weak and shimmering with tears.

“This isn’t just about her.” Her mother shoots back. “This is about him.” She jabs a finger in Archie’s direction. “I want you to see what kind of person Archie truly is.” She steps towards him and pushes her finger against his chest, shoving him backwards. The look on his face is indecipherable, but it’s causing Betty’s chest to painfully contract and she isn’t sure how much more she can take of this.

“So that is what this is about?” Fred crosses his arms. “Your crazy grudge against my teenage son?”

Alice looks like she’s about to explode, but Betty grabs her by the arm and forces her to turn around so that they’re facing each other. “I’m never going to stop being friends with Archie, mom. Ever.”

“We’re done here.” Fred announces, but of course Alice feels the need to have the last say.

“Oh, we are far from being done here, Fred-”

“Stop,” Archie begs, “Stop, stop! Please.” He turns to face Alice, his eyes glazed over. “You’re right, Mrs. Cooper. You’re right. I’m selfish, and I’m stupid, and I don’t deserve to be your daughter’s friend - I don’t deserve to be her anything, actually.” He swallows and quickly steals a glance Betty’s way before returning to Alice; the gesture splits the blonde’s heart into tiny jagged pieces. “But please…don’t hurt Miss Grundy because you wanna hurt me.”

“This isn’t about hurting anyone, Archie.” Alice replies stiffly, and Betty has half a mind to intervene again but she’s just so tired of this, of everything. “It’s about doing what’s right - and of course, informing our neighbours.”

“Alice, I swear to God…” Fred chides, and Alice takes the bait.

“You swear to God what, Fred?” She glares at him, and despite feeling emotionally and physically drained of the entire situation Betty wills herself to step in between them.

“Publish one word about this, Mom,” She growls, “And I will tell everyone that I broke into Miss Grundy’s car.”
Her mother’s eyes widen. “Betty-”

She presses on despite the tears freely streaking down her cheeks, despite the flaring pain in her palms. “That I robbed her and made up the story of their affair. It will be like I finally…snapped. Like Polly.”

“Betty…” Alice falters at the mention of her older daughter, and for a second Betty thinks she’s finally broken through to her, that she finally has her where she wants her.

“It will prove what everyone already thinks about us.” She doesn’t know why, but she’s smiling. “Crazy runs in this family. Like mother, like daughter.” Maybe she’s finally accepting it. Maybe she’s finally coming to terms with the poison running in her veins, the disease that is the Cooper bloodline. “Mom, for the last time - I’m not Polly. Archie is not Jason - so stop using them as an excuse to control my life.”

Alice opens her mouth to say something, but when she realizes there’s nothing she can say she slips into a bewildered silence. The room is heavy - heavier than it already is.

“I’ll quit.” Grundy suddenly speaks up, breaking the silence, and everyone turns to stare at her. She takes a few unsteady steps forward. “I’ll quit my job. Will that satisfy you?”

Betty wants to say something, but she’s out of words for the night. She melts into the background, pressing her back against the wall. Her fists are clenched tightly by her sides, and she can feel the blood beginning to squeeze out of her wounds.

“She has to leave town.” Her mother says. Betty watches from her corner of the room; her eyes and cheeks are red from crying all night but her expression is stony. The detachment she felt from the night at Ethel’s pool house comes creeping back and suddenly she’s floating upwards, away from her body. She has a top-down view of the room now, and she can see herself standing away from the group, stiff and straight against the far wall like a statue as the remaining four continue to argue amongst themselves.

*Crazy runs in this family.*

“The hell she does.” Archie counters; his voice is faint and fuzzy, like she’s listening to him through a phone with bad reception. “Why does she need to leave town?”

“Because, son, it’s what’s best.” Fred’s voice is just as garbled and unclear. “And Alice will keep her word.”

“I will.” Her mother’s voice is growing fainter, like she’s moving farther and farther away - or maybe Betty’s the one moving? She can’t really tell.

*Like mother, like daughter.*

“I’ll pack my things,” Grundy makes her way towards the exit; there’s a faint ringing noise, and it crescendos until she can barely hear the second part of her sentence. “I’ll be gone by morning.”

“Miss Grundy.” Archie’s voice is the last thing she hears before the white noise completely washes over her eardrums, and everything fizzles out into an inky black.
When Betty comes to, she is lying in her bed, in her room, back at home. She raises herself on her elbows at first, rapidly blinking until her eyes focus. Her desk light is on, casting a warm orange glow on the powder pink walls, and it's deathly quiet.

She rewinds to earlier in the night, when she was at school watching her mom berate her best friend, and her heart stutters with panic. What happened after Miss Grundy left? Why can't she remember the ride home?

*Crazy runs in this family.*

The blonde rolls off her bed and claws at the dark space underneath, and when her fingertips brush against the tendrils of that dreaded wig she gasps and recoils as if it's going to suddenly spring teeth and snap at her. It's still there, which must mean she didn't use it. How could she, anyway? She'd have to somehow come all the way home, get dressed into whatever the hell she was dressed as when she was tormenting Chuck, then somehow head back to school. She wouldn't have had any time for that... and even if she did, would she even do it, especially when her mother was there? When Archie was there?

When Betty scrambles to her feet and reaches for her phone on her nightstand, she notices two things: Her pill bottle standing next to her phone, and that her hands are bandaged. She shakes one pill out of the bottle and pops it into her mouth before grabbing her phone and staring at the screen. It's a little past midnight, and Veronica apparently called her three times in the past hour. How long was she out? How long was she at school? Did her mom bandage her hands? Does Veronica know what happened? All of these questions are fluttering around her head and it's making her dizzy.

Her phone suddenly buzzes in her hand, causing her to jump in surprise. She just received a text message:

*I'm so glad ur okay.*

Betty instinctively moves towards her window, and when she spots her best friend's shock of red hair from his room across the street her shoulders relax and she lets out a watery laugh - because of course that's the first thing he says to her after enduring an entire night of getting his head bitten off by her mother. After being told that he's basically the worst person to exist on this stupid planet because he bears a slight resemblance to her sister's boyfriend, Archie Andrews texts her to say he's glad she's okay.

He's wrong - it's she who doesn't deserve to be his friend, to be his anything.

*I'm sorry for worrying you,* She sniffles as she texts back.

He shakes his head, wordlessly telling her that it's fine. *Wanna take a walk with me tomorrow morning? I'll explain everything, I promise.*

She knows that once she's ready to tell him the truth about herself and how she can't return his feelings, it's over, and she'll be all alone - but maybe it's better that way. Maybe she needs to keep her distance, because it's the only way she can protect him. The farther she is, the less likely she'll be able to hurt him again.

Maybe this is better for everyone else too - including Veronica.

*I want nothing more.*
She chokes back a sob before hitting Send.
“Oh my God.” Betty shakes her head in disbelief.

“Intense, right?” Archie tosses a baseball into the air but he fails to catch it; it tumbles onto the sidewalk and it’s just about to roll onto the street when Betty bends over to save it. Archie just informed her of two things: Grundy was trying to escape an abusive ex-husband, and that Grundy was with him the entire morning of July Fourth, meaning she wasn’t the one who fired the gun. “That’s why she has a fake identity and keeps a gun.”

“It still doesn’t make what she did to you okay.” She flicks her wrist, flipping the baseball bat in her hand so that its head is resting on her shoulder. She tosses him the ball, and he barely catches it on the tips of his fingers.

“She didn’t do anything, Betty. You have to accept that.” He absently kicks at a rock as they walk towards the end of their street. “I was all she had. She was alone and afraid.”

“You were in over your head, Arch. You were in this…relationship,” Her face sours at the word, “With this person who was cutting you off from everyone else in your life. Was hiding away from everyone the best thing to do - not only for your sake, but for hers?”

“I was going to deal with it, Betty.” His eyes harden, and she can feel her chest starting to ache again. “I wanted to do it on my own terms…” His gaze falters, and he sighs. “Not yours.”

The blonde swallows. “I’m sorry, Archie. I didn’t mean-”

“It’s okay.” When she doesn’t look convinced he shakes his head. “No, really, it is. It’s not your fault, Betty. You were only trying to help.” He raises his free hand to rub the back of his head, chuckling sheepishly. “Maybe, for next time, your next diary should have a lock.”

She can’t help but laugh at his attempt to lighten the mood despite still feeling like garbage for what happened the other night. That’s Archie Andrews for you - always trying to lift people up, even the ones who hurt him. His greatest strength and weakness is the ability to see the good in others. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

His expression softens. “And…you’re okay, right? You didn’t look so good after Miss Grundy left.”

Panic sends her pulse into a frenzy. “What do you mean?”

“I dunno,” He shrugs, “You just seemed really…out of it. You were quiet, and didn’t really talk much. It wasn’t like you at all, Betty. It worried me. I didn’t know you, um…” He nods to her bandaged hands, and her neck and cheeks begin to burn with shame. “It was stupid of me not to notice - we’ve known each other for so long, and-”

“Please don’t beat yourself up about it, Arch.” Betty steps forward and swings around so that she’s facing him. “I didn’t want anyone to find out…especially you. I didn’t want you to think I was crazy.
“Crazy?” Archie’s eyebrows are high on his forehead. “I would never, ever think that about you, Betty. Nothing in this whole world would make me do that.” She briefly thinks back to the night at Ethel’s pool house, and she almost wants to laugh. *I sincerely doubt that.*

He begins to reach out to her, but decides against it at the last minute and shoves his hand into the pocket of his jeans. “I didn’t wrap them too tight, did I?”

Her eyes are so wide that they actually hurt a little. “You were the one who did this?”

He flinches. “Do you mean that in a bad way?”

“N-no!” The blonde frantically shakes her head. She can feel the guilt bubbling inside of her, rushing up her chest and stinging her eyes with unshed tears. Why does he keep treating her the way she doesn’t deserve to be treated? Why can’t she love him the way he wants her to? “I actually thought my mom did this for me.”

“You mean you don’t remember me doing this?” He blinks a couple of times as he tries to process this. “After Miss Grundy left your mom dropped my dad and I off at the drive-in so we could get our truck back, and then she told us to take you home because she didn’t want anything to do with you.”

Betty’s mouth is slightly agape from shock. This is news to her; she tries to think back to the events of last night, but anything after the confrontation in the music room is a thick black block of nothing. “I…I don’t remember that at all.”

Archie frowns; his eyes are sad, almost hurt, and the guilt intensifies. “We brought you to our place first so I could fix your hands…but you kind of just stared into space the whole time. You didn’t seem to hear anything I was saying, and you didn’t answer when I tried talking to you.” He shrugs and looks away, possibly out of embarrassment. “So I took you home and uh, I helped you into bed. I wanted to make sure you were safe before I left you.” He takes his hand out of his pocket so he can run it through his hair. “I didn’t want to sleep until I knew for sure that you were alright. Honestly, after all the stuff that went down last night, I wasn’t able to sleep anyway.”

“Archie…” She can feel the tears coming, and she hates herself for it.

“Hey,” He smiles for her, but it’s not the full-bodied boyish grin she knows so well; it’s tired, worn out. Defeated. “You don’t have to say anything. I haven’t been the greatest friend to you recently and I will never forgive myself for that, but all of that stuff with Miss Grundy - it’s over now. I’m moving on, and I’m going to start by being there for my friends - the people who really care about me,” He gestures towards her. “Like you and Jug.”

She was so determined to distance herself from him and her other friends after last night’s events, but the second she saw Archie standing by her front door with that lopsided smile of his earlier that morning she realized that it would be near impossible to keep herself away from him. Not only is he physically close almost all the time - he lives across the damn street, for Pete’s sake - but Betty can barely remember what life was like before he was a part of it. They have been best friends nearly all their lives; why should that stop now? And if it really has to end - and it will, she’s pretty sure it will, once she tells him the truth about her feelings - she would like to hold onto him for as long as she possibly can. With everything that’s been happening lately - Polly, her mother, Veronica, the issues with her mental health that she’s trying very hard to avoid - she’s desperate for something good, and Archie’s chock full of it.

She drops her bat onto the grass so she can step forward, wrap her arms around his waist, and press
her forehead against his shoulder. “Why are you so good to me, Archie Andrews?”

His chest rumbles with a shy chuckle, and when he hugs her back she can’t help but sigh. If only things turned out differently.

Both the bat and the baseball are lying on the lawn now, completely forgotten.

When Betty returns home after spending the morning with Archie (How did he survive little league for so many years? That boy should not be given a bat under any circumstance) she finds a note for her on the fridge; apparently her mother is out for the week on a “Women and Journalism spa retreat” and is expecting her to “monitor her own behaviour while reflecting on her actions from the previous night”. She throws her head back to laugh as she crumples the note into a ball, laughing even louder when she dumps it into the trash can.

A part of her wants to call Veronica but she opts to call Jughead instead. She needs a distraction - a productive distraction, and she knows if she calls Veronica she’s going to waste the whole afternoon stuttering and stealing glances like some kind of lovesick moron. That girl has got her under some sort of weird spell.

“Veronica’s going to be upset that you didn’t call her.” Jughead, for some reason, won’t let this go. They’re at the public library riffling through some old newspapers and records, trying to find anything on the Coopers’ and the Blossoms’ so-called feud.

“She’ll be fine.” Betty insists, awkwardly clearing her throat as she squints at a faded photograph. “What’s a weekend apart going to do? Plus, I can play it off like I need space or something.”

“A weekend can do a whole lot when you’re attached to someone.” He’s glancing at her from the corner of his eye.

“And you would know this…how?”

“Because I’m surrounded by people who have the capacity to be romantically attached to others, and so I learn by observing them.” He rolls his eyes and sets down his magnifying glass. “Look, just because I don’t have the ability to form… intimacies with people doesn’t mean I’m completely clueless about it. That’s not how it works.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Betty mutters, absentmindedly flipping through a newspaper that’s much older than she is. “I just…well, how does it work, exactly?”

Her question catches him off guard; Jughead raises his head from the newspaper clipping he was analyzing, his blue eyes wide and the corners of his mouth turned downwards in a contemplative frown. His forehead crinkles with thought as he tries to give her a clear answer. “I’ve never had to explain it before. I don’t give it much thought, to be honest.”

She raises an eyebrow. “You don’t?”

He turns to her. “Do you?”

“Uh, well…” Betty leans back against her chair and glances around the room to make sure no one else is within earshot. “I did, a lot…when I first found out. It was all I could think about, actually. I
still think about it every now and then—"

“Because of Veronica.” He interjects, and when her cheeks flare red he smirks triumphantly.

“Is it really that obvious?” She groans as she presses her forehead against the table in shame.

“Yes, but back to what I was saying—” Jughead begins to twirl his magnifying glass in between his fingers. “-you have something to think about, whereas I don’t have much at all. There’s something there for you to contemplate.”

“But there must be something.” Betty lifts her head. “You love your parents and Jellybean, right? And you love Archie and me.”

He crosses his arms. “Of course I have the ability to love - I’m not a robot, Betty.”

She ducks her head, embarrassed. “Sorry.”

“You’re fine.” He dismisses her apology with a shrug. “There are a billion different ways to love someone, and I’m capable of all of them except for the romantic and the physical kinds.” He shrugs again. “That’s all there is to it, really.”

She blinks a couple of times as she tries to process this. “So you’ve never, ever, had a crush on anyone?” When he shakes his head, she tries to dig deeper. “Not even thought about having a crush, or wanting to be with someone in the romantic way?” He shakes his head again. “You’ve never passed someone in the halls one day and thought to yourself, Wow, they’re cute?”

He snorts at this. “No, I have not, and I sincerely doubt I ever will - but I’m okay with that. It’s just the way I work.” He reaches for another newspaper and begins to flip through it. “If you think about human sexuality as a spectrum, where each colour represents a different kind of attraction, I’d be in the grey. Does that make any sense?”

“A little.” Betty cants her head. “But what’s life without a little colour?”

“Grey is a colour.” He smirks. “The full spectrum is incomplete without it.”

He has a point there. “What if you just haven’t found the right person?”

“Who says I’m searching?” He pauses on a page and hovers his magnifying glass over one of the photos. “I have all the love I need from you, Arch, and my family. I don’t need anything more.”

“But, er…people like you…they can still date and fall in love if they really wanted to, right?”

Jughead continues to scrutinize the photo, not even pausing to look up at her. “Asexuality is just as multifaceted as the rest of the spectrum, Betty. Some of them may choose not to partake in a romantic relationship, but it doesn’t necessarily mean they can’t do it at all. Same thing applies to physical relations. Grey comes in many shades, just like any other colour.”

“So you could, if you really wanted to.” She scratches her cheek with her index finger. Maybe she should do more research on the sexuality spectrum, because this is sounding a lot more complicated than she thought.

“Yes, technically - but I’ve never experienced nor desired it, and I’m comfortable with the possibility that I never will - in fact, I enjoy it. It makes things less complicated, and the less complicated life is the better. I mean, look at you and Archie.” He makes a mock disgusted face, and she can’t help but giggle and roll her eyes. “I can’t imagine how horrible it is to be dragged around by your hormones
all the time.”

“Very funny.” She leans towards him so she can have a better look at the picture he’s analyzing. “Did you find something?”

“I think so.” He points at the line of text underneath the photo. “There’s a Cooper listed here, and a Blossom. I think this guy might be your great-grandfather.”

The photograph contains two men standing in front of a farmhouse. Betty can’t really tell who’s who, since she’s never seen a picture of her great-grandfather before, and the lack of colour in the photo makes it even harder to tell. She squints at the text that Jughead’s pointing at, and her eyes widen. “The founding fathers of Cooper and Blossom Maple Farms?”

Jughead hands her the magnifying glass so she can get a better look at it. “Blossom Maple Farms was established over a hundred years ago. It’s probably older than Riverdale…but not once have I read or heard of Cooper and Blossom Maple Farms.”

“So my great-grandfather and Cheryl’s great-grandfather were in the maple syrup business together at some point.” Betty shifts the magnifying glass to the faces in the photograph, hoping to get a sense of familiarity with either of them, but to no avail. “But it’s obvious that my family is no longer in it…so something must have happened between them. My great-grandfather must have given up his half of the business for one reason or another, and started the Riverdale Register afterward.”

“And that reason might be why Jason and Polly are the new Romeo and Juliet.” When Jughead eyes the alarm on Betty’s face he quickly backtracks. “Without the tragedy, of course.”

“There has to be some sort of explanation somewhere.” Betty takes a photo of the article with her phone so she can refer back to it later. “It would’ve been reported in the paper or something, right?”

“Maple syrup was Riverdale’s main source of income in its early days, so I think your great-grandfather suddenly calling it quits would be a big enough deal to have it published.” Jughead agrees as he pulls a stack of old records towards him. “These are organized by month and year, so we should go through each one.”

The duo get right to work, splitting the stack right in the middle and dividing it between them. After twenty minutes of scanning through the different newspapers Betty finds exactly what she’s looking for. “Oh my God.”

“What?” Jughead scoots to her side and glances over her shoulder to read the paper she’s holding, and his eyes go wide as he reads the headline out loud. “Maple Syrup Mogul Dead at 34.” He squints at the block of text written underneath a large photograph of a group of police officers standing forlornly around a body covered in a white sheet. The photo appears to have been taken inside a barn or stable. “Charles Henry Cooper, the former half of Cooper and Blossom Maple Farms, was found dead this morning by his business partner, Jasper Issac Blossom, in what appears to be a freak accident.”

Betty shakes her head in disbelief. “The rest of the article goes on to say that one of the syrup barrels on an upper shelf somehow got loose and rolled off, hitting him in the head and killing him instantly.”

“But why would the name of the company change?” Jughead continues to look through the rest of the newspapers to see if he can scrounge up anything else. “Don’t you think Jasper Blossom would’ve kept your great-grandfather’s name to honour him and the business they built together?”
Betty didn’t think of that. She thoughtfully rubs her chin as she watches Jughead sift through the newspapers. “So you don’t think this article is telling the whole story.”

“I know you come from a family of journalists, Betty, so I apologize in advance for this - but since when do newspapers ever tell the whole story?” Jughead grabs his laptop and quickly types a few lines of notes.

The blonde raises an eyebrow. “You have an idea. What is it?”

“I’m going to see if the library keeps an archive of coroner’s inquests.” He shuts his laptop and shoves it into his bag. “If they don’t, I’m going to the sheriff’s office. There has to be an autopsy report for your great-grandfather lying around here somewhere, and I’m going to get my hands on it one way or another.” He stands up and begins to organize the newspapers and records they were analyzing together.

“And what am I supposed to do?” She helps sort through them, placing them into the boxes they came in.

“Let me worry about this.” Jughead assures her as he places a lid on one of the boxes. “You have enough on your plate right now.” He grabs the box Betty was sorting and stacks it on top of the one he was organizing. “Call Veronica.”

“What does calling Veronica have to do with this?” Betty groans as she grabs the last box and follows him to the front desk. They drop the boxes off and thank the librarian before Jughead walks her to the entrance.

“Nothing, but I’m one hundred percent positive that not calling her will bite you in the ass,” He pushes the door open and holds it for her. “So you should probably do it.” He places his free hand on her shoulder and gently shoves her out of the library, closing the door behind her before spinning on his heel and walking back inside. Betty gapes at his retreating form for a second, but gives up by throwing her hands in the air and storming back home.

“Looking good, Cooper.” Kevin lets out a low whistle, and the blonde playfully rolls her eyes before raising a hand to brush the bangs to the side of her face. She decided to try a slightly newer look for Monday: Instead of her usual high ponytail with every strand pulled back, she went with a looser ponytail that sits on the nape of her neck. She let her bangs loose too, allowing them to cascade over her forehead. “Veronica won’t be able to resist.”

The mention of the brunette’s name sends a hot blush to Betty’s cheeks. “Do you think she’s mad at me?”

“For getting dragged away by your mom on your cute little movie date - which I was a willing third wheel to, by the way - and then ghosting her for the rest of the weekend?” Kevin scrunches up his forehead in thought. “Nah, ’course not.”

She sighs and closes her locker. “She didn’t walk with us to homeroom.” Veronica always meets Betty by her locker first thing in the morning so they can walk to class together, but she wasn’t there this time.

“I’m sure she has a perfectly good reason.” Kevin reassures her, patting her shoulder as they make
their way towards a door around the corner that leads them to the field.

“Jughead told me to call her.” Betty shakes her head. “He told me to call her because if I don’t, it’ll come with consequences, and I hate that he’s always right. How is he always right? How does he know these things? Is that stupid hat of his clairvoyant or something?” She shakes her head again; it’s obvious she’s talking to herself. “That has to be it. How else would he know?”

“You’re freaking yourself out, Betts.” Kevin opens the door for her, and she walks through. “Just tell her the truth - tell her that there was just a lot to process, and you needed some time to yourself. She’ll understand.”

They’re approaching the bleachers now, and the closer they get the harder Betty tugs on the sleeves of her denim jacket. She can see Veronica sitting with Archie, Jughead, and - she squints at first, but when her suspicions are confirmed her eyes widen with surprise - Valerie Brown?

“Hey,” Veronica glances up from her box of fries as the duo move to sit next to the redhead, but her eyes are trained on Kevin. “I was just asking Archiekins here what life’s like in a PG world.” When everyone glances at her in confusion, she nonchalantly plucks a fry from her box and drops it into her mouth. “PG: Post-Grundy.” She grins. “What, too soon?” Her body is angled specifically so that it’s facing Archie and Valerie, which means she would have to turn her head to acknowledge Betty - something she hasn’t done yet. Betty’s not even sure if the Hey was meant for her.

The blonde drops her gaze and notices the flash cards in Archie’s hands. “Coach Clayton says I have a shot at being varsity captain,” He shrugs. “So I’m not thinking about anything else right now.”

“Are you sure you’re not just throwing yourself into football as a way to avoid your feelings?” Veronica asks, and Betty wants to glance over her shoulder to look at her, to just let her know somehow that she’s sorry for avoiding her for the past few days, but for some reason she’s too afraid to.

“I’m not avoiding anything, Veronica.” Archie mumbles. “I’m just trying to get my life back on track.”

“I can help with that.” Valerie pipes up, and the group turns to look at her. It’s weird seeing one Pussycat without the other two close behind. Since when did Valerie hang out with Archie? “I know Miss Grundy was tutoring you-”

“Understatement of the year.” Veronica jokingly interjects, and Jughead and Kevin suppress their chuckles. Betty twitches, nearly turning around to give her a mock glare, but decides against it at the last second.

“But there’s this amazing songwriter from New York who’s an adjunct at Carson College.” Were Valerie’s eyes always such a lovely shade of green? And her skin…does it feel as smooth as it looks? “Incredible mentor. He does some coaching on the side, and I told him about you. You wanna meet him?”

Archie looks flabbergasted (And so does Betty, but for a completely different reason). “Yeah, I’d love to…but football-”

Snap out of it. Betty clears her throat and smacks her best friend’s arm. “No - Archie can, and he will.” When the redhead blinks at her, she smiles at him. “This is a great opportunity, Arch. You can’t pass this up.”

Valerie pulls a scrap piece of paper and a pen from her pocket. “Call him if you want, but do it
soon.” She quickly scribbles in a number and slips the paper into the breast pocket of his jacket. “His spots fill up fast.”

“Thank you, Val.” He pats his pocket and smiles at her before she stands up to leave. He turns to Betty and amusedly shakes his head. “What was what for?”

“Grundy may have been your music teacher, but your memories of her shouldn’t stop you from pursuing your passion.” She can feel Veronica’s eyes on her and she swallows hard. “At least give it some thought, okay?”

He chuckles and nods, putting his flash cards away. “Alright, but only because you said so.”

She’s about to say something back when Cheryl appears out of nowhere with a stack of black envelopes. “Sorry to interrupt, Sad Breakfast Club,” She quips as she begins to hand out the envelopes, “But I’m here to formally invite you to Jason’s memorial at Thornhill this weekend.”

Kevin raises an eyebrow. “But your brother isn’t.”

“Riverdale doesn’t know that.” Cheryl cuts him off with a glare, but her anger dissipates quickly and is replaced with what actually looks a little like panic. “Mommy and Daddy are going to call off the search.” Her eyes flit over to Betty, and the blonde’s heart begins to race.

“Wait,” She can hear Veronica from her seat behind her. “Why are they calling it off?”

“It’s been over a month,” Archie fiddles with his envelope. “They might have just given up on finding the body.”

“Or they might have found out where he and Polly are hiding.” Betty’s voice is hollow, and her fingertips are twitching over her palms. Veronica’s eyes are practically burning holes into her back. “We have to talk to them…but her phone, I don’t know-”

“Use a payphone.” Jughead suggests. “It’ll be harder to trace, at the very least.” When Betty moves to get up, he lunges forward and grabs her by the arm. “Whoa, whoa, wait. Not now.”

“And why not?” Cheryl crosses her arms. “This is nothing short of an emergency, you hobo.”

“He’s not a hobo-” Archie begins to protest, but Betty cuts him off.

“She’s right - this is an emergency. If the Blossoms know where Jason and Polly are hiding, that means they’re in danger.” Betty stands up and breaks out into a jog towards the school. “We have to warn them.”

“Betty-” Veronica’s voice nearly freezes her in place but the mounting panic inside of her urges her to surge forward. There are a couple of payphones by the front entrance; thank God Riverdale High hasn’t gotten a renovation in over fifty years.

She skids to a stop in front of the first payphone she finds and stuffs her hand into her pocket for a quarter. After slipping the coin into the slot she picks up the receiver and quickly dials Polly’s number. Her heart is thudding so loudly in her ears she can barely hear the phone ringing.

“I’m sorry, but the number you have dialled is not in service. If you would like to-”

Betty slams her finger on the hook, and when her quarter tumbles out from the hatch she catches it and shoves it into the slot again before re-dialling Polly’s number.
“I’m sorry, but the number y-”

“No,” Betty reaches for the hook again. “No.” The intercept message plays for the third time, and she hits the hook. “No, no, no, no…” Her free hand tightens into a fist as she dials Polly’s number for the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh time.

“I’m sorry, but-”

The tears are dripping off the end of her chin by the eleventh time. Betty presses on the hook again, and again, and again, and every time the intercept message replays her eyes burn with more tears.

“Betty.” She turns around and finds Archie standing not too far away, his brow creased with worry. When he spots the tears on her face he extends his arms to her, and she defeatedly drops the phone, leaving it dangling just inches above the floor by its cord, and crumples against him. She sobs into his shoulder, lifting her head briefly to take a breath, and her eyes lock onto Veronica, who’s staring back at her from a few feet away; her mouth is slightly agape and her eyes are sad.

Before Betty can utter a single word, the brunette throws a small, hopeless smile in her direction before turning to leave. She chokes out another sob, which Archie thankfully misinterprets.

“It’s gonna be alright.” He murmurs as he comfortingly pats her back, but she finds that incredibly hard to believe.

With absolutely no way of contacting Polly, Betty spends the rest of the week in a constant state of anxiety. Jason’s “memorial” is happening in a couple of days, she has no idea why the Blossoms suddenly called off the search, and it’s driving her insane. She isn’t sure if this is a good thing, but Cheryl isn’t doing much better, and both girls have found an affinity with each other - that is, when they aren’t butting heads, which seems to happen almost all the time.

“So you’re telling me that Great-Granddaddy Blossom started Blossom Maple Farms with your great-grandfather?” Cheryl’s sitting on the corner of Betty’s desk at the Blue and Gold office, flipping through a rough copy of an article Jughead wrote about a girls’ volleyball game that happened last night.

“Jughead and I found some old newspapers at the library.” The blonde reaches into her bag for a folder, which she tosses in Cheryl’s direction. “It was originally called Cooper and Blossom Maple Farms, and it stayed that way up until my great-grandfather was killed in an apparent freak accident.”

Cheryl opens the folder and finds scans of the articles Jughead and Betty were looking at a few days ago. She rifles through them with one perfectly sculpted eyebrow raised high on her forehead. “Daddy never mentioned anything about a joint partnership - and with a Cooper, of all people.”

The blonde rolls her eyes. “Thanks.” Her eyes dart to the doorway, foolishly hoping Veronica would stride in with that ridiculous cloak of hers and a sarcastic word or two about how no one reads newspapers anymore, but she knows she’s only kidding herself. “This partnership has to be the source of this stupid blood feud - Charles Cooper suddenly dying and Jasper Blossom removing him from the company name can’t be a coincidence.”

“So what are you implying?” Cheryl narrows her eyes and throws down the folder. “That my great-grandfather had something to do with your great-grandfather’s death? Are you saying Jasper
Blossom murdered Charles Cooper?"

“Well,” Betty frowns, “No, not exactly, but-”

“Of course you’d try to make it look like my family’s the only guilty party.” The redhead scoffs and lifts herself off Betty’s desk, brushing off her skirt. “The next time you want to accuse the Blossoms of ruining your life you should at least back it up with hard evidence.” When Cheryl pulls the door open she nearly collides with Jughead, who’s just making his way in. “Out of the way, Boresythe.”

“Did you find anything?” Betty notices the dark half-circles under Jughead’s eyes; he looks more sleep-deprived than usual.

“I did,” He digs into his messenger bag and tosses a folder onto her desk. “But it’s not very informative - which only raises my suspicions.”

Before Betty can even think of reaching for it Cheryl snatches the folder and opens it. “A coroner’s report?”

“On Charles Cooper,” Jughead points to the folder. “But take a look at it. There’s something fishy about the way it’s written.”

Cheryl lets out a dramatic sigh before falling silent to skim through the report. It takes her about five seconds to read it through, and when she finishes she closes the folder and wordlessly hands it over to Betty. The blonde stares at it for a couple of seconds before slowly taking it from the redhead; she opens it with a shaky hand, anticipation jumping around inside her in a frenzy, and begins to read it.

She was wondering why it didn’t take Cheryl very long; it only has one page, and the coroner didn’t write more than a handful of sentences. “This only says that the body has a single laceration to the back of the head…and nothing else.” Betty takes the single page and flips it around, even though she knows there’s nothing to read on the other side. “It doesn’t sound like they were very thorough.”

“I told you my great-grandfather had nothing to do with it.” Cheryl huffs.

“But a coroner’s report is usually a lot more detailed than that, even if the cause of death is obvious.” Jughead shakes his head. “They have to call out every single thing that looks out of place.”

“And there wasn’t anything out of place, aside from the fact that there’s a hole in this guy’s head because a barrel fell on him.” Cheryl quips. “Case closed, mystery solved.”

“No,” Betty’s still staring at the report, as if looking at it long enough would somehow make more words appear. “Jughead has a point. It sounds like the coroner’s being vague on purpose. Something doesn’t feel right.”

“So you’re insinuating that the person responsible for poking around your great-grandfather’s corpse is lying.” Cheryl deadpans.

“That has to be it.” Jughead reaches into his bag again and pulls out more photocopies of old newspapers. “According to a few eyewitness reports, Jasper was the last person who saw Charles the day before he died. After the working day was done they closed shop together, went to the local pub for a drink, then parted for the night.” Jughead reaches under his beanie to scratch his head. “The next morning, Jasper headed into work, business as usual, and noticed Charles wasn’t in the office, so he headed into the barn to see if he was there…and that’s when he found his body.”

“You think Jasper Blossom killed him.” Cheryl’s tone is icy. “Watson here already made that accusation. Try again.”
“Who else could it be?” Jughead shrugs. “Jasper was the last person seen with him. They were
business partners, so that gives him a motive. Maybe he got greedy and wanted all of the profits for
himself, or-”

“If you think my family would sink down to Lodge-like depths, you’re mistaken.” The redhead
snaps. “And for the last time, the coroner’s report said nothing about a murder. It was obviously just
an accident.”

“But Cheryl,” Betty’s shuffling through the different photocopies, pretending she didn’t hear the
insult made towards the Lodges. “It kind of adds up. If your great-grandfather really murdered mine,
wouldn’t that be the perfect set up for a blood feud? It could explain why our parents hate each other
so much and why they can’t stand seeing Polly and Jason together.”

“And the Blossoms have always been an influential family in Riverdale.” Jughead points out. “They
could have easily bribed or worked with the police to cover everything up.”

“Okay, so let’s pretend for a moment that this actually happened.” Cheryl crosses her arms. “How do
you explain the newspaper reporting it as an accident? The Blossoms were never associated with the
Register.”

“The Riverdale Register used to be the Riverdale Gazette.” Jughead explains. “The Coopers
changed the name once they took ownership of it...which, interestingly enough, happened almost a
year to the day Charles Cooper was found dead.”

Betty frowns as she digests this new bit of information. Her family always talked about their
association with the local newspaper as if they founded it, but apparently that isn’t the case. Why
would they hide this from her? “Who owned the paper before?”

“A family I’ve never heard of until recently - the Merriweathers.” Jughead gestures towards the stack
of photocopies Betty’s holding and points to the one on top; the headline reads MERRIWEATHER
GOLDEN GIRL MAKES RIVERDALE DEBUT and below it is a photo of a snooty-looking family
in lavish gowns and suits. In the middle stands a young woman with a stare so cold Betty can’t stand
to look for too long. “After Charles’ death the family sold the paper to the Coopers, left town, and
dropped off the face of the earth. I couldn’t find much on them, except for the fact that they came
from old money - which means they were insanely rich - and helped fund the town in its early days.”

“I guess there aren’t any living descendants around here.” Betty mutters, and when Jughead shakes
his head she sighs. “Well, if they suddenly sold the paper to my family and ditched town, that must
mean they’re involved in Charles’ death somehow.”

“Yeah.” Jughead agrees. “Sounds like they bailed for a reason.”

“So maybe they killed him.” Cheryl shrugs. “Maybe they killed him and blamed Jasper for it, bribed
the police to lie in the autopsy report, and then covered it up in the newspaper to save face.”

“That is also a possibility.” Jughead rubs the back of his neck. “I’m going to have to look through the
archives again and see if I can dig up anything else. I don’t know where we can find any other
clues.”

The idea strikes Betty like a lightning bolt; she abruptly stands up, nearly knocking her chair over.
“There’s one other place we can look, but we’re going to need to work together.” She locks eyes
with Jughead, then shifts over to Cheryl. “All three of us.” When the other two glance expectantly at
her she continues. “Thornhill has been here nearly as long as Riverdale has been around, right?
Every Blossom that ever lived in this town lived there, including Jasper. There has to be something
of his lying around somewhere, maybe a journal or something. I know you have to have some family heirlooms, Cheryl.”

“Jewelry, blurry photos, and a pocket watch, but I can’t fathom why my family would bother keeping a stupid journal.” Cheryl huffs. “Though…I guess there might be something in the attic. God only knows what’s lurking up there.”

“Then that’s where we need to search next.” Betty concludes. “I can guarantee we’ll find something useful there.”

“Great idea, Velma, but how exactly are you going to snoop around in my attic without my parents knowing?”

“Your brother’s memorial is this weekend.” The blonde nervously tugs at her sleeves, knowing right off the bat that this is a bad idea. “Your parents will be distracted with that, right? So while they’re pretending to mourn their not-dead son, that gives us an opportunity to look around.”

Jughead takes a moment to think about Betty’s suggestion. “I mean, it’s not exactly disrespectful, seeing as Jason is still alive…”

“And, um,” Betty turns to Cheryl, pulling so hard at her sleeves the fabric is beginning to stretch. “I was wondering, maybe, you could help distract your parents while Jughead and I look. If you went with us, it would only raise suspicions, and I know you’re probably thinking of a way to turn this down because why would you let us snoop around your own house without you, especially when you don’t think Jasper killed-”

“Consider it done.” Cheryl’s flat response shocks the both of them; Betty and Jughead’s eyes widen as the redhead shifts her weight onto one leg and places a hand on her hip. “Look, I’m only agreeing to do this because A: I can’t pass up an opportunity to aggravate my parents on behalf of my brother, and B: I want answers as much as you plebs do. Don’t think I’m doing you any favours.” She nonchalantly flips her hair behind her shoulder and swings around to leave the room. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, there’s a Vixens-only sleepover happening at chez moi tomorrow night and I need to prepare for it.”

“Vixens-only?” Betty blinks as Veronica’s face flickers into her head. She can feel heat rising in her cheeks but it’s not the same kind of warmth that comes up when Veronica’s around, or when Kevin calls her out on staring at Veronica for too long; it’s burning, almost searing, and it’s making her want to tighten her hands into fists.

“Are you deaf?” When Cheryl reaches the doorway she half-turns to roll her eyes at the blonde. “The invitation was strictly extended to members of the cheer squad. No Bulldogs-” She briefly squints at Betty’s baseball cap, which is sitting on her desk next to her laptop. “-allowed.”

“So for this weekend,” Jughead calls after her as she finally exits the Blue and Gold office. “How will we know when it’s okay to go to the attic?”

They can’t see Cheryl anymore, but they can definitely hear her; her voice echoes down the hall so loudly and clearly it’s as if she’s standing right next to them. “Trust me, you’ll know!”

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Ever since Cheryl mentioned that Vixens-only slumber party at Thornhill, Betty’s been dreading
Friday night. It was impossible to stay focused in class, because every time she saw Veronica, Cheryl, or another River Vixen the only thing she could think about was Veronica surrounded by girls, probably tipsy, in lingerie lounging around in Cheryl’s room. Mind, she’s never seen Cheryl’s room before, nor is she sure if any of the girls have even worn lingerie (Do cheerleaders sleep in lingerie at sleepovers? She’s not exactly sure how this works), but the image pops into Betty’s head regardless and it’s driving her crazy.

Okay, maybe the thought of just Veronica in lingerie isn’t so bad, but the thought of her in lingerie and Cheryl, of all people, being the only person to see it is what’s driving her crazy.

“You’re in deep.” Kevin remarks on the morning of Jason’s faux memorial; he and Jughead are in Betty’s room, watching her fuss over her reflection in the mirror.

“Shut up.” Betty groans as she adjusts her bangs. She spent all night worrying about the sleepover and ended up not sleeping at all, so now she’s trying to hide how tired she looks. “It’s bad enough we haven’t really talked for an entire week.”

“That’s kind of your fault.” Jughead butts in as he fails with his tie for the billionth time; Kevin sighs and begins to do his tie for him. “I told you to call her, to talk to her-”

“I know, I know,” Betty grumbles. “But when do I ever listen?”

“Never.” Kevin answers as he finishes the knot; Jughead stands up to check himself out in the mirror, and his eyebrows rise with surprise when he sees that Kevin tied his tie in a perfect Windsor knot. “But that isn’t your priority. You and Jughead are on a mission - a suicide mission, if I may add.”

“Nothing’s gonna happen.” The blonde reassures him as she anxiously tugs at her black dress. It feels like it’s too tight in some places and too loose in others; she’s not exactly sure if the dress no longer fits or if her anxiety is just making her body do crazy things. “We’re just going to slip in, take a look around, and slip out. It won’t take any longer than ten, maybe fifteen minutes.”

“Anything that risks incurring Penelope and Clifford Blossom’s wrath is a suicide mission to me, even if you are getting Cheryl’s help.” Kevin stands up and moves towards Jughead so he can adjust the lapels of his jacket. “Hold still, dammit - behind every well-fitting suit is a perfect gentleman.”

“I don’t want to be gentle for anybody.” Jughead squirms away and reaches in the inside pocket of his jacket for his beanie, which he fits on his head despite Kevin’s protests. “Thornhill has hundreds of secrets and I’m pretty sure a few of them are related to Charles Cooper’s murder. Betty and I have to find them.”

“Are you kids ready?” Hal shouts from downstairs. The trio shuffle out of Betty’s room and make their way out of the house so they can pile into Hal’s car. Betty’s surprised her father decided to go to the memorial in the first place, but every time she tried to ask him why he always found a way to avoid answering her directly.

It’s a short and quiet ride to Thornhill; the atmosphere is dreary and solemn even though Betty knows there’s not much to be dreary and solemn about. If anything, she’s anxious over not knowing where Polly and Jason are. She still can’t shake the feeling that the search was called off because the Blossoms figured out where they were hiding. Why else would they stop looking?

The Blossoms went all out with the decor even though it’s a fake funeral: There are bouquets of fresh flowers at every corner - some provided by them, some donated from their friends and colleagues - and pictures of Jason during various stages of his life are hung all over the walls of the
parlour (The fact that Thornhill even has a parlour is a testament to how old it is). Hal immediately detaches himself from the kids the second they step into the room, heading straight to the minibar; Betty, Jughead, and Kevin find Archie sitting with Valerie by one of the front rows. There’s a casket at the head of the room, closed shut.

“Do you ever take that thing off?” Kevin remarks as he takes a seat to Archie’s right side, wrinkling his brow at the redhead’s varsity jacket. Betty glances down at Archie’s lap and notices he’s holding a football jersey - Jason’s jersey.

“I’ll be right back.” Archie rises to his feet and makes his way over to Penelope, who’s talking with some guests. Betty and Jughead take their seats in the row behind Archie; the blonde takes a quick look around and notices Cheryl and Veronica are nowhere to be found.

Jughead elbows her ribs. “Look.” Betty turns to see Archie talking to Penelope; he hands over Jason’s jersey, and Penelope stares at him, her expression almost awestruck. She murmurs a few words Betty can’t hear, and then she reaches towards Archie, stroking the side of his face with her hand. The blonde blinks a few times, not really sure how to process what she’s seeing; in seconds Archie’s back in his seat, looking like he’s seen a ghost.

“Did she just touch your hair?” Kevin asks, looking just as disturbed as the rest of the group.

Betty shakes off her discomfort and reaches out to touch Archie’s arm. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” He glances over his shoulder to give her a halfhearted smile. “I just…I felt like I had to do something. I know Jason’s…you know, but…” He shrugs his shoulders, not really sure what to say. “A part of me feels responsible for what happened. I was there that morning, I could’ve helped him somehow. I could have helped your sister. Maybe-”

“Don’t blame yourself.” Valerie places a hand on his shoulder. “There was nothing you could have done. You had no idea any of this was happening.”

“Because I was so caught up in stupid things, things that didn’t matter.” Archie visibly tenses up, and Betty’s heart aches for him. “I should’ve…I could’ve done something.” He shakes his head, and Valerie extends her arm so that it’s wrapped around his shoulders. He leans against her, and it almost looks like he’s relaxing under her touch.

Jughead and Kevin glance at each other, and Betty joins in. She knows what they’re thinking, because she’s thinking the exact same thing: When did this happen? When was this a thing? Is it even a thing? Are they just friends? How much did Archie tell her about Polly and Jason? Do the other Pussycats know?

Veronica steps into the room, but she isn’t with Cheryl or any of the other Vixens. She gives Penelope a brief smile before joining the rest of the group, taking the seat next to Betty, with surprises the blonde.

“I know this is just for show,” The brunette murmurs, “But it kind of puts things in perspective, doesn’t it? Makes you thankful you’re still alive.”

She’s acting like Betty hasn’t been avoiding her for the past few days. The taller of the two has no idea to respond, but she quickly wracks her brain for something to say. “Um, how was the Vixens sleepover?” Really? That was the only question you could come up with?

“Well,” Veronica cants her head to the side but keeps her eyes trained on the casket, “For starters, it wasn’t a Vixens sleepover - it was a Vixen sleepover, as in I was the only other River Vixen there
aside from Cheryl.”

Betty furrows her brow. “She invited other girls that weren’t on the cheer squad?”

“Nope.” The shorter girl’s lips pop on the p, “I was the only girl invited, period.”

That flaring, unexplained anger from that day in the Blue and Gold office returns with a vengeance, its flames licking the blonde’s insides. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.” Veronica shakes her head, and all Betty can smell now is lavender. “When she invited me on Monday she made it sound like the entire squad was coming, so I agreed. It was nothing short of a weird nightmare - straight out of a Tim Burton movie. For a hot minute I was wondering if Beetlejuice would show up if I said his name three times.”

*Monday?* Cheryl asked her to this sleepover days ago, and Veronica’s only mentioning it now. Why didn’t she tell her?

The blonde is just about to ask, but she’s cut off by an organ playing and the sound of people shuffling towards their seats. Veronica abruptly leaves her spot and moves to sit farther up, in the very front row. The gesture confuses Betty, and for some reason she feels a little hurt. Why did she do that? Did she sense that she was upset over not knowing about the invite? Was Veronica somehow able to read Betty’s mind and figure out she’s getting jealous over absolutely nothing?

Wait, who said anything about being *jealous*?

Jughead nudges her again, and she turns to see what he’s staring at; Hal and Clifford are speaking with each other by the minibar, but their conversation doesn’t appear to be a friendly one: Both men look frustrated with each other, and while Betty can’t make out what they’re saying she can hear the briskness in their voices. Clifford exchanges something short and clipped with Hal before stomping off to join his wife by their son’s empty casket at the front of the room; Hal watches Clifford at first, exasperated, and downs his drink in one gulp.

There are way too many things happening at once, and Betty can feel the anxiety creeping back. She’s beginning to feel a little overwhelmed by everything: The entire town gathered in Thornhill to mourn someone who may or may not be dead, Cheryl lying about this *Vixens-only* sleepover, the possibility that Polly might be in grave danger, Veronica arriving at Thornhill the night before only to find out she was the only one invited, Hal and Clifford exchanging what appears to be not-so-nice words with each other, Veronica keeping her solo sleepover with Cheryl from her, this stupid blood feud, Veronica being forced to spend an entire evening with the Blossom family by herself, this mysterious Merriweather family that no one knew about until Jughead stumbled across their names in an old newspaper, Cheryl and Veronica spending the night together, Cheryl and Veronica sharing the same room, Cheryl and Veronica sharing the same bed…

A collective gasp rolls over the entire room, which forces Betty’s thoughts to a standstill. Everyone in the audience is staring at something towards the back: Cheryl’s making her way down the aisle, completely decked out in a white dress and matching veil. In all honestly, it really shouldn’t be that big of a deal - what’s a colour to a “dead” person anyway? - but people will always be slaves to tradition, and so the entire town gazes at her as she makes her way towards her brother’s casket. Penelope looks like she’s trying very hard not to march over to her daughter and slap her across the face, while Clifford looks like he wants another drink.

“Yes.” Kevin murmurs excitedly.

“Oh my God.” Veronica whispers as Cheryl ghosts past her. Betty’s hands begin to tremble.
“Welcome to Thornhill.” Cheryl takes the podium and smiles at Riverdale, acting as if she’s talking about something as casual as the weather. “Thank you all for coming. If you’ll kindly take your seats, I’d like to start the memorial with a few words about Jason.” She briefly drops her gaze, and it looks like her bottom lip is trembling. She’s really going out of her way to make this believable.

Penelope twitches in her seat, but Clifford restrains her. Veronica turns her head to face them and utters, “You’re only going to make things worse.” Out of the corner of her mouth. Penelope glares daggers in the brunette’s direction, and Betty’s insides twist painfully.

“The last time I saw Jason,” Cheryl begins in a weak voice, “I was wearing this dress. I know it’s impossible, but I swear…when I put it on,” She half-smiles at his portrait, which is sitting next to his casket, “It feels like he’s in the room with me.”

Focus on the memorial. Focus on Cheryl. She’s going to let you know when it’s safe to go to the attic. Betty can feel her fingernails pressing into her palms but she’s trying her hardest not to let them cut into her skin; she’s gritting her teeth, clenching her jaw so tight it’s starting to hurt, and she’s struggling to figure out why she’s so angry in the first place. Is it the context of this fake memorial? Is it the fact that the Blossoms might know where Polly and Jason are? Is it because she can’t entertain the notion that there are others who need Veronica the way she needs her?

You can’t own a person. Her conscience chides as she fails to keep her eyes trained on Cheryl, instead allowing them to linger on the back of Veronica’s head. She isn’t yours to claim.

“Even though we were twins,” Cheryl continues, “I used to demand that I have my own birthday party - and so one year, out of the blue, Jason convinced me we had to combine them into one. It wasn’t until years later I found out why.” Cheryl’s voice begins to break as tears rim her eyelids. “It’s because no one wanted to come to mine, and Jason didn’t want me to know.” She sniffs as the tears begin to fall; Betty can no longer tell if she’s faking it or not. “He protected me every single day. I wish that day at the river, I protected him.” Cheryl places a hand on the casket, and a few tears drop onto its shiny surface. “I’m so sorry, Jay-Jay.” Betty’s chest caves in when she realizes that maybe Cheryl’s crying because she, too, is hysterical over not knowing why the search has suddenly been called off. Cheryl’s lost as much as she has at this point, arguably even more. Whereas Betty has her friends, Cheryl has no one. Jason is all she has left, and now she doesn’t even know if he’s alive or not - and to top it all off, she’s supposed to act like he’s already dead. At least Betty can still act like there’s still hope. “We failed you. All of us.”

Veronica’s chair scrapes against the floor as she vacates her seat, rushing over to Cheryl so she can catch her in a comforting hug. The redhead presses her face against Veronica’s neck and her arms tighten around the smaller girl’s waist, and Betty’s filled with rage all over again. She knows she shouldn’t be feeling this way, she knows it’s not right, but why isn’t she doing anything to stop it? It’s not like she enjoys getting angry over something so stupid, so trivial - and the worst part is she’s well aware there’s a very simple solution - Just go up and talk to her, for God’s sake - but she has no desire to do it and she has no idea why. For reasons unknown to her she’s content with making things more complicated.

Penelope hurriedly takes the podium. “I think we’ll adjourn now to the winter salon for a light supper.” The room gradually roars to life again as people leave their seats. Cheryl and Veronica are still embracing by the casket; the redhead briefly lifts her head off the brunette’s shoulder and locks eyes with the blonde. She shifts her head slightly, subtle enough for Betty to get the signal but not so much that Veronica notices.

“Hey.” Jughead whispers, and Betty forces herself to listen. “I think that’s our cue.”

She follows him through the crowd, leaving the room and making their way towards the main
staircase. It’s incredibly busy, making it easy for the duo to sneak upstairs undetected. Now that she
has a task to complete, she can force herself to focus on that instead of how stupid she’s being.

“How do we even get up to the attic?” Betty whispers as she runs her hand down the wooden
banister; she wrinkles her nose in disgust when she finds a thin layer of dust coating the pads of her
fingers. “Cheryl never told us.”

“We can worry about that later.” Jughead is poking his head into one of the rooms. “We should
search here first - it’s Jason’s room.”

The blonde raises an eyebrow, glancing over her shoulder to make sure they aren’t being followed.

“Why?”

“Polly isn’t the only reason why he left Riverdale. He must’ve left behind something that’ll at least
give us an idea as to what those other reasons might be.” He turns the doorknob and opens the door
slowly, cringing when the hinges creak. He lets Betty inside first before he steps in and closes the
door, glancing around. “Check under the bed, his desk, the closet - anywhere that might look like a
hiding spot.”

Jason’s room has been left untouched since his disappearance, and judging by the stale odour it
smells like that door hasn’t been opened since he left. Betty drops to her knees to check under the
bed while Jughead rummages through some drawers. They overturn the room in silence, checking
every nook and cranny, but they come up short.

“Well, at least we can say we tried.” Jughead shrugs and turns on his heel to make his way towards
the door, but he freezes mid-step.

“Hello.” Rose Blossom, Cheryl’s grandmother, had somehow made her way into the room without
either of them noticing.

Startled, Betty backs up, accidentally knocking into Jughead. “I, uh-”

Rose’s ancient wheelchair groans as she approaches them; one of her eyes is sightless and milky, but
Betty has this strange feeling that she’s staring into her with that one eye and it’s freaking her out.
“Oh, it’s you.” She smiles. “How lovely to see you again. Why are you still here? You should’ve
been together by now.”

“The horror,” Jughead whispers into the blonde’s ear, “The horror…”

“Shut up.” Betty hisses out of the corner of her mouth before throwing Rose an awkward smile.
“I’m so sorry, we were just leaving-”

“Come closer, Polly dear.” Rose beckons Betty with a bony hand. “Why haven’t you left yet? Was
there a change of plans?”

The mention of Polly’s name gives Betty an idea: If Rose thinks she’s her sister, maybe she can get
more information. Betty moves to sit on the corner of Jason’s bed, and her breath gets caught in her
throat when Rose quickly takes her hands in her own. That woman is cold to the touch. “Uh, yes,
slight change of plans. I, um, I’m going to meet him tonight, actually.”

“It’s a good thing you’re not wearing it.” Rose taps Betty’s left ring finger; it’s obvious she’s talking
about the engagement ring. “Don’t tell Penelope I gave it to you or she’ll likely come and snip it off
your finger.” She imitates a pair of scissors with one hand and Betty gulps. “You keep it close to
your heart, always.”
“T-thanks, Nana Rose.” Betty glances over her shoulder for a split second to helplessly stare at Jughead. When he shrugs in response, she returns her gaze to Rose and tries to put on another smile. “Um, did Jason leave anything behind that I should bring with me? Maybe…maybe he forgot something? Something important?”

“That’s why I followed you here, dear.” Rose’s tone is indignant, as if she expected Betty to know this. “That boy has always been a bit forgetful. Got it from his mother’s side, of course.”

“So there is something important.” Betty leans in a little closer. “Can you tell me where it is?”

Rose drops her gaze to her lap, and for the first time Betty notices the old shoebox with a single rubber band wrapped around it to keep it shut. Rose takes the box into her frail hands and holds out to the blonde; Betty takes it and swallows hard. “Is that for me?”

The old woman’s nose gets even wrinklier as she turns it up with disgust. “I told him to keep it somewhere safe, somewhere away from prying eyes. I told him to keep it with him at all times, but he refused. Said he wanted to leave everything behind, including the secrets.”

The shoebox suddenly feels like it’s made out of lead. There’s something inside that made Jason want to leave town, and it’s important enough for the Blossoms to want to hunt him down for. The blonde gulps again and dips her head in a polite nod. “Thank you. I’ll be sure to give this the second I see him.”

Rose nods back, and Betty and Jughead scurry out of the room as quickly as they possibly can. “Holy shit.” Jughead wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. “She was giving off serious horror movie vibes.” When the blonde thrusts the box into his hands his eyebrows knit together with confusion. “Don’t you want to look inside first?”

Betty suddenly feels queasy all of a sudden. The box and whatever’s in it doesn’t seem so appealing anymore. There was something about Rose Blossom that threw her off, and she can’t exactly figure out what it is. “You should do it first. Searching Jason’s room was your idea.”

“Yeah, but-” As the duo descend the stairs, they nearly bump into Veronica. Jughead quickly hides the box behind his back, but Betty knows the brunette’s already seen it. “Oh, hey.”

Veronica’s staring downward, where Jughead’s hands used to be. “What were you two doing?”

“Nothing.” Betty shakes her head, though she knows lying is only going to make things worse. “Nothing important.”

“Don’t lie to me, Betty.” The shorter girl crosses her arms. “Look, I know Ason’sjay otnay eadday, but don’t you think snooping around during a memorial is kind of messed up?”

Her words spark a flame within the blonde. “Since we’re on the subject of lying, why didn’t you tell me about the sleepover you had with Cheryl?” She had no idea why those words came out of her mouth. It’s not like she wanted to say them, but she did anyway. Why is she making things harder for herself?

Veronica’s eyes narrow and she lets out a dark laugh. “You disappeared for an entire weekend without any explanation, so I don’t think I owe you one. Why does it matter to you anyway? It’s not like I interrogate you on your little adventures with Jughead and Archie.”


“When you conveniently forgot you owned a phone last weekend, I asked him if he saw you.”
Veronica’s tone is annoyed. “He told me you and him spent Saturday morning together, and then you hung out with Jughead afterward.”

“Okay, so?” The girls are so immersed in their argument by now that they didn’t even notice Jughead slipping away with the box. “Archie wanted to talk about what happened with him and Grundy, and Jughead and I are trying to figure out why Jason and Polly wanted to leave Riverdale in the first place. We’re trying to fix things!”

“You’re trying to fix things by ransacking a dead boy’s room and pretending I don’t exist?” The brunette rolls her eyes. “I tried to call you last weekend. I texted you. You never replied. I was worried sick!”

There’s guilt pooling inside of her, but her stubbornness is holding firm. She doesn’t know why, but she feels the need to win this fight. She has no excuse for ignoring Veronica an entire weekend but for some reason a part of her thinks she needs to prove the brunette wrong somehow. “We don’t even know if he’s—” Betty quickly lowers her voice once she realizes she’s yelling, “—dead or not, so don’t try to pull that on me.” Why is she arguing? Why is she trying to pick a fight? Why is she doing this? “You know what? I don’t need to have this conversation right now.”

“Oh, what a coincidence, because neither do I.” Veronica spins on her heel and leaves, and Betty’s thoughts are running a mile a minute as she watches her disappear into the crowd.

Wait.

Don’t go.

I’m sorry.

I don’t know why I snapped at you.

I’m an idiot.

Come back.

“Veronica—” She utters and reaches out, but she’s already gone.

The ride home was awkward, as she expected. Hal didn’t have much to say about the memorial other than “I just wanted to pay my respects”, and not a single word more. He’s currently outside, fiddling under the hood of his car; he asked Betty if she wanted to help but she’s in no mood to do anything with anybody right now. The only good thing about today is that old shoebox, which she’s sure Jughead is currently rifling through at this very moment. Maybe she’ll give him a call later, if the overwhelming desire to disappear goes away.

Still clothed in her black dress, the blonde closes the blinds on her window and crawls into bed, folding her hands over her stomach and glancing up at the ceiling. She replays her argument with Veronica over and over in her head, trying to figure out why she felt the need to pick a fight with the brunette in the first place. There was no rhyme or reason for it, other than the fact that she was stupidly jealous over something that probably never happened. The rational part of her believes that Cheryl invited Veronica over that night because she needed moral support. It could’ve been Tina or Ginger or any of the other Vixens who blindly worship the redhead, but it ended up being Veronica -
and it’s probably because Veronica just so happens to be really good at offering moral support to people who need it. There’s no way there could have been an ulterior motive.

So if this is the real reason why Cheryl invited Veronica over, why is she so angry about it? It’s not like Veronica isn’t allowed to comfort anyone else. She’s allowed to do whatever the hell she wants. Betty has no control over her, and it should be that way - so why does she feel like she should have control? The thought scares her, and she feels half-compelled to reach for the pill bottle on her nightstand.

There’s a soft knock at her door; Hal opens it by a crack and pokes his head in. “Hey, kiddo. How’re you holding up?”

Betty can’t help but feel a little suspicious. “Fine, I guess.” She keeps her eyes on the ceiling, counting the little glow-in-the-dark stars she and Polly stuck onto it when they were younger.

She feels the foot of her bed sink as Hal sits on it. “You haven’t said a thing since we got home. Is everything okay?”

“Jason and Polly were engaged.” Maybe if she forces herself to talk about something else, even if it's something she's not in the mood to discuss, she won’t have to think about Veronica. “Did you know that?”

There’s a fit of strained silence. “Yes.”

This prompts Betty to bolt upwards and gape at him. “Is that what you and Clifford Blossom were talking about?”

Hal turns away from his daughter, but his voice is stern. “That is none of your business.”

“Yes, it is my business.” Betty raises her voice, incredulous over the fact that her parents knew about this the whole time. They knew about Polly’s pregnancy, about her engagement, but they never told her. Why? Why does everyone else seem to be one step ahead of her? “Why didn’t you tell me? Tell me what’s going on, Dad.”

Hal sighs and shrugs his broad shoulders. “Clifford and I were arguing because he and his filthy clan came this close to destroying our family.” There’s another bout of silence as he begins to wring his hands. “Your little friend Cheryl’s great-grandfather murdered yours, Betty.”

She’s suddenly having flashbacks to that morning in the library. So she and Jughead were right…but how does Hal know? “Why?”

“The same reason they do everything - greed and hate. They were in business together, selling and trading maple syrup - and one day, Great-Grandfather Blossom decided that he didn’t want to share the profits, so he murdered my grandfather in cold blood.”

“That’s why you hated Jason? Because of some blood feud that happened before you were even born?”

“They stole our livelihood, Betty,” Hal snaps. “And I’d die before I’d let them steal my daughter too.”

“You don’t know where she is and you don’t even care!” Betty yells back. “She’s been missing for months and you and Mom haven’t done a single thing to find out where she might be.” She sniffs as the tears spring to her eyes. “Don’t act like Polly disappearing is breaking your heart, Dad, because I know it isn’t. You hate that Polly and Jason were together and I know a part of you wishes
she wasn’t your daughter.”

“Polly’s sick.” There’s venom dripping off of Hal’s words now; he stands up, his fists curled by his sides. “Jason made her sick, and she’s never coming home.” He promptly leaves her room, slamming the door on his way out. Betty stares at the door for a few seconds before jumping out, flinging the door open and rushing down the stairs. She grabs her heels and leaves in a hurry, not really knowing where she’s going, but she’s overwhelmed with the desire to get as far away from the house as possible. She rubs her biceps as she crosses the street, regretting not bringing a jacket, and when she sees the park at the end of the sidewalk she crosses over to the grass and plops down on one of the swings, curling one arm around one of the chains and dejectedly staring at the sand under her feet. She closes her eyes and tries to force her brain to shut off, to stop thinking about everything that happened today, but it’s impossible.

She doesn’t know how much time has passed, but a little while later there’s the sound of chains groaning; someone has taken the swing next to her. When she turns her head to see who it is, she’s surprised to find Cheryl, still clad in her white gown. The redhead is staring straight ahead of her; there are streaks of mascara running down her pallid cheeks from when she was crying earlier. “You had to get away too, huh?”

Betty returns her gaze to her shoes. “My dad told me that your great-grandfather murdered mine. I don’t know how he knows…but I’m going to find out. Jughead and I went to investigate after your signal and we found something that might give us hard evidence.”

“I saw you coming down the stairs.” Cheryl affirms as she kicks at the sand with one foot. “It was a box, wasn’t it? What was inside?”

“I don’t know.” Betty admits. “Jughead has it now.”

“Ah, yes,” Cheryl nods. “I saw him barely escaping with his life from your lover’s spat with No Name Brand Paris Hilton.”

The blonde’s cheeks begin to burn. “We’re not-”

“Who are you trying to kid here, Betty?” Cheryl rolls her eyes. “Anyone with a working set of eyes can see you’re holding so many torches for Veronica Lodge that it’s a miracle you haven’t burned to death yet.”

“Is it really that obvious?” Betty groans and throws her head back to defeatedly stare at the sky. “Kevin and Jughead have been telling me the same thing for weeks now.”

“I’ve known you were a useless lesbian since the dawn of time, but if I tried to explain it we’d be sitting here for the rest of eternity.” When Betty tries to protest Cheryl plows on. “And don’t try to talk yourself out of this because you’re only going to make yourself look stupider. Speaking of stupid, you were reaching so far for a reason to argue with your crush I was almost worried you were going to dislocate your arm.”

“We wouldn’t have fought if you just told her the truth. Why didn’t you tell her she was the only person invited to your sleepover?” Betty asks meekly; she wants to be angry but she’s more embarrassed than anything. “Why didn’t you invite Tina or Ginger, or any of the other River Vixens?”

“I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t have come if I told her she was the only person I invited, but it ended up being a good thing, anyway.”
Betty's chest painfully contracts as her mind goes through the different reasons why Veronica and Cheryl having a one-on-one slumber party might be *a good thing*. “What do you mean?”

"Turns out I wasn't the only person who needed to get a few things off her chest. It was a bit annoying, I'm not going to lie, but she wouldn't stop whining about how you never answered her texts and calls last weekend. And, to answer your previous question, she and I wanted to put an end to our differences and at least try to be civil with one another.” Cheryl pauses for a moment, biting her bottom lip. “And because I couldn’t invite you over without worrying about whether or not my parents were going to slit your throat in your sleep.”

Betty’s at a total loss for words, both at the fact that Veronica spent the bulk of the slumber party openly worrying about her and Cheryl wanting Betty to be in Veronica's place. “You wanted it to be me?”

“Tina and Ginger weren’t the ones who came to my rescue that night at the pep rally, but since you weren’t a viable option your girl was the next best candidate.” Cheryl shrugs, and Betty's heart flutters at *your girl*. “We’re sisters-in-law now. I’m going to have to learn to tolerate you eventually.”

That's Cheryl's way of saying *I think of you as a friend*. Betty smiles to herself and turns to glance at her. “Thanks, I think.”

“Thank me when you finally come to your senses and talk to Veronica like a grownup, instead of throwing a fit over nothing.” Cheryl begins to rock her swing back and forth. “You don’t have the right to be jealous over someone who isn’t yours.”

That last bit hits Betty hard. “I know.” She toys with her hands, running her thumb over the marks on her palm. “I’ll…I’ll talk to her. I promise.”

“You better.” After a few seconds of silence the redhead looks away and mutters under her breath, “I'd be lying if I told you I didn't ship it just a little bit.”
Chapter Summary

Chapter title is taken from "Betty" by The Pom Poms.

*Crack.* The ball smashes face-first into her bat and it’s sent soaring into the early morning sky. Her breath, short and laboured from practicing in the cold for the past hour, passes through her lips in tiny clouds, its silver vapours curling and twisting upwards into the air.

There’s a sudden whooshing noise as the pitching machine spits out another baseball. *Crack* - Betty’s bat takes another direct hit, and this ball flies even farther than the previous one. She squares her shoulders and tightens her hands around the bat handle, squinting into the horizon. She forces herself to focus on the pitching machine, tuning everything out so that the only thing she can hear is the puttering and wheezing of its ancient engine. She’s surprised it’s able to operate in this weather.

There are goosebumps mottled all over her arms and her knees are trembling, but tending to herself is the last thing she wants to do. It’s the Monday after the weekend of Jason’s “memorial” and she’s been haunted by two things since then: Polly’s whereabouts still being a mystery, and Veronica refusing to talk to her. She knows there’s nothing she can do about Polly, but with Veronica it’s especially worse because everything’s basically her fault, and all of this could’ve been avoided if she just did the grownup thing and talked to her directly.

But no, Betty apparently loves making things worse for herself, so she opted to lash out at Veronica for no reason instead. She was jealous over something that never happened, an imaginary situation her anxiety and insecurity concocted because she’s so used to not having nice things. When Cheryl told her that Veronica actually spent most of their slumber party worrying over Betty, all the blonde wanted was for the earth to split underneath her feet and swallow her whole.

She came to school really early this morning to practice her batting because fretting over Polly and Veronica has taken a huge bite out of her sleeping schedule, so she figured she might as well do something with these extra hours of being awake - plus, the physical exertion helps with the stress. Sort of.

The blonde slips her hand underneath her cap to wipe the sweat from her forehead, deciding that’s enough for today. She packs up her things and drags the pitching machine back to the gym’s equipment room before heading into the change room for a quick shower. After changing into some fresh clothes, she starts to make her way to the library to get a head start on next week’s History assignment when she hears the creaking of door hinges. Who else would be here this early?

She tentatively walks towards where she thinks the noise is coming from, poking her head around every corner she comes across. She’s beginning to wonder if it’s just a coincidence that this other person just so happens to be at school at the same time as her, or if she’s being followed. Gulping nervously, Betty makes her way down the corridor, gradually increasing her pace when she hears the shuffling of footsteps nearby, and when she hears a loud *thump* she panics and breaks out into a sprint. She makes a sharp right and collides with something hard, knocking backwards on her bottom; her bag skitters across the floor, crashing against the lockers. She takes a second to focus, and her eyes widen when she spots Jughead sitting across from her, rubbing a sore spot on his forehead. His hair is damp, and there’s a towel draped over his shoulder.
“Geez,” He groans in pain. “Watch where you’re going, Betts.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” She gasps as she reaches for her bag. “I thought someone was following me!”

“I thought someone was following me.” He retorts as he rises to his feet; he holds out a hand for her and when she takes it he pulls her up. “And, to answer your question, I was just taking advantage of the school’s state of the art facilities.”

It takes a second for her to realize what he’s implying. “You’ve been showering at school? Is there something wrong with the water at your place?”

“Er,” Jughead scratches the back of his head, shaking a few droplets of water out of his dark hair. “No, not exactly.”

She cocks an eyebrow. “Have you secretly been practicing for something? Are you actually participating in physical activity on your own free will?”

He snorts. “C’mon, Betty. You know me.”

“Then why are you here?”

He’s visibly uncomfortable, but he knows she’s going to keep grilling him until he tells her the truth, so he relents. “Follow me.”

Betty’s confused, but she agrees and follows him down the hallway. There’s an old closet underneath one of the stairwells used to be a storage area for custodial supplies, but it hasn’t been used for awhile; Jughead wrenches the door open and extends his arm, wordlessly inviting her to peek inside. She cranes her neck and gasps when she finds a small cot stashed away in the corner. There’s a rusty old filing cabinet he’s been using as a makeshift nightstand; his phone is sitting on top of it, along with copies of Metamorphosis and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Canned goods, a thermos, and a small cooler are tucked away in another corner, and some of his clothes are hanging on hooks meant for electrical wires and cleaning equipment. Rose Blossom’s shoebox is semi-hidden underneath the cot with the rubber band still wrapped around it.

“How long?” She reaches out towards the wall next to her, her fingers brushing against his denim sherpa jacket. She’s at a complete loss for words.

Jughead leans against the doorframe and crosses his arms. “Since they shut down the drive-in. That’s where I was living before.”

Her jaw dangles as she mentally adds Jughead has been practically homeless for God knows how long and you’re only finding out now to her list of things to worry about. “Why haven’t you been living at home?”

“Yeah, he kinda fell off the wagon after Archie’s dad fired him.” He sighs and pulls on his beanie. “He hasn’t had a job since. He keeps promising that he’s gonna get his act together but my mom couldn’t take that roller coaster anymore, so she grabbed Jellybean and went to live with our grandparents in Toledo.”
“That’s…” She shakes her head, still in disbelief that this is happening. “Really rough, Jug. I’m so sorry - where does your dad think you’re staying?”

“He thinks I’m couch surfing.” Jughead replies casually as Betty ducks out of the closet. He closes the door behind her and shoulders his messenger bag, like none of this is a big deal.

“This is insane.” Betty cries; it’s no secret his family is far from perfect, but she didn’t think it would get this bad. “Stay with me. There’s plenty of room - I’ll tell my mom-”

“No offence, Betty, but I’d rather sleep on hot coals than share a roof with your mom.” She can’t help but laugh at this, because she feels the same way. “Don’t worry about me, okay? Just don’t tell anybody - especially Archie.”

“Archie’s the first person you should’ve told about this!” She hisses as students begin to fill up the hallway. “He’ll definitely let you stay with him. Mr. Andrews loves you.”

Jughead laughs humourlessly. “Mr. Andrews is part of the reason why I can’t live at home in the first place, Betty. Don’t you think it’ll get a bit awkward?”

“You know Archie doesn’t care about that kind of stuff.” She replies indignantly. “Jug, what happened between your dads has nothing to do with you and Archie. Please, you have to tell him. You shouldn’t be spending your nights Harry Potter-ing it out under the stairs of our freaking school.”

“This is temporary. I’m going to figure something out.” He glances around them for a second, like he’s checking if the coast is clear. “There are more important matters at hand - like what’s inside the box Rose Blossom gave you, for instance.”

The box - she nearly forgot about it. She was so preoccupied with Polly’s whereabouts and Veronica being rightfully pissed off at her that the whole encounter with Rose Blossom completely slipped her mind. “Alright, I know you’re using the box to deflect from talking about your living situation, so don’t think you’re off the hook with that, but did you find out what’s inside?”

“I did,” Jughead purposefully ignores her accusation of deflecting, much to her chagrin. “But we can’t talk about it here. What I can tell you, though, is that it’s a major game changer.” He begins to separate himself from her, spinning on his heel to melt into the throng of busy students.

“So you’re just going to leave me hanging in suspense?” She calls after him, but he’s already gone; Jughead has a weird talent for slipping out of situations he doesn’t want to be a part of. Sighing in defeat, she begins to make her way towards homeroom.

Monday went as horribly as Betty thought it was going to go: She fell asleep in homeroom and got chewed out for it, she forgot about today’s Biology quiz and she’s sure she barely scraped a pass, she dropped her tray at lunch and the only thing salvageable was the tiny bag of crackers she was going to crumble into her soup, she was so disoriented from lack of sleep and food that she somehow managed to hit herself in the head with her bat during softball practice, and to top it all off Veronica ignored her for the entire day. Now that she’s finally home, all she really wants to do is lock herself in her room and sulk.

She drags herself up the stairs, half-listening to her mom nagging her about something or other, and
she ignores the way her mom’s voice rises when she slams the door behind her. Instead of doing something productive like catching up on homework or doing some editing for the Blue and Gold, she trudges over to her bed and flops face-first onto the mattress. She sighs heavily into the pillows, lying still for a few defeated seconds before rolling on her back to stare at the ceiling. She can feel her phone sitting in the back pocket of her jeans, and a part of her foolishly hopes it’ll ring, and that when it does, she’ll check it and see Veronica’s name scrolling across its screen.

But instead, she gets a sharp tapping noise from her window. At first she thought she was just hearing things, but then it happens again, rhythmically - tap, tap, tap - and it forces her to sit up. She half-twists to glance at her window, and her eyes widen when she sees Archie waving to her from the other side of the glass.

“How the hell-” Betty scrambles to her feet and makes her way over so she can push her window open. “Archie, what are you-”

“Your dad left this on the lawn.” The redhead grins and gestures towards the ladder he’s standing on. “Thought we’d make some use of it.”

“We?” Betty blinks incredulously, and her jaw drops when Jughead crawls into her room right after Archie. “What are you guys even doing here?”

“We noticed you’ve been a little down in the dumps,” Jughead raises his hand, which is clutching a takeout bag from Pop’s. “So we decided to come cheer you up.”

“Juggie ate your fries on the walk here.” Archie confesses as Jughead tosses her a burger.

“That’s okay.” Betty’s laughing to herself as she watches the boys get comfortable - Archie sits on the floor with his back against the side of her bed, while Jughead pulls up her desk chair and sits on it backwards - and her chest begins to swell with affection for them. She hops back on her bed, crossing her legs and unwrapping her burger. “I honestly can’t remember the last time the three of us hung out like this.”

“I know, right?” Archie chuckles as Jughead chomps through his burger. “Just like old times. The Three Musketeers, at it again!”

“Actually, Archie, there were four musketeers.” The blonde laughs again when the redhead rolls his eyes at her. “The ladder kind of reminded me of your treehouse from back in the day, Jug. I wonder if it’s still there?”

“In Fox Forest?” He shakes his head. “After all these years, I doubt it.”

“We should check it out sometime.” Archie suggests, and he smiles when the other two agree. He glances over his shoulder, his expression softening. “How’ve you been, Betty? Is everything okay? Jughead told me you’ve had some things on your mind lately.”

She can feel Jughead’s eyes on her, and she nervously gulps down a bit of burger. “Uh, yeah - well, no. Nothing’s really okay. I’ve been stressed out over not knowing where Polly and Jason are. There’s no way to get a hold of either of them. I’m scared the Blossoms know where they’re hiding.”

He frowns. “I wish there was something I could do.”

“There might be.” Jughead sets his burger aside so he can pull the shoebox out of his messenger bag. He tosses it over to Betty, who catches it easily. “Take a look. I know I said we were here to cheer you up, but this is far from cheerful.”
“What’s that?” Archie raises a thick eyebrow.

“After Jason’s memorial Jughead and I did some investigating around Thornhill,” Betty explains as she pulls the rubber band off. “And Rose Blossom gave this to me, thinking I was Polly.”

“You and Jughead?” Archie sounds suspicious, and Betty’s pulse begins to speed up.

“Cheryl was involved too.” Jughead interjects; it’s almost like he knows what Betty’s fearing. “She gave us the green light to head upstairs.”

“I see.” Archie sounds unconvinced. “Well, what’s inside?”

“I’m about to find out.” Betty lifts the lid off the box. The first thing she notices is how musty everything smells; there’s a bunch of old photographs inside, along with keepsakes like ticket stubs and newspaper clippings. At the bottom of the box lies a stack of old papers; they’re yellowing at the edges and some feel so brittle she feels like they’re going to fall apart if she holds them for too long. She gingerly digs the stack out of the box, and her eyes widen at the sheet sitting on top. “This is an autopsy report.”

“Yep.” Jughead’s already on his second burger. “Bit of a warning, though - it’s very descriptive.”

“Wait, a coroner’s report for who?” Archie’s brow is furrowed, but no one answers him.

The room falls silent for a moment as Betty shuffles through the report. The coroner’s handwriting is heavily stylistic, with large swooping arcs and elegant curves. “Numerous bruises on the biceps and ribcage,” Her voice is shaking as she reads the report out loud, “A crack along the skull about two inches long extending from the back of the head towards the centre, bruises around the neck, damaged larynx…” Realizing she doesn’t need to read any further, she raises her head from the report, forcing herself to keep her eyes trained away from it. She sits stock still, her eyes still glued to the report, but her expression is horrified.

“There was clearly a struggle.” She shakes her head; her eyes are glassy and her throat is starting to ache with unshed tears. “Charles was murdered and there’s blatant proof for it, so why did the newspaper only report it as an accident?”

“Charles?” Archie asks again, clearly confused and slightly frustrated that he’s left out of the loop. “What’s going on here? Who’s Charles and why was he murdered?”

“Charles Cooper was Betty’s great-grandfather.” Jughead explains as he rifles through the Pop’s bag for a napkin. “He and Jasper Blossom - Cheryl and Jason’s great-grandfather - founded what we now know as Blossom Maple Farms, but right when their business started to thrive Charles was suddenly found dead in their barn, apparently a freak accident - or, at least that’s what the newspaper reported it as. I tried to look for the coroner’s report before but the first one I found wasn’t as descriptive as this; it only said that he had a blow to the head. Not a single word more.”

“What?” The redhead’s eyes widen. “So there’s a fake report, and Rose Blossom had the real one?”

“Apparently,” Jughead’s reply is slightly muffled, thanks to the giant bite he just took of his burger. “Which implies that someone covered up the real story.” When Archie shakes his head, Jughead continues. “There’s no proof that Jasper Blossom did it, but he’d be the most likely suspect before Shirley Merriweather.”

“Who?” Both Archie and Betty ask simultaneously, and Jughead replies by pointing to the box. Betty reaches into the box and finds an old photograph of three teenagers happily standing together in what looks like a garden; there’s a girl in the middle, flanked by two boys. The girl’s stare is cold,
with no depth to it whatsoever, and the longer Betty stares back the more uneasy she feels. The girl’s name, along with Charles’ and Jasper’s, is scrawled on the back of the photograph. “She must be that same girl from the article I found on the Merriweathers last week…but what makes you think she could be a suspect?”

Jughead points to the box again with his half-eaten burger. “Who else would the love letters be addressed to?”

“Love letters?” Betty peers back into the box and finds a stack of old envelopes tied together with some string. She gently undoes the knot and takes the first envelope, flipping it open and pulling the single leaf of paper out. Her expression sours as she reads further and further. “To my beloved - time is nothing but a word when we are apart. It holds no meaning, no substance, and so it does not move forward or backwards; it merely stands still.” She wrinkles her nose as she folds the paper back into its envelope. “Alright, that’s enough of that.”

“So Jasper murdered Charles because of this Shirley girl?” Archie blinks as Betty continues to look through the contents of the box. “Who are the Merriweathers, anyway?”

“The Merriweathers were an incredibly powerful family in Riverdale’s early days, and they owned the newspaper before the Coopers - but a year after Charles died they sold the paper to his next of kin and left town, never to be seen again.” Jughead shrugs. “As of right now, Jasper murdering Charles because they were fighting over Shirley seems to be the most plausible reason, but we have to do more research before we come to any solid conclusions.”

“What’s this?” Betty pulls out what appears to be a class photograph: Four rows of children no older than ten years old are staring glumly into the camera; there’s a nun with an even more sombre expression standing to the left of the group with her hands crossed over her front. The blonde squints at the chicken scratch at the back of the photo. “The Sisters of Quiet Mercy…?”

Jughead nods. “It’s some kind of religious group home on the outskirts of town. It’s been around for years; it started off as an orphanage but sort of expanded into a school, then a place for vulnerable or so-called ‘at risk’ women and children.”

“Do you think Jasper’s one of the kids in this photo?” Betty squints at all of the little faces in the picture, as if she expects to recognize any of them. “Maybe he and Charles went to school here together, or something.”

“Shirley might’ve gone too.” Archie adds.

Betty frowns as she places everything back into the box. “Well, there’s only one way to find out. We have to go there ourselves - they must have records, or something that might be useful.”

“If it housed people, then it definitely has some kind of archival system to keep track of who came and went.” Jughead agrees. “We should head up there this weekend.”

“Sounds good to me.” Betty claps her hands together.

“But the variety show is this weekend.” The redhead glances up at the both of them. “You’re not gonna miss it, are you? It’s on Saturday.”

Jughead grimaces. “The Sisters of Quiet Mercy is closed to visitors on Sundays. Saturday’s the only good day to go.”

Archie’s downtrodden expression is making Betty’s chest ache. “We’ll only be there during the day.” She reassures him. “The variety show’s in the evening, right? We’ll probably make it back by
“Dude, you don’t even know if you’re gonna play. You haven’t auditioned yet.” Jughead somehow pulls another burger from the takeout bag, even though it looked empty just seconds before.

“I’m trying out tomorrow.” Archie huffs, though the tips of his ears are burning red with embarrassment. “If I’m really gonna be serious about this music thing I have to start getting used to performing in front of other people, and not just my dog.”

“Poor Vegas probably needs a break anyway.” When Archie shoots Jughead a glare he shrugs before chomping into his burger.

“You’re going to do great, Arch.” Betty smiles at him. She can feel Jughead’s eyes on her and she knows why, but she doesn’t want to address it right now. “We’ll be there Saturday night. It’s a promise.”

When Betty arranges to meet with Cheryl at Pop’s after school the next day to tell her what she found in her grandmother’s box, she didn’t expect two things to happen: That Cheryl would actually agree to be seen with her in public, and that Cheryl would be paying for her meal.

The redhead shrugs as she swirls the straw inside her glass of cherry cola. “Like I mentioned before, we’re going to be related through marriage very soon, so I have to learn to be nice.”

“Right.” Betty awkwardly clears her throat and pushes her plate away so she can concentrate on their conversation. “Anyways, Jughead and I looked through the box and we found a few things.”

“Like what?”

“The real coroner’s report, for starters.” Betty reaches into her bag and pulls out a photocopy of the report. “It’s a lot more thorough than the one Jughead found.”

Cheryl takes the report into her manicured hands and takes a moment to flip through it, but when she’s finished her stony expression remains unchanged. “Okay, so Charles was clearly murdered… but do we have any clues as to who did it?”

“Not really,” Betty admits as she dips her hand into her bag again to pull out a couple more photocopies, this time of the photographs and a few of the love letters that were in the box. “But there were these, and it kind of gave us a lead.”

“Who’s the uppity-looking Anne of Green Gables?” Cheryl squints at the photo of Charles, Jasper, and Shirley.

“Shirley Merriweather.” Betty explains. “Jughead thinks she’s the muse in those love letters.” She gives Cheryl a few minutes to peruse through the letters, and the more disturbed the redhead’s expression becomes the broader the blonde’s smile grows. “I probably should have given you a warning.”

“That was harder to sit through than the autopsy report.” Cheryl shakes her head. “I hate to say it but from what it looks like, this might be a crime of passion. What if Charles was murdered because he and Jasper were fighting over Shirley?”
“That’s what we were thinking too, but-”

“Listen to this,” Cheryl begins to read an excerpt from one of the letters. “I can only ask that the Lord Almighty find it in Himself to forgive me for the heinous crime I am about to commit, only because I am committing it for the noblest of causes, which is love. If that doesn’t scream ‘hoes over bros’ then I don’t know what does.”

Betty was so disenchanted by the first letter that she didn’t bother to read the rest of them, so this is news to her. “Oh my God. That’s blatant evidence.”

“Except not really, because Jasper doesn’t name names in this thing.” Cheryl huffs in frustration and returns the photocopies. “It’s heavily implied, but it doesn’t exactly point the finger at anyone in particular.”

“That’s okay.” Betty stuffs the papers back into her bag. “Jughead and I still have a lead. That other photo, the one of all of the kids-”

“The one that looks like a still from a foreign language horror movie, yes.”

“It’s taken at a place just outside of town called The Sisters of Quiet Mercy.” Betty continues effortlessly. “It’s a-”

“Group home. I know.” When the blonde gapes at her, Cheryl frowns. “Your parents and my parents planned to dump your sister there when they found out she was pregnant.”

“What?” Betty’s eyes widen. “How do you know?”

“I did some sleuthing of my own after you told me your sister was pregnant; Nana Rose isn’t as forgetful as she wants us to think.” Cheryl continues to fiddle with her straw. “After failing to force Polly to get an abortion, Plan B - pun intended, of course - was to ship her off to The Sisters of Quiet Mercy so she can quietly have the baby, then put it up for adoption. I read about the place online; it’s not an ideal vacation spot, if you know what I mean. It’s the reason why we had to come up with the whole getaway plan in the first place; if your parents dragged your sister away, there’s no way they’d ever let Jason visit her there…and I don’t think they would’ve let you visit either.”

Betty can feel her heart dropping into her stomach. The thought of her sister living in some strange place in the middle of nowhere by herself makes her incredibly uncomfortable. “Jughead and I are planning to go up there this weekend. That other photo is a class photo taken at The Sisters of Quiet Mercy; we’re thinking Jasper and Charles went to school there.”

Cheryl leans back and sighs. “Ah, yes - the couple that investigates unsolved murders together, stays together.”

The blonde’s cheeks flush pink. “We’re not like that.”

“Calm down, Betty - you should know that I’m joking.” Cheryl rolls her eyes so hard Betty swears she can hear them. “My pinky finger has a heftier emotional capacity than Forsythe’s entire existence, and I already told you I’ve figured you out years ago. Please tell me you talked to your beau - your real one.”

She didn’t think their conversation would take a sudden turn towards her love life - or lack of one. When she takes too long to answer Cheryl speaks up again. “I already know that you didn’t, so I’m just going to spare you the humiliation. How are you so willing to bend over backwards for something like a stupid blood feud that happened decades before you were born, but when it comes to your personal life your common sense suddenly ceases to exist?”
“I wouldn’t be in this mess right now if I knew the answer.” Betty groans. “It’s been almost two weeks - not including our argument from this past weekend - and we still haven’t talked. I’ve no idea what she’s been up to lately and… and it’s killing me. I hate not knowing where she is, or what she’s doing.” She absentmindedly begins to trace the crescents on one palm with the thumb of her opposite hand, mimicking the way Veronica used to do it. “I don’t know if she’s okay, or if she’s tired, or stressed, or sad, or-”

Cheryl holds up a hand. “A single word more and I’m going to projectile vomit.”

The blonde hangs her head. “Sorry, I’m just worried. She’s going through her own stuff right now and I hate that I can’t be there for her.”

“Are you talking about the recent drama that unfolded between her and Archibald?” One of Cheryl’s eyebrows arch upward when Betty furrows her brow in confusion. “Judging by your vacant expression you aren’t, so allow me to fill you in: Despite a slight slip up at his audition, Archie was offered a spot for this weekend’s variety show, but the poor boy has a bad case of stage fright so Veronica volunteered to accompany him.”

Now this is news. Betty blinks a few times as she tries to process this. “This happened… recently? And since when can Veronica sing?”

“She sings - and I quote - like a nightingale. All of this is hot off the press as of a couple of hours ago.” The redhead crosses her arms. “Valerie Brown caught wind of his disastrous audition and offered to perform with him - and he agreed, for obvious reasons.”

“Obvious reasons?” Betty interrupts as she’s pummelled with yet another new bit of information. She was just with Archie the other afternoon “Are you saying that she and Archie are together?”

“Not officially, per se, but let’s not kid ourselves here and just call it what it is - which is yes, they’re pretty much together, Betty, what rock have you been living under?” Cheryl rolls her eyes again. “As I was saying, Archie agreed to Valerie’s proposal, and he was so swept up in the moment that he completely forgot about poor little Veronica… so imagine her reaction when she walks into the music room during spare period, repertoire in hand, vocal chords warmed up and ready to go, only to find the Sonny to her Cher strumming his guitar to the tune of Valerie’s voice instead.”

Betty suddenly remembers the conversation she had with Archie the other day; he said he was trying out for the variety show today. How did that slip her mind? Now she feels terrible for not attending his audition, especially now that she knows he has stage fright. She could’ve been there to support him, to be a familiar face in the crowd in the hope that it might calm his nerves. In all honesty, she spent most of the day avoiding everyone because she wasn’t in the mood to socialize. This whole I screwed up with Veronica fiasco, coupled with her and Jughead’s investigation, is sucking the life out of her. How is she supposed to solve Charles’ murder, make up with Veronica, help Jason and Polly, and be a good best friend at the same time?

“So…” Betty feebly tries to come up with a reply, but she’s neck-deep in self-hatred. “What’s Veronica up to now?”

“I can’t believe you didn’t hear about this either.” Cheryl shrugs and leans forward to steal a fry from Betty’s plate. “Valerie quit the Pussycats.”

Betty can feel her eyes nearly bulging out of her skull. "What?"

"A little birdie told me Josie won’t let Melody or Valerie perform with other people for some reason, so Valerie quit the Pussycats in order to perform with Archie. This meant that there was a free spot..."
on the Pussycat roster up for grabs, so Veronica seized it in her tiny manicured hands." The redhead shakes her head in disappointment. "That's all I have, and that's all you're going to get. If you think I’m going to be your middle woman while this little spat of yours is going on, you can forget it; talk to her yourself if you want to know what she’s been up to."

“I’m getting around to it.” The blonde grumbles as Cheryl pilfers another fry. “I’m just trying to figure out how to approach her. What am I supposed to say?”

“Well, when one is to apologize, they usually open the conversation with I’m sorry.” The redhead’s reply is saturated with sarcasm. “I get it - it’s not easy to admit that you messed up, but don’t you think this has gone on for long enough? You’re miserable, I’m going to assume she’s miserable, and being miserable sucks - so suck it up and just talk to her already so you can both stop being so annoying.” And with that, she abruptly rises from their booth and saunters over to the counter to pay for her and Betty’s bill. When she finishes with that, she half-turns with a flourish and exits the diner without sparing Betty a last look.

Of course it has to rain on the one day The Sisters of Quiet Mercy is open to visitors. Betty is mentally thanking herself for wearing layers as she pulls her hood over her head and fastens the buttons on her varsity jacket; she’s freezing from waiting for the bus for so long, and of course when she finally boards said bus the driver doesn’t have the heat on, so on top of being wet she also has the AC blasting on her face. Jughead is annoyingly complacent for the entire journey, drumming his fingers on his lap with one hand and scrolling through research notes on his phone with the other.

When they reach their stop and exit the bus she turns to him and asks, “How are you not dying of hypothermia right now?”

“Hm?” He slowly raises his head to look up at her. “Oh, I’ve been in worse conditions, trust me.”

Flashbacks of his sad little cot under the stairwell of their school come back to her full force, and guilt immediately douses her frustration. “Did you talk to Archie yet?”

Jughead shrugs. “Haven’t found an opportunity.” Knowing him, that really means, I don’t want to tell him.

Betty grits her teeth in frustration as they cross the street; the bus dropped them off right in front of a towering brick building with stone steps and pillars. The words SISTERS OF QUIET MERCY: HOME FOR TROUBLE YOUTHS is engraved onto a sign at the entrance, topped with a cross. “If you’re not going to tell him, I will.”

He exhales sharply and shoves his hands into the pockets of his denim jacket, taking a second to glance at the stone angel greeting them at the top of the steps. “Okay, okay - I’ll talk to him at my earliest convenience. Will that make you happy?”

“Very.” Betty gives him a tooth-achingly sweet smile as she places her hands on the double doors to push them open. They’re greeted with linoleum floors, barred windows, white walls, an overuse of disinfectant in the air, and a surplus of nuns. There’s a booth in the centre of a room; in it sits an old woman with her silvery hair tied up in a tight bun. Next to her is a statue of the Virgin Mary; the blue paint on her robes is faded and chipping.

Betty tentatively approaches the woman, placing her hands on the ledge of the booth. “Um, hello -
my name is Elizabeth Cooper. My friend and I are writing an article for our school's newspaper on Riverdale’s founding families, and we were wondering if there’s someone we can talk to - someone who might know something about this place’s connection with them.” There’s a painfully large lump in her throat, probably born out of her nervousness, and she swallows hard in an attempt to force it to go away.

After a beat of silence the old woman croaks, “Can I see some identification, please?” Her beady eyes flit over to Jughead. “You too.” When the both of them fork over their student cards, she wordlessly takes them and gives them a quick glance before handing them back. She slides an open binder towards them. “Sign here.” A nun materializes next to them, seemingly out of nowhere, and gestures to follow her down the hallway. Betty and Jughead quickly sign the guestbook and exchange unsettled looks before scurrying after her.

“This place is older than Riverdale itself.” The nun’s voice is even croakier than the secretary’s. “It started off as a prayer group, you know - just a handful of women who dedicated their lives to the Lord. They believed they were called upon by Him to carry out his bidding.”

“When, exactly, did everything start?” Betty fishes a notepad out of the inside pocket of her varsity jacket.

“Oh, not long after confederation.” The nun nonchalantly passes by a few rooms with the doors open; one of them has a teenage girl, no older than Betty, sitting perfectly still on the edge of her bed in what looks like a hospital gown, her glassy eyes staring at her bare feet. The room next over has a group of four young children sitting in a circle, playing some kind of hand-clapping game. “It didn’t really gain traction until after the civil war. There were hoards of orphans, an unfortunate result of the bloodshed, and no place for them to live.” She turns a corner; the hallway stretches further forward, with more rooms, more nuns, more displaced children aimlessly wandering around with no direction or purpose. “The granddaughters of the original Sisters took those poor souls in, using an abandoned schoolhouse as headquarters…” She spreads her arms wide, though she continues walking forward. “Which eventually grew into what you see now.”

“We were looking through some old records from someplace else and found this.” Jughead pulls up the class photo on his phone and holds it up so the nun can see. “Can you tell us anything about it?”

She stops walking and takes a moment to study it; seconds later, her eyes widen and she leans back a bit. “Oh, my.”

Betty raises an eyebrow. “Something the matter?”

“Did you say your name was Elizabeth Cooper, dear?” When the blonde nods, the nun lets out a sigh. “You’re here to investigate Charles Henry Cooper’s death, aren’t you?”

“Um,” Betty hastily tries to conjure up an excuse. “It’s part of what we’re planning to write for our article, yes. I just feel like there’s a lot more to the story than what the public was told, and with him being my ancestor and everything, I feel like it’s my right to find out.”

“You are absolutely right.” The nun agrees; she resumes walking, leading the pair to a single door at the end of the hall. She reaches into her habit for a ring of keys, and she slides one into the lock. After unlocking the door, she holds it open and gestures for the two to head inside. The room is small, with a low ceiling, and it smells like it hasn’t been aired out in awhile; its perimeter is covered with filing cabinets. In the centre of the room lies a single table with a couple of desk chairs and a small lamp. There aren’t any windows. “I am the record keeper around here; if there’s anyone who knows anything about this place, it’s me.”
“Then you don’t mind if you stay with us and answer a few questions?” Betty takes a seat and places her notepad on the table. “We - well, I want to know everything you know about Charles. Is he in that picture?”

“Yes,” The nun takes the other chair and folds her hands on her lap. “He was a longtime resident.”

Both Betty and Jughead’s eyes widen. “Wait, he lived here?” Betty’s so stunned by this news that she drops her pen. “So does that mean he was an orphan?”

The nun tuts and shakes her head. “The Coopers were a well-respected family in Riverdale, I’m sure you know that - but back then they were also notorious for being cursed. Every generation was struck with a sudden, often unexplained tragedy of some sort.”

“I’ve…never heard of this before. Ever.” The blonde doesn’t want to admit it, but this so-called family curse might explain a few things. She has half a mind to tell the nun that people still think this curse exists. “This wasn’t mentioned in any newspaper we found in the library. Not even my parents said anything about it.”

“People believed the curse would pass onto them if they publicly talked about it, so it’s no surprise you’re only hearing of this now. It’s not a fond memory to look back upon; your parents probably thought they were sparing you from it.” The nun points to one of the filing cabinets on the opposite wall. “You should find Charles’ file over there - second drawer from the top.” Jughead goes to fetch it, and when he hands it to her she opens it and begins to flip through its pages. “He arrived at our doorstep when he was only four years old. He was the sole survivor of a yellow fever outbreak that took his parents and older sister. Greedy distant relatives swooped in and took all of their assets, so Charles was left with nothing to his name.” The way she’s talking, it’s as if she was there when Charles was still alive. It’s kind of creepy.

The nun hands Betty Charles’ file. The first page has a photograph of him from when he was first admitted into the home; his light hair is falling over a serious stare, and his cheekbones are strangely defined for a child his age. His thin mouth is sagged downwards in a frown; Betty’s never seen a more miserable kid. “Did he ever get adopted? How long did he stay here?”

“He was eighteen when the Blossoms took him in.” The nun replies casually; Betty nearly falls out of her seat, and Jughead has to hold onto the edge of the table so he doesn’t fall over too.

“No way.” Betty whispers in disbelief. “Charles became a Blossom? So I’m guessing that’s how he and Jasper met.”

“Oh, no - Charles and Jasper were friends long before that.” The nun reaches over to flip a few pages in Charles’ report; when she finds what she’s looking for she beckons Jughead over so he can take a closer look. There’s another photograph, this time of a slightly older Charles with his arm around the shoulders of a boy who looks about his age. The Charles in this photo is as lanky as he was in the previous one, but he looks significantly happier. “The Blossoms sent their only son Jasper here for school, and the both of them were in classes together. According to their student records, they were very bright boys but often misbehaved in class; they were known to be pranksters, and were practically inseparable. They were the best of friends.”

Jughead can’t help but chuckle at this. “It’s weird knowing that the Coopers and the Blossoms actually liked each other at one point. If they were so close, why didn’t the Blossoms adopt Charles earlier?”

“Because Charles refused for a very long time.” The nun explains. “He was hardheaded and proud, even as a boy; he felt that as the sole Cooper in his family tree, he had to make it on his own, rebuild
from the ground up, but Jasper eventually wore him down and convinced him to stay with his family. By that time, the Blossoms have developed a sizeable maple tree farm; both boys worked there after school and during the summers, learning everything there is to know about the business of maple syrup.”

“And that’s how Cooper and Blossom Maple Farms started.” Betty finishes for her, and the old woman nods. “So he wasn’t legally adopted by the Blossoms, then, since he kept his last name.”

“That’s correct. By the time he came of age he was released from the Sisters and chose to live with the Blossoms, where he stayed until he married and had a family of his own.”

“What was his wife’s name?” Betty’s writing hand is moving so quickly it’s almost blurred; she isn’t even sure if she’ll be able to read her own writing later, but she has to get this down quickly. There’s so much new information and she barely has the time to let any of it sink in.

“Shirley Merriweather.”

The nun’s response hangs heavy in the air, suspended above Betty’s head. The tip of her pen hovers over her notepad, but she can’t will herself to write anything down. “Shirley Merriweather is my great-grandmother?”

“Another little-known secret.” The nun adds. “The Merriweathers arrived abruptly in Riverdale one summer with no intention of staying, but Shirley and Charles were swept up in a whirlwind romance and her family decided to take up residence - that is, until Charles’ untimely death.”

“Do you think Charles was murdered?” Jughead asks.

The nun falls silent for a moment. Her wrinkled brow wrinkles further as she tries to think of what to say. After a few long seconds she raises her head to look at him with solemn eyes. “That, I don’t know the answer to. I must confess, his death has been a bit of an obsession of mine; I’ve spent many hours poring over reports and files in this very room, trying to fit as many pieces together as I can…but even after all these years, I still can’t make heads or tails of it.”

Betty can’t help but be a little discouraged over that. This woman spent years investigating Charles’ case and still can’t come up with an answer; what makes her think she’s going to solve it anytime soon if she’s only been on the case for barely a month? “The Merriweathers owned the local newspaper before selling it to Charles’ family…so that means Shirley stayed behind when her family left Riverdale.”

“That’s right. The Merriweathers weren’t fond of their daughter falling for a lowly orphaned farm boy, even though the Coopers were one of Riverdale’s founding families and the farm was thriving, so they acted like their union didn’t exist - which might explain why you haven’t heard of it until now. She refused to identify with her family, especially after Charles died, and only referred to herself as Shirley Cooper after they got married. The estrangement resulted in the Merriweathers relinquishing the newspaper and leaving Riverdale forever.” The nun shakes her head. “The poor woman was a firm believer in the theory that her husband was murdered and worked herself to death investigating it. She believed her family was behind it somehow, but she was never able to come up with enough proof.”

Betty thinks back to the two photographs with Shirley in them; it’s kind of hard to believe that the girl with the cold stare ended up falling in love with her great-grandfather. She definitely didn’t look like the romantic type, but photographs can only tell so much. “What about Jasper? How did he handle Charles’ death?”
“He was devastated, of course.” The nun replies, though there’s a heavier, sadder tone to her voice. “With his best friend and business partner suddenly gone, he was forced to pull up his bootstraps and captain their rapidly growing farm on his own, but he couldn’t handle the pressure very well. He became an alcoholic and a gambler; his parents forced him into marrying a daughter of one of their high-society colleagues in an attempt to get him to straighten out, but that never happened, unfortunately.”

Jughead leans against one of the filing cabinets and crosses his arms. “If Shirley was so adamant about her husband getting murdered, why did the paper report his death as an accident?”

“You must remember that back in those days, reputation meant everything.” The nun explains. “If Shirley’s accusations were made public, even if they weren’t true, the Merriweathers would be ostracized. They rejected all of her stories, all of her investigations, and made it look like she was a poor widow wrought with grief. Riverdale never looked at her the same way, and they continued to shun her long after her family abandoned her.”

Betty bites her lip. “That’s horrible.”

The nun sighs. “When she had complete control of the newspaper she tried publishing a few investigational pieces, but no one took them seriously. Riverdale accepted Charles’ death as an accident and moved on, whereas the Coopers were left with nothing but bitterness and loose ends.”

“Is there any evidence that might suggest Jasper was involved?” Betty asks. “My family’s hated the Blossoms for years, and my dad told me that it’s because Jasper killed Charles. If Shirley thought her family was behind the murder, where’d this animosity over the Blossoms come from?”

“Her children.” The nun sounds more tired now, like this entire conversation is siphoning the life out of her with every word. “Shirley thought the world of Jasper and didn’t think for a second that he killed her husband, because she knew Jasper loved him like a brother. Her sons, however, didn’t think so, and did everything in their power to try and prove that Jasper was the murderer. The Blossoms obviously didn’t take too kindly to the accusations; their falling out resulted in removing the Cooper name from Cooper and Blossom Farms altogether.”

“We have something that proves he was murdered.” Betty opens her bag and takes out the same photocopies she showed Cheryl. “It’s a coroner’s report - the real one. Rose Blossom gave it to us when we were at Thornhill the other week.”

“What?” The nun’s eyes widen as she wordlessly accepts the report from the blonde; she pulls out a pair of reading glasses from her habit and takes a few moments to read it. When she finishes, her expression is awestruck. “So the Blossoms kept this report from the public all this time. This…this is groundbreaking, children.”

Betty reaches up to brush the bangs out of her eyes. “It’s the complete opposite of the report we found at the sheriff’s office.”

“Yes, I’ve read that one.” The nun frowns. “The Blossoms had very powerful connections back then, so I wouldn’t be surprised if they persuaded the local law enforcement to hide the real report. This all makes sense now - you might have a real case here. After all these years, Charles Cooper might finally be able to rest.”

“That’s the plan.” Jughead smirks; he plucks his phone from his pocket to glance at the time, and his eyes widen. “Betts, we have to go. The bus should be coming any minute now.”

Oh, shit - the variety show. Betty clumsily stuffs her notepad and the report into her bag and bolts out
of her chair so quickly she nearly knocks it over. “Thank you so much for helping us out. We got a lot more than we thought we were going to get.”

“You’re uncovering a very important part of your family’s history. I hope you give your great-grandfather the closure he deserves.” The nun rises to her feet and shows them the door. “If you ever need anything else, you can always come back here and ask for me; my name is Sister Abigail.”

“We will.” Betty promises as they make their way back towards the front entrance. The windows are blurry with rain, and she sighs as she pulls her hood back on. “And I’ll be sure to give you any updates we might have later on.” She gives Sister Abigail a parting wave before she and Jughead head out into the downpour to catch their bus back to town.

It’s dark and pouring rain by the time the bus pulls back into Riverdale. The variety show started forty-five minutes ago.

The short run from the bus stop to the entrance of the school was more than enough for the pair to get soaked; Betty’s wringing out her ponytail as Jughead opens the door for her. “I hope we didn’t miss it.” She mumbles as she and Jughead jog down the hallways towards the auditorium, leaving a trail of small puddles in their wake. Her legs are aching and her chest feels like it’s going to collapse inwards but she’s pushing herself to keep running; she made a promise to Archie and she intends to keep it. She can’t afford to mess up another friendship.

The duo quietly slip into the auditorium just as the audience rises from their seat to applaud a recently completed act - which, thankfully, wasn’t Archie. It’s a full house, so Betty and Jughead are stuck leaning against the far wall, but they still have a decent view of the stage, so she’s not too hung up about it. She’s here, and that’s all that matters.

Kevin walks over to the centre of the stage to announce the second-to-last act: Josie and the Pussycats - which means Archie must be performing after them, if he hasn’t gone already. The crowd is shuffling around with excitement, knowing this is probably going to be the best performance of the show. Betty thinks back to what Cheryl told her earlier about Veronica joining the Pussycats after Valerie quit, but before she has the chance to prepare herself the curtains begin to pull apart.

The crowd sucks in a collective gasp of surprise when they’re greeted with four girls on stage; Josie, Valerie, and Melody are at their usual stations, and off to the right stands Veronica with her own microphone and set of cat ears. Betty’s mouth goes embarrassingly dry as her eyes run over the leopard print leotard stretched tight over the brunette’s body. Her gaze drops to her stockinged legs, lingering on her near-bare thighs for a few seconds longer than she’s willing to admit.

How is this girl real?

The hiss of Melody’s snare drum scares Betty back to reality, and when she hears Jughead snickering beside her she elbows him in the ribs. Valerie begins to play her synth (Betty’s too awestruck over Veronica to wonder why Valerie's up there even though she apparently quit the band), and she, Josie, and Veronica start to swing their hips to the beat of Melody’s drums. Betty’s eyes are once again fixated on Veronica’s body, her pupils moving back and forth like pendulums as the brunette sways left and right.
Betty’s feeling uncomfortably warm even though her clothes are thoroughly soaked through, but she knows Jughead’s just going to laugh at her if she takes off her jacket, so she stubbornly keeps it on. Everyone else in the audience seems just as transfixed as she is - save for one man who abruptly but quietly stands up in the middle of the song and leaves the room - and when the song ends Betty finds herself sighing in disappointment. That was way too short.

The audience is in an uproar; Betty’s clapping so hard her palms are numb, and she’s suddenly reinvigorated with the need to run up to Veronica and apologize for being an idiot and for letting her insecurities get in between them, but she knows that the time to do those things isn’t now. Archie will hopefully be on stage any minute, and she needs to stay focused.

Something finally goes her way for once - Kevin calls Archie onstage, and right on cue the redhead suddenly appears with his guitar. Betty can see that he’s sweating, even from where she’s standing. He nervously waves at the crowd before taking a seat and lowering the microphone stand so that its level with his face. He gulps nervously, his eyes scanning the crowd, and when Reggie unexpectedly yells, “Stick to football!”, from his seat the poor boy nearly jumps out of his skin. The room rumbles with hushed laughter, and Betty’s jaw twitches with annoyance. Archie’s hands are poised over his guitar, ready to play, but his eyes are clamped shut, like he’s trying to block out something. Betty’s never felt so helpless; if only there was a way she could let him know that she and Jughead are here for him.

Archie opens his eyes and he looks into the crowd again; it takes a few seconds, but his eyes finally find Betty’s, and when they do his entire face lights up and he’s suddenly grinning ear to ear. Betty can’t help but grin back, and she gives him a small nod even though she’s not sure if he can see it. Surprisingly, he nods back, and his fingers begin to pluck the strings of his guitar. All traces of his nervousness are gone; his other hand effortlessly moves up and down the fretboard, and he clears his throat before leaning into the microphone. His soft croon is entrancing, and Betty can spot a few people in the crowd lowering their phones so they can fully experience it.

When Archie finishes the entire auditorium stands up to applaud him, including Reggie and the rest of the football team. Jughead sticks his fingers in his mouth and lets out an obnoxious whistle, while Betty jumps up and down and cheers at the top of her lungs. The crowd begins to disperse not long after, and the both of them file out of the auditorium early, hoping they can catch their redheaded friend in the hallway.

Betty swiftly turns the corner, raring to find Archie so she can congratulate him, but Jughead grabs her by the sleeve and tugs her back to his side. She glares at him, expecting an explanation, but he only responds with a simple jerk of her head. The blonde turns to whatever her’s gesturing towards, and her eyes widen when she finally finds her best friend standing not too far away from her with his lips firmly pressed against Valerie Brown’s.

“Wow.” Is all Betty can say. She missed out on way too much while she was sulking over Veronica.

When Archie and Valerie finally pull away from each other the redhead glances up and immediately notices his two friends. “Hey!” He calls them over, and when Betty and Jughead are close enough he pulls the both of them in for a tight hug. “Geez, you guys are soaked.”

“Didn’t check my weather app before heading out.” Jughead shrugs. “You killed it, man.”

“You were amazing, Arch.” Betty gushes; she throws a shy smile in Valerie’s direction. “You guys…I didn’t know-”

“No one did,” Valerie chuckles, and Archie bashfully rubs the back of his head. “But I’m sure Archie wouldn’t have wanted anyone else to be the first ones to know besides you two.”
The sound of rapidly clicking heels catches Betty’s attention; there’s only one person who can walk that fast in those kinds of shoes. She places a hand on Archie’s bicep and smiles apologetically. “Hey, I’m sorry I have to cut this short, but there’s something I have to do - something important. Promise we’ll talk later?”

“Yes, of course.” The redhead nods and drops his hand to entwine his fingers with Valerie’s. “Do what you need to do, Betty.”

“Thank you!” She grins and takes a step back, her shoulder brushing against Jughead’s.

“Finally.” She isn’t sure if he actually muttered this or if she just imagined it, but she rolls her eyes at him anyway before swinging around and breaking out into a jog. She hopes her lucky streak is still alive…

Betty circles back to the front entrance and finds Veronica dressed in a non-Pussycat outfit storming away from her mother, who’s standing at the opposite end of the hall with Fred Andrews. Raising a flaxen eyebrow in confusion, Betty follows Veronica towards the front doors, picking up her pace when she realizes the shorter girl is going to run out into the rain without a jacket.

“Ronnie!” She calls after her, reaching out to catch her elbow right before the brunette is about to step outside.

Veronica whips around, her expression annoyed, but when she realizes who it is she immediately softens. Betty is suddenly overwhelmed with how beautiful she is; seeing her again at such a close proximity is strangely relieving, like the first fresh of breath air after being submerged for so long.

“B? When did you get here?” The smaller girl’s eyes widen and she reaches up to pinch a stray strand of blonde hair in between her manicured fingers. Betty can smell her perfume and her knees are growing weak at an alarmingly fast rate. “You’re wet - like, really wet. Where the hell have you been?”

“Right before you and the Pussycats played,” Betty swallows hard and tries to ignore the way her heart is fluttering over how close they are; being deprived of Veronica for nearly two weeks is making her crazier than usual. “And it’s a long story. Why were you angrily yet fashionably strutting away from your mom and Mr. Andrews?”

Veronica lets out a quiet chuckle; her hand drops to Betty’s shoulder, and the blonde’s stomach flip-flops three times over. “We clearly have a lot of catching up to do.”

“I’ll say.” Betty shrugs off her varsity jacket and throws it around Veronica’s shoulders. When the brunette blinks in confusion, the blonde smirks. “I’m taking you to Pop’s - my treat.” Archie’s officially with Valerie - so she can do stuff like this now, right?

Her question is answered when Veronica returns the blonde’s smirk with one of her own.

Betty swears she’s never going to fight with Veronica again.

It turns out that the two weeks they spent apart was also two of the worst weeks of Veronica’s life. To start things off, the real reason why the Twilight Drive-In closed down was because the Lodges purchased the property. Hiram paid the Southside Serpents to hang around the area so the land can
decrease in value, making it easier to buy. Hiram’s planning to revamp the lot into some kind of swanky commercial space, complete with a mall, a new movie theatre, and condominiums; Hermione’s been acting on her husband’s behalf, merely executing his plans since he’s unable to do so from jail.

Secondly, Fred Andrews gave Hermione a new job as a bookkeeper for his construction company so she doesn’t have to work at Pop’s anymore. Betty made a comment about how this was good news, but her words were squashed when Veronica reveals that she walked in on her mother and Fred kissing one afternoon when she decided to surprise her at her new job. Hermione plans to award Fred the construction contract for the upcoming project - named SoDale - but she can’t make it official until Veronica co-signs the contract, as her father appointed her as Lodge Industries’ legal officer. Nothing can go through unless Veronica explicitly states it can, and when her mother came to her with the proposal she vehemently refused because she’d only be feeding the flames to this affair. Veronica offered to sign it only if the affair stopped, but Hermione was unwilling; the entire fiasco ends with Hermione forging Veronica’s signature and telling Fred he has the contract with Veronica in clear earshot - which explains why she was storming off earlier.

And then there’s the third thing with Archie and the Pussycats, which Cheryl had already briefly explained earlier. It turns out that the man who suddenly ditched the variety show in the middle of the Pussycats’ performance was Josie’s father, who’s apparently a total jerk and sets impossibly high standards for his daughter. His presence makes Josie more high-strung than usual, which caused a rift between her and the other two girls; it got so bad to the point where Valerie temporarily quit the band to accompany Archie, as she previously wasn’t allowed to perform with him while she was still a Pussycat. Archie initially asked Veronica to accompany him, so Veronica wasn’t pleased when she found out about the switch - but, thankfully, the pair made amends right before he went onstage, so things between them are okay now, and Valerie and Josie made up as well, which was why she ended up performing with the rest of the band plus Veronica.

“I told him to focus on something that makes him feel safe.” Veronica’s arms are outstretched across the table in their booth so she can take her hands in Betty’s; her thumbs are running over her palms, over the red crescents, and the blonde swears she’s melting under her touch. “I guess he found something, because he killed that performance.”

Betty thinks back to when she locked eyes with him earlier, and she swallows hard before suddenly withdrawing her hands. “Jughead and I sorta walked in on him and Valerie.”

The brunette doesn’t look surprised. “Well, it’s about time. They deserve each other.” She takes a sip from her double chocolate milkshake and folds her hands atop the table. “Okay, so I gave you all the deets on what’s been going on with me - it’s your turn.”

“Wait.” Betty bites her lip. “Before I do, can we just…talk about what happened last weekend? I just, I want to say that I’m sorry and that I snapped at you for no reason, because I…” C’mon, out with it already. “I was upset that you didn’t tell me about the sleepover at Cheryl’s. I know you didn’t have to tell me about it - there was literally no reason to - but I was upset about it anyway because, I dunno…” Betty mumbles the next part in one hurried breath. “I was a little jealous.”

She can tell Veronica’s trying to hide a smile, because she’s dipping her head so that it’s a little hard to see her mouth. “Did you just say you were jealous?”

The blonde’s collar is closing in on her neck. “I don’t know, I’m just stupid, okay? I don’t, like, own you or anything, so it’s not like I had a right to feel that way, but I did anyway and I hate myself for it. I didn’t like that I acted upon it. I didn’t like that it caused us to fight.” She swallows. “I didn’t like that I had to be apart from you.”
Veronica raises her head at Betty’s last sentence; her eyes are slightly wide with surprise, like she wasn’t expecting to hear that, but the rest of her expression is soft, almost relieved. She reaches out to her again, and the blonde automatically responds by meeting her halfway and allowing the shorter girl to take her hands in hers. “I don’t like being apart from you either.” Her voice is nearly a murmur, but it’s blaring loud inside of Betty, bouncing off her bones and filling every available space inside of her. “I guess you can say I was jealous too. I was upset over you hanging out with Archie and Jughead over me, even though I had no reason to. You’ve been friends with them longer than me, so it’s only natural that you’d feel more comfortable with them when you’re going through something. I should’ve accepted that, but I couldn’t for some reason, and it was killing me.”

“But you shouldn’t feel like they have seniority over you because I’ve known them longer.” Betty insists. “You’re still really important to me.”

Veronica lets out a sigh. Even the way she sighs is perfect - it’s melodic, breathy, almost angelic. “But there’ll always be that part of me that demands all of your attention, and as unreasonable as it is, it’s also incredibly hard to ignore sometimes. Jealousy’s a stubborn one.”

Betty’s struggling to wrap her head around the fact that the both of them want the same thing: All of the other girl’s attention, all of the other girl’s time. The jealousy was mutual, albeit at different times. Her heart is practically bouncing around in her ribcage at this point. “You can say that again.”

The brunette frowns. “I know you’re going through a lot, B. I don’t expect you to tell me everything, but you know I worry about you sometimes. When I was at Cheryl’s, all I could think about was you.”

Betty can feel her eyes stinging, and she drops her gaze to her lap. “I should’ve called you back, or something. There was just…so much happening, with Grundy and Archie, and my mom was handling it terribly so I just couldn’t take it anymore. I wanted to tune everything out, to just pretend for a second that I’m not a part of any of this, and you ended up getting lost in there somewhere. I’m sorry, V.” She squeezes the smaller girl’s hands. “I should’ve been there for you while all that stuff with your mom was happening.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it.” Veronica’s rubbing her scars again. “I’m just glad you’re okay. You take up quite a lot of space in my universe, Betty; when you’re not around, everything else kind of falls apart.” She peeks at her from under those long, dark, eyelashes, and her smile is adorably shy; Betty’s heart feels like it’s being squeezed by an invisible fist. “I’ll admit that it did hurt when I found out you hung out with other people while I was trying to contact you - I know why you were with Archie now, but why Jughead?”

The blonde sighs, and Veronica lovingly squeezes her hands. “Get comfortable, because you’re in for a story.” She dives right into the details of her and Jughead’s investigation, from their day at the library, to Jughead discovering the fake autopsy report, to the incident with Rose Blossom, right up to their visit to the Sisters of Quiet Mercy.

Veronica, who’s been withholding all of her comments until Betty finished her story, shakes her head in disbelief. “I’m legit wondering why Dateline hasn’t done their own investigation on this yet, because as tragic as your story was, it’s also incredibly juicy.” The blonde notices that their hands haven’t separated for the entire explanation, and her cheeks burn pink when the shorter of the two tilts her head. “And I thought my family was full of secrets.”

“I honestly have no idea what to make of all of this.” Betty shrugs. “I don’t even know where to go from here.”

“You don’t have to go anywhere right now.” Veronica responds tenderly. “You’ve been running
around town for the past two weeks trying to solve other people’s problems and it’s taking a toll on you. You’re allowed to be selfish every once in awhile.”

She has a point there. Between helping Archie out of an illegal relationship with his teacher (And trying to set him up with Veronica), figuring out where Polly and Jason are, solving her great-grandfather’s unsolved murder, and festering over a semi-homeless Jughead (After finding out the Lodges bought out the Twilight, Betty figured this wasn’t a good time to tell Veronica about this), Betty’s had very little time to stop and catch her breath. The realization hits her like a ton of bricks, and she suddenly feels exhausted. She pulls away from Veronica and slumps in her seat, groaning before leaning back to stare up at the ceiling. “I don’t know how to be selfish, Veronica. I’ve spent all my life trying to do and be things for other people.”

“Well, now’s the perfect time to start doing and being things for yourself.” Veronica stands up and steps out of the booth, outstretching a hand. “Up. I’m walking you home so you can get some sleep - which I’m sure is something you haven’t been getting lately.”

She’s right, as usual. Betty sluggishly rises to her feet and pulls a few bills out of her wallet, languidly tossing them on the table before throwing her varsity jacket back on Veronica and taking her hand. The girls walk out of Pop’s together, hand in hand, sticking to lighthearted topics the entire walk back to the Cooper house. Betty feels five pounds lighter by the time they reach her doorstep; despite the fact that she still has no idea where her sister is, and that she still has no idea where to look next for her great-grandfather’s case, mending things with Veronica gave her the small boost in confidence that she needed to get back on track. She doesn’t know where to go from here, but at least she has someone to navigate these uncharted waters with.

“I’m glad we did this.” Veronica smiles as she returns Betty’s jacket. She raises herself on her tiptoes and presses a kiss on the corner of Betty’s mouth; her lips linger for a few seconds before she pulls away completely. “I’ll see you Monday?”

Betty’s response is at least five seconds delayed; the spot where Veronica kissed her feels like it’s on fire - actually, her whole body feels like it’s on fire. Is she having a stroke? Did she get some kind of contact high from Veronica? Was she that deprived of her? “Y-yeah. Um, see you Monday.”

Veronica has to know about the weird effect she has on her. She can’t be that oblivious.

The brunette murmurs a shy, “Bye”, before grinning, turning around with a flourish, and walking towards the end of the street. Betty watches her until she can’t see her anymore, and then she stumbles up her front steps and fumbles with her key for a second before unlocking her front door. The house is eerily dark and quiet.

“Betty?” She can hear her mother’s voice coming from the top of the stairs; she’s whispering, and she sounds anxious. “Is that you?”

The last thing she wants right now is for her mother to take away her small bout of happiness. “Mom, I don’t.”

“Elizabeth, grab something sharp - a knife, scissors, anything - then get up here as quickly and quietly as you can.”

Betty raises an eyebrow. “What?”

“Right. Now.” Betty’s too annoyed to argue at this point, so she trudges into the kitchen to grab one of the knives sitting in the drawer. Her mother is probably being overly paranoid, as usual, and thinks there’s an intruder or something lurking around in the hallway, when in reality it’s probably her dad
or a noise coming from outside. This isn’t the first time this has happened.

Except when Betty meets her mother on the second floor, she notices the gun she stole from Grundy’s car clutched in one of her mother’s trembling hands; the other hand is holding a flashlight. “Mom,” She hisses, whipping her head left and right as she tries to figure out what’s got Alice so spooked, “What the hell are you doing with that?”

“There’s someone in the attic, Betty.” Alice’s eyes are glued on the door at the end of the hallway. “I came home and I heard shuffling from upstairs. Someone’s there.”

“Okay,” Betty tries to keep her voice calm, but she can’t help but wonder if her mom’s paranoia actually has some merit this time around. “Why didn’t you call Sheriff Keller?”

“Can we just go?” Alice’s voice is shrill. She shuffles forward and beckons Betty to follow her; the younger Cooper sighs but gives in, trailing close behind. When the pair reach the end of the hallway Alice reaches out and turns the doorknob slowly, cringing when the door opens with a loud groan. They head up the rickety wooden stairs, and when they finally reach the attic Betty panics slightly when she sees that the one light in the room - a single, dim lightbulb dangling from a chain - is turned on.

“Hello?” Alice calls out, peering at the junk lying around them. “I know you’re there. Show yourself or else I’ll call the police.”

This suddenly feels very familiar to Betty, like she’s done this exact thing once before many years ago (Without her mom brandishing a gun, of course). She sets the knife down on a cardboard box, ignoring her mother’s protests, and takes a few steps forward. She remembers climbing up to the attic with her mother when she was very young because they were looking for something. Something was missing, and they looked all over the place for it, and just when they were about to give up her dad pointed out that they never thought to check the attic. Nobody ever thinks about the attic.

“Polly?” Betty breathes her sister’s name into the darkness.

The short wall of cardboard boxes lining the far wall begins to quiver, and Alice raises the gun just in case, but when Polly emerges from the other side of that wall, soaking wet and heavily pregnant, she immediately drops the pistol and leaps over the boxes to capture her daughter in a bone-crunching hug. It doesn’t take long for Betty to do the same; the three hold each other for a few minutes, sobbing in each other’s arms, overwhelmed by the impromptu reunion.

When things settle down Betty realizes there’s someone missing. “Wait, where’s Jason?”

Alice quirks an eyebrow. “Jason?”

Polly pulls away from her sister; her eyes are red and puffy, like she’s been crying all day. She opens her mouth to reply, but the words get caught in her throat, and she shakes her head before bursting into tears. Betty pulls her in for another hug, and she comfortingly rubs her back as she exchanges concerned glances with their confused mother.

This is not good.
“Start from the very beginning, Polly.” Alice hands her oldest daughter a steaming mug of tea and takes the seat across from her. All three Cooper women are sitting in the kitchen, still frenzied from the sudden reunion. Betty grabbed Polly a set of fresh, dry clothes to wear and is now comfortingly squeezing her sister’s shoulder as she listens to her story.

“The plan was to have Jason fake his death…then I was supposed to wait until he gave me the signal to leave so I could join him.” Polly’s hands are trembling so bad she has to set her mug down on the table. “Everything worked out perfectly; we drove all the way to Montreal, and that’s where we’ve been staying until Jason suddenly told me we had to leave. That was about a week ago. I’m sorry I couldn’t contact you sooner, Betty - before I left, Jason was really on edge, like he knew something bad was going to happen.”

“It’s okay, Pol, but why did you have to go?” Betty asks.

“He didn’t say.” Polly sniffles. “He just told me that it wasn’t safe here anymore and we had to find someplace else. He told me to go first, because my safety and our baby’s safety were top priority. I know this is probably the last place he’d want me to be, but I…” She chokes on another sob. “I just didn’t know where else to go.”

Alice has been surprisingly - and suspiciously - supportive so far. It’s almost like she completely forgot that she was supposed to hate Polly and the baby growing inside her belly. “Oh, Polly - I’m just glad you’re back home with us. You’ll be safe here, okay? There’s nothing to worry about.”

Betty’s eyes narrow. “You were the reason why Polly wanted to run away in the first place. Don’t act like you care all of a sudden.”

Alice stands up and moves so that she’s standing in between her daughters and her husband. “Polly came home, Hal, and we’re going to do everything in our power to get everything she needs to make sure she’s safe and comfortable.”

“Abort? That was your father’s idea, not mine.” Alice shakes her head. “And for the record, while I was upset with you for continuing your relationship with Jason, I never wanted you to leave - but you gave us no choice. You didn’t want to listen.”

“So your next option was to cut ties with me?” Polly’s laugh is sarcastic and humourless. “You threw me out, left me with nothing. Betty told me you weren’t even making an effort to look for me. You obviously didn’t care whether I lived or died.”

“What is going on?” The front door swings open and in walks Hal. “I can hear you guys shouting from outside. What are you-” When he steps into the kitchen and finds Polly sitting at the table, his expression instantly darkens. “What is she doing here?”

Alice stands up and moves so that she’s standing in between her daughters and her husband. “Polly came home, Hal, and we’re going to do everything in our power to get everything she needs to make sure she’s safe and comfortable.”

“She doesn’t live here anymore, Alice.” Hal’s tone is venomous. “She isn’t our daughter - not while she has that thing growing inside of her.”
Betty’s jaw drops at the severity of her father’s words. “Dad, how could you say that? Polly and the baby are part of our family whether you like it or not! She’s carrying your grandchild!”

“This is my house, and whatever I say goes.” Hal shouts, and his hands curl into fists. “I don’t want to see her here, ever.”

“Now you wait just a second.” Alice raises her voice a few decibels higher than Hal’s. “You’re not the law around here, Hal.”

“As long as she agrees to have that baby, she’s not welcome here.” He growls. “Get rid of it. I don’t care how you do it - just get rid of it. Then you can stay here.”

Betty’s just about to make a retort when Alice steps in. “She doesn’t want to do that, Hal. There are ways around this - we can put the baby up for adoption. We’ll go with our alternative plan by sending her to the Sisters.”

“I’m not doing any of that.” Polly spits out her reply like they're bits of spoiled food. “I’m raising this baby whether you like it or not.”

“You’re not ready.” Hal sighs. “This is a big responsibility and you’re too young to bear it. Believe me, Polly, this is something you don’t want to do. I’m talking about making a mistake that can affect you forever. You don’t want to do this - you don’t want to ruin your life.”

Hal’s words ignite a fire in Alice; she steps forward and does something neither Betty or Polly were expecting: She places both of her hands on his chest and shoves him so hard he stumbles backwards. “You bastard. You’re treating Polly the exact same way you-” Her eyes go wide and she stops herself from continuing her sentence. Hal’s looking at her with alarm, like he’s warning her not to continue. Both Cooper girls exchanged confused glances, but before either of them can ask what’s going on Alice raises her head and continues. “Polly’s moving back here, where she belongs, and that’s final.”

“The hell she is, Alice!” Hal fires right back, immediately picking up where they left off, like that weird intermission never happened. Betty is desperate to cut in, to say anything that’ll get them to stop arguing, but she’s frozen in place. She’s not exactly scared; she’s more shocked than anything. Her parents never fought in front of her and her sister before, but both girls knew they did it often. She recalls many sad memories of her younger self huddled under the sheets with Polly, trying to drown out the muffled shouting from the master bedroom down the hall - but the irony of it all is that the rest of Riverdale has no idea that this has been their reality for so many years. The Coopers are the resident Stepfords - your typical clean-cut, all-American, picture perfect family with the nice house, manicured lawn, white picket fence, the works. Oh, if they only knew.

“I will not be party to raising a child that has Blossom blood.” Her father speaks up again, and her mother responds with another shove to the chest.

“Get out.” Her tone is even but stern. When Hal shakes his head her voice doubles in volume; she points to the front door, tears streaking down her cheeks. “Get. Out.”

Hal refuses again. “No.”

Betty struggles to find her voice. “Mom-”

“Get out before I do something that we’ll both regret.” Alice grabs her husband by the sleeve and pulls him out of the kitchen, down the hall, and towards the front door. Polly and Betty’s eyes are so wide at this point that they might just roll out of their sockets. “And I think by now, you know what
I’m capable of.”

Hal, desperate to have the last word, lets out a dry chuckle. “Oh, but what would people think?” He aims where he knows will hit Alice the hardest: Her reputation, her family’s reputation. Alice’s greatest fear is to have the rest of Riverdale think they’re less than perfect; she would have no choice but to backpedal at this point, to apologize and take Hal back.

But this night has been full of surprises, and it doesn’t look like it’s going to stop anytime soon. “I don’t…I don’t care anymore.” Alice sniffs, pausing for a second to wipe her tears away. “And I am not gonna ask again. Get out. I don’t want you here.”

Hal’s jaw drops as he fails to come up with a good enough rebuttal. His fists are clenched so tight his veins are visibly pulsing underneath his skin, but he finally relents and storms out of the house, slamming the door so hard the windows shake. Alice heads back into the kitchen and collapses in her seat, raising her hands to her face so she can sob into them. Polly and Betty are still glued to their own seats, unsure of where to go from here.

After a beat of silence Betty clears her throat and forces herself to speak up. “Mom…” Her sentence peters off into silence and she bites her lip. What is she supposed to say? What can she say?

“I never wanted you to abort the baby, Polly.” Alice’s face is still partially hidden by her hands and her voice is muffled, but her tone is sincere. “Your father, he insisted that it was the only option. He wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“But why?” Polly furrows her brow. “Why does he hate Jason and his family so much? Where is all of this even coming from?”

“He thinks Great-Grandpappy Cooper was murdered by Jason and Cheryl’s great-grandfather.” Betty answers, her tone flat. When Alice and Polly’s heads snap in her direction her eyes begin to well with tears, and she can feel her fingers curling towards her palms. “Jughead and I wanted to find out why our families have been hating each other for so many years, so we started an investigation…and we found out that Dad might actually be telling the truth.”

“Wait, what?” Alice wipes her tears away and shakes her head in disbelief. “You mean to say that this blood feud actually has blood?”

Betty nods; her hands move to her jeans and she grips the fabric so her fingernails don’t sink into her skin. “Charles Cooper and Jasper Blossom started a maple syrup business together called Cooper and Blossom Maple Farms. Everything was going really well until Jasper stumbled upon Charles’ body in a barn one morning.” She pauses to sniffle. “Cheryl thinks that there was another reason why Jason wanted to run away from Riverdale, and I’m starting to think that this has something to do with it.”

Polly frowns. “You might be right. Jason said there was something he found out about his parents’ business, but every time I asked him what it was he’d find some excuse to change the subject. It might be the reason why he told me to leave Montreal.” Her eyes widen with fear. “What if his parents found out about us somehow? What if they’re on their way to Montreal right now to find him?” Her breathing quickens, and her voice begins to rise in both tone and volume. “Betty, we have to find Jason. We have to make sure he’s alright. What if—”

“Polly,” Betty quickly takes her sister’s hands and squeezes them. “Jason’s going to be fine. I’m sure he came up with a plan in case something like this ever happened. He’s doing his part, and now we have to do ours.” She tries to give her sister a smile, but it comes out as a pained grimace instead. “I’m going to do everything I can to get to the bottom of this, okay? We’ll find Jason and he’ll come
back home, and you’re going to raise your family together, and everything will turn out okay.”

“What’s most important is that you’re back here with us, Polly.” Alice reaches across the table to place her hand on top of Polly and Betty’s entwined ones. “Head on upstairs and get some rest. We’ll get right to work first thing in the morning. Betty, if you have anything on this supposed murder, I’d like to see it.”

Betty blinks. “Are you saying you want in on this investigation?” Having the power of the local newspaper would be a huge help, and it would kind of bring things full-circle. Shirley Merriweather-Cooper can finally get the answer she was looking for. It’s just that Betty has a lot of reservations working with her mother…but after the past few hours, she’s beginning to think that maybe things might actually be different this time around. Maybe reaching her breaking point tonight was what needed to happen in order for that wall to come down - this might finally be an opportunity for Betty to actually build a real relationship with her.

“If this’ll help settle things for once and for all, then yes, I do. At the end of the day, all that matters to me is you two.” Betty can’t remember the last time her mother’s voice was this soft. “I know I haven’t been the best mother to the both of you, but I want you to know that I only had the best intentions - the very best.” Tears return to her eyes, and she bites her bottom lip. “I’m sorry, girls. I’m sorry for everything.”

A wave of emotions crashes into Betty and the three Coopers stand up at the same time; Alice circles around the table and takes both of her daughters in her arms, and the three of them hold each other so tight it’s a wonder any of them can still breathe. Betty knows that in the long run, this might not mean anything - Alice could just be caught up in the heat of the moment and she might revert back to her freakishly controlling self tomorrow morning - but she’s going to take it for now, because she wants to believe that her mother is capable of redemption, that the Cooper family isn’t as cursed as Sister Abigail said it was.

Betty calls Cheryl first thing the next morning and texts Veronica right afterward. Exactly twenty minutes later, both girls are standing at her front door, bickering over the purpose of Veronica being here.

“She asked me to come.” The smaller girl hisses just as Betty opens the door for them. “I’m here for moral support.”

“Whatever. Where is she?” Cheryl gracelessly shoves Betty aside and storms into the foyer, heels clicking against the floorboards as she searches every room. “Polly?”

“In here.” Her sister’s voice is coming from the den. Veronica shakes her head before jutting her chin in Cheryl’s direction, and Betty throws her a defeated smile before gesturing for her to go first. They step into the den just as Cheryl throws herself against Polly in a hug.

“I’m so glad you’re safe.” Cheryl pulls apart from her, her hands gently clasping Polly’s shoulders; her mouth splits into a grin when she notices her swollen belly. “Oh my God.”

Polly lets out a shy giggle. “I hope that’s a good ‘oh my God’.”

“Of course it is!” Cheryl shakes her head, still trying to process everything. When she realizes Jason isn’t here to see her freak out about her future niece or nephew, her face falls and she looks like she’s
on the verge of tears. “I just wish I knew he was okay.”

“Are your parents home, by any chance?” Betty asks the redhead as Polly takes a seat on the sofa. She moves to sit next to her sister, and Veronica sits on her other side.

Cheryl leans against the brick fireplace, crossing her arms. “Daddy left on a business trip not long after Jason’s memorial and hasn’t been back since. Why do you ask?” When Polly and Betty exchange nervous glances the redhead raises an eyebrow. “Out with it already.”

“Jason told me to leave around the same time.” Polly grips her skirt with her small hands. “That must mean they know where we’ve been hiding.”

“Then what the hell are we doing? The longer we spend twiddling our thumbs the more likely Jason might be in real danger.” Cheryl takes out her phone, but Polly shakes her head.

“There’s no way to contact him, Cheryl. He doesn’t have a phone. Believe me when I say he did everything he could to cover our tracks.”

“Clifford Blossom had to have found out somehow.” Veronica points out; she briefly leans across Betty’s lap and holds out a hand. “I’m Veronica Lodge, by the way - Betty’s bestie and soulmate.”

Betty’s cheeks burn at the mention of soulmate, and Cheryl rolls her eyes. Polly smiles and shakes Veronica’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Veronica - and I totally agree. Jason telling me to leave around the same time his dad suddenly leaves Riverdale can’t be a coincidence.”

“Wait.” Betty raises her head as an idea begins to form. “When I last talked to you, Jason said that he made a one-time deal with the Serpents, right? He dealt drugs for them in exchange for cash.”

Cheryl looks like she’s just about to scream, but Polly calmly interjects. “It was a one-time deal.” She keeps her eyes on the redhead as she says one-time. “We needed money to get away and start over. He went to a bar on the other side of the tracks and made a deal with them. That’s it.”

Betty furrows her brow. “Do you think that the Serpents might have told Clifford?”

The redhead gapes at her. “Are you implying that my family would dare to associate themselves with Southside filth? I’ve grown accustomed to the insults your family’s hurled at us over the years but this is way beneath you.”

“Betty’s onto something here, Cheryl.” Veronica snaps. “Aside from Betty the Serpents have been the only other people Polly and Jason have been in contact with ever since they left town. The Serpents knew where they were going, and that’s all your dad needed to figure out where they’re hiding.”

“But why on earth would my father talk to the Serpents? He has no affiliation with them whatsoever.” Cheryl huffs.

“That, I don’t know the answer to,” Betty admits. “But so far it’s the closest thing we have to a lead. I just wish I could figure out the connection between this and Charles’ murder.”

“It’s because Jasper murdered him, wasn’t it?” Veronica cocks her head to the side. “Or at least that’s what your family thinks.”

“Yeah, but we’ve yet to determine a motive that would make my family hate Cheryl’s family for the next few generations.” The blonde reaches up to rub her temples; she’s thinking so hard she’s starting to get a headache.
Veronica, always so attuned to Betty’s body language, reaches up to pry one of Betty’s hands away from her head so she can entwine their fingers. Her thumb rubs gentle circles against the blonde’s skin and the impending headache is already starting to fade into nothingness. The movement was anything but subtle, however; Cheryl and Polly’s eyes immediately drop to their joined hands, but neither of them speak a word about it. Betty can feel her cheeks rapidly rising in temperature, but Veronica looks as if nothing out of the ordinary happened at all.

Polly awkwardly clears her throat and finally breaks the silence. “What do you think your parents are going to do Jason once your dad finds him, Cheryl?” She curves a hand over her stomach and frowns. “What if they want to hurt him? What if they want to hurt the baby?”

“We’re not going to let that happen.” Cheryl’s voice is firm. “We’re going to find Jay-Jay first and we’re going to make sure the both of you can raise your child away from all of this.” She turns to Betty, who nods in affirmation.

“You’re not gonna like what I’m going to say next,” She glances at Veronica before fully facing her sister. “But I think I’m going to have to start looking around in the Southside for some answers.” When both Polly and Veronica start to protest, she holds up a hand to stop them. “I’m not going to be alone - Jughead is going to be with me.”

“That’s reassuring.” Cheryl rolls her eyes. “I wasn’t aware Forsythe was capable of doing anything outside of moping and engorging himself.”

“It’s better than heading there by myself,” Betty spits back. “And my mom wants in on the investigation too. It’s only option we have right now. Where else am I supposed to look?”

“Betty,” The concern in Veronica’s stare causes her chest to painfully contract. “I don’t know about this. At least let me come with you.”

She drops her gaze and notices that they’re still holding each other’s hands. She awkwardly clears her throat as her face begins to heat up again. “I’m not going to risk putting you in danger. It’s going to be fine, V - like I said, I’ll have Jughead with me. I’m literally just going to pop in, ask a few questions, and pop out.”

“Where are you even going to start?” The brunette frowns. “The Serpents are a huge gang; they’re scattered all over the Southside. They probably have a billion hangout spots.”

“Why don’t you ask your little friend Kevin?” Cheryl interjects; when Polly, Betty, and Veronica turn to look at her with confusion she raises a fiery red eyebrow. “What, you don’t know?”

Betty shakes her head as she tries to wrack her brain for an answer. What does Cheryl know about Kevin that she doesn’t? Do Kevin and Cheryl even talk to each other? “Know what?”

“Aren’t you guys BFFs or something?” Cheryl’s shoulders dramatically rise and fall as she sighs with disappointment. “He’s been running around with a new boy toy from the Southside - a long-haired, leather-clad, straight-out-of-a S.E.-Hinton-book type.” She begins to examine her nails, boredom stretched across her features. “I’ll admit that his eyes are pretty dreamy.”

Both Betty and Veronica’s eyes go wide. “What?”

“God,” Cheryl groans. “You’ve been hanging out with Archie for way too long. They hooked up on the drive-in’s last night, after your mother kidnapped you. Did he not tell you?”

Veronica shakes her head. “Not a single word.”
“Me neither.” Betty tries to think back to the last time she and Kevin hung out; it definitely was the night of the drive-in closing, but so many things happened since then that she never really had the time to talk to him. “I guess I’ll ask him about it tomorrow.”

“I’ll try and snoop around Thornhill and see if I can scrounge up any clues as to where Daddy might be, but no guarantees.” Cheryl flips her hair over her shoulder and makes her way towards the front door. “In the meantime, please ensure that the mother of my future niece or nephew are taken care of. I’ll be dropping in from time to time to check, of course.” She opens the door and disappears behind it, leaving a flabbergasted Betty Cooper in her wake.

“I said I was sorry!” Kevin groans by Betty’s locker the next morning.

“Not good enough.” Veronica hisses. “I was there with you most of the night and you didn’t tell me that you were sucking face with a Southside Serpent every time you went for a popcorn refill.”

“How was I supposed to bring it up?” He shoulders his bag as Betty spins her lock. “Here’s your popcorn - oh, by the way, I hooked up with a Serpent behind the snack bar?”

“That’s exactly how you were supposed to bring it up.” Veronica’s glaring daggers at him as they round the corner towards the student lounge. “This is, like, an ultimate betrayal - and we had to find out from Cheryl, of all people. Cheryl!”

“So, do you think he can help us out?” Betty steps in between them in a feeble attempt to quell their bickering. It’s too early in the morning for a migraine.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Kevin answers tentatively. “But I have to warn you: The Southside Serpents are no joke. He brought me to one of their hangout spots one time and I got some serious Coyote Ugly vibes.”

The trio walk into the student lounge and find Archie and Cheryl having a conversation on the couch; judging by the anxiousness in Archie’s tone it isn’t a casual one.

“But there has to be something I can do.” Archie pleads. “I can talk to him, or-”

“How many times do I have to say it, Andrews? He’s not here. He’s been away on business for the past couple of weeks now; you’re going to have to wait until he returns.” The other redhead sighs and stands up, smoothing out the wrinkles in her skirt. She spares Betty a fleeting glance before nonchalantly brushing past her to leave the room.

“What was that all about?” Veronica sits on the lounge chair adjacent to the couch, while Betty and Kevin sit with Archie.

“My dad’s crew walked out on him.” Archie buries his face in his hands. “Apparently Clifford Blossom gave them a better offer, with two years’ worth of guaranteed work. My dad’s business is in trouble and he was really counting on this job - I want to talk to Mr. Blossom to see if I can cut a deal with him, but he hasn’t been around. I’m fresh out of ideas.”

“Ah, the bourgeoise strikes again.” Jughead, who seemingly appeared out of nowhere, is sitting on the armrest of Veronica’s chair with a breakfast burrito in his hand.
“I wish I could help.” Betty places a hand on Archie’s shoulder, squeezing comfortingy. “It sounds like we’re both in a bit of a bind right now.” She glances around the room to make sure the coast is clear. “Polly came home.”

Archie immediately raises his head to gape at her. “What? Is she okay?”

“Physically, yes; emotionally…I’m not so sure.” Betty clasps her hands together atop her lap. “Jason told her that it wasn’t safe to stay in Montreal anymore, and that they had to leave. He just so happened to tell her this around the same time Clifford Blossom had to leave for business, so Cheryl and I are thinking that he knows where they’ve been hiding, and he went up there to find them. Jason told her to leave first, so they didn’t come here together. For all we know, Cliff Blossom might be running around the continent right now trying to hunt his son down.”

Jughead takes a huge bite out of his burrito; beside him, Veronica’s expression sours with disgust. “So we have a business in trouble, a missing boy who was initially thought to be dead, and his pregnant girlfriend hiding from her psychotic father-in-law. Just a typical day in good ol’ Riverdale.”

“We’re overdue for a break.” Kevin collapses against the couch and runs his hands through his hair.

Veronica visibly perks up at the mention of a break, leaning forward in her seat. “Back in New York, whenever I needed to blow off some steam, I’d go out on a bender.” Her lips curl back in a mischievous grin, and Betty blinks in confusion.

“A bender?” She echoes; she doesn’t like the sound of this.

“Dancing with my fave celebrity gal pal, a circle of close friends, and some dimwitted, sexy, disposable arm candy.” Veronica counts on her fingers. “Josie’s my obvious choice for the celeb gal pal and you guys are my circle of close friends…as for arm candy, I was thinking Reggie. He fits the criteria.” She lets out a soft laugh. “So, what do you think?”

Betty digs her fingernails into the couch’s cushions at the mention of Reggie being sexy, disposable arm candy, but she wisely holds her tongue. This isn’t the time to get stupid and jealous; there are more important things to fret over.

“I’m in.” Kevin answers immediately. “I’m so in.”

“I have to help my dad out first before I can even think of letting loose, so I’m out.” Archie ruffles his hair, his brow still furrowed with concentration as he tries to think of a solution.

“Uh, and I’m out too - I gotta help Arch with his dilemma. Two brains are better than one.” Jughead is quick to use his best friend as an excuse to back out of this crazy idea, and Betty has half a mind to kick herself for not thinking of that sooner.

“B, you have to come with.” Veronica implores. “Arguably, you need this break more than any of us.”

Why does she have this sinking feeling that there’s more to this “bender” than meets the eye? “If you can find a way to convince my mom to allow me to go, then sure.”

“Girl, I am the master of sneaking out.” The brunette smirks. “We can devise an escape plan no problem.” She claps her hands together. “Let’s do this tonight.”

“Tonight?” Betty’s eyes widen. “It’s Monday, Ronnie. We have school tomorrow!”

“So?” She shrugs her small shoulders. “That never stopped me before. Just have a shot of espresso in
the morning and you’re good to go.” She rises from her seat and brushes off her skirt. “I’ll text you the details later. It’ll be fun, I promise!” She gestures for Kevin to walk with her, and the both of them leave the room just as Valerie walks in.

“You okay, Betty?” The Pussycat asks as she takes the spot on the couch Kevin was previously occupying; Archie immediately curls an arm around her shoulders, and she leans into him. “You look a little blue.”

She can feel both Jughead and Archie’s eyes on her. The blonde clears her throat and frenetically shakes her head. “I’m fine. Just…” Her teeth worry her bottom lip as she tries to figure out how to expertly change the subject. “What are you going to do about your dad, Arch? Maybe we can think of something.”

“If you can magically conjure a construction crew out of thin air, that would be great.” Jughead smirks before taking another bite of his burrito.

“That’s it!” Archie straightens up, and for the first time that morning he looks like the weight of the world isn’t pushing down on his shoulders. “We could help him - as in you and me.”

Jughead raises an eyebrow. “You really think a couple of teenagers would be able to make up for an entire crew of experienced, trained, certified construction workers?”

“You could ask Moose and some of the Bulldogs to help.” Betty offers. “I’m sure they’d help out. Your dad has done so much for Riverdale, Arch - it’s about time Riverdale returned the favour.”

“That’s a great idea, Betts.” Archie’s expression brightens even more, and she can’t help but smile at that. “We can head over to the site after school and surprise him!” He stands up and holds out a hand for Valerie. When they’re both standing, he shoulders his backpack and flashes Betty that signature crooked grin of his. Seeing it again makes the blonde realize she hasn’t seen it in awhile, and it kind of makes her heart ache. “Jug, meet me at my locker the second the bell rings, okay? I’ll see you guys later.” He takes Valerie’s hand in his and in seconds they’re gone.

Jughead moves to sit next to Betty; the scrambled eggs in his breakfast burrito are spilling out from the top and dropping onto his jeans. He casually picks the pieces in between his fingers and pops them into his mouth. “Thanks for ruining my Monday evening.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’d rather be pouring concrete than dreading whatever plan Veronica’s currently hatching.” She reaches into her backpack and tosses him a napkin. “Did you think she was acting weird, though? Like…randomly suggesting we go out to God knows where on a school night with no context whatsoever - it kind of threw me off.”

“She’s from New York, Betty. I’m sure those darn city folk do this all the time.” He shrugs as he dabs the corners of his mouth with the napkin. “It sounds like she knows what she’s doing, and if anything you’ll be there for damage control, so what’s there to worry about? She was kind of right on you needing a break. The last time you had one was when you were in California.”

While Jughead does have a point, this isn’t exactly the best time to take a vacation. “I can’t. My family’s being torn apart by this stupid blood feud and I’m sure Cheryl’s family isn’t doing much better. With Jason missing and Clifford conveniently heading off on a business trip around the same time, every minute counts. We have to get to the bottom of this.”

“And we will, after you give yourself a chance to recharge.” Jughead stuffs the last of his burrito into his mouth, swallowing noisily. “You’re gonna burn out if you keep pushing yourself, and things will slip through the cracks. You’re only human, Betts. You’re allowed to have fun in between all the
murder and other generally scandalous things that happen around here.”

Again, Jughead has a point. She really is in need of a night where she can let her hair down - figuratively and literally. “Fine, but-

“No texting me or Archie.” Jughead easily cuts in. “You’re focusing on one thing and one thing only, and that’s wondering whether or not you should climb through your window or sneak in through the back door after your night is over.” He rises from his seat and pulls on his headphones, giving her one last smirk before leaving her in the student lounge.

“I’m excited, and I’m not even going. Polly’s sitting on the edge of her bed, bouncing with giddiness.

“Are you sure you’re allowed to do that?” Betty’s warily eyeing her belly as she heads over to her closet. She sighs in defeat as she rifles through various dresses and blouses; what exactly do you wear to a club? She’s never been to one before, and to be honest she wasn’t planning on going to one in the foreseeable future until Veronica revealed her grand scheme via text message in the middle of History class earlier that afternoon.

“You always covered for me when I snuck out to see Jason.” Polly’s grinning from ear to ear. “It’s just kind of neat that I’m the one covering for you this time.”

“You can come too, if you want.” Betty holds a powder blue dress against her chest and examines herself in the full-length mirror that’s hanging on the inside of her closet door. “The bouncer will be so distracted by your pregnantness that he’ll forget to card you.”

“Speaking of which, how are you guys going to get in? Do you have fake IDs?” Polly grabs one of the stuffed animals sitting on her sister’s bed - an orange cat - and begins to fiddle with it.

“I have no idea, but knowing Veronica she probably has something up her sleeve.” The younger Cooper pulls out another dress, frowning at it before tossing it on the bed next to Polly. “She always does.”

“I like Veronica. She’s nice.” Polly’s tone is hesitant, almost like she’s testing something out. “Are you guys…close?”

Betty’s too preoccupied with her outfit dilemma to notice. “Yeah, you can say she’s become a close friend. We haven’t known each other for very long but we’ve already been through so much together.”

Polly hums as she watches Betty go through a couple more outfits. “Do you like her?”

Betty’s squinting at her reflection; she’s holding up a dark grey dress this time. “Well, yeah. We’re friends. Why wouldn’t I like her?” It’s only when Polly snorts that she finally pulls away from her closet to fully pay attention to what her sister’s implying. “What?”

Polly’s tugging on the ears of the stuffed cat. “I meant do you like her, Betty - in a non-platonic way.”

Betty drops the dress and whirls around to gape at her. Her breath hitches in her throat as she
struggles to find a proper response, but a noise between a strangled cry and a whimper is the only thing she can come up with. Polly laughs, and it only makes the heat in her cheeks rise. Kevin knew about this from the seventh grade, but how long did Polly know? Does she even want to know the answer?

“It’s okay, Betty - really, it is.” She pushes the discarded dresses aside to make room, and Betty hangs her head as she makes her way over. “I wanted to wait until you said something, but I wasn’t sure if you were, um, aware of it.”

“Trust me, I’m very aware of it.” She mutters as she buries her face in her hands. “But I haven’t been for very long. It actually started in the summer, when I was doing my internship.”

“Brad, right?” The quickness in Polly’s response makes Betty even more embarrassed.

“You knew?” She mumbles into her fingers.

“Not for a long time - I’ve only been toying with the idea since summer. When you couldn’t stop talking about how nice she was and how you guys went on cute little dates all the time, I kind of got the hint.” Polly places a hand on her sister’s back. “Does anyone else know?”

“Jughead, Kevin, and Cheryl. That’s about it.” Betty straightens up and sighs. “I don’t really know how to talk to Archie about it yet. I mean, I know he won’t judge me or anything, but I dunno - I just can’t think of the right words to say.” She sighs again. “Maybe I should ask him for advice on how to get a girl to actually notice me.”

“Wait, so you and Veronica aren’t together?” The elder Cooper sister’s eyes are wide.

“Who said that we were?” Betty’s eyes are just as wide, and she’s sure her whole face is red by now.

“No one. It’s just that when she and Cheryl were here the other day, you guys were…uh…” Polly clears her throat and tries to continue her sentence by gesturing with her hands. “The way you were acting around each other, it just kind of implied that…um…”

Flashbacks to Veronica holding her hands in her den flash behind her eyelids, and a tennis ball-sized lump is suddenly lodged in her throat. “She does that a lot.”

“She holds peoples’ hands?”

“No, not just anyone’s.” Betty’s eyes drop to her lap. Openly talking about her relationship with Veronica is making her realize how non-platonic they actually act around each other, and now she’s wondering how they must look when they’re out in public like school or at Pop’s. How many others know, or at least suspecting? “She knows about the thing I do with my nails. She can somehow…sense when I’m stressed, so she does this thing where she reaches for my hands and…I dunno, just the way she does it, it calms me down. It centres me.” She pauses for a second. “She’s just so…the way she just knows when something’s up, and all the different ways she’s shown how much she cares, it strikes something inside of me and I just…God, Pol, I wish I could explain how she makes me feel, but there’s no possible way to describe it. It’s a feeling that transcends words; you have to feel it to understand it. That’s what she does to me.”

She feels so stupid right now. Talking about your feelings is the worst.

“That’s…” Polly blinks a couple of times, taken aback by the emotional weight tacked onto her sister’s words. “Wow. You do know that’s something you can’t find in just any other person, right?”

Betty swears she’s going to burst into flames. “I never felt this way about anyone before - not even
“Archie.”

“So…what exactly…is it?” The tentativeness returns to Polly’s voice. “Like, generally speaking, what do you see yourself as? Is there a label for it?”

“I don’t know.” Betty frowns. “I mean, I want to say that what I felt for Archie was real. I know that I loved him in that way at one point in my life. I just don’t know when it began to turn into a different kind of love.” She absently threads her fingers through her ponytail. “Am I…am I a lesbian? Am I gay? Is that what I’m supposed to call myself now? I don’t really know, to be honest. I’m not sure if that’s me, but at the same time I don’t really know what else to call myself.”

“You don’t have to call it anything if you don’t want to.” Her sister’s fingers curl around her wrist. “As for Archie, there’ll be a time when you’ll be ready to tell him. I know he’s your best friend, but if you force yourself to tell him I don’t think it’ll give you the results you want. It’ll come, Betty - both the thing with Archie and whatever title or label you feel fits you.”

It’s conversations like these that make Betty realize how much she misses having Polly around. “And…you don’t care what that title or label is, if I ever end up finding it?”

“You’re my sister no matter who you are.” Polly smiles. “The more comfortable you are with yourself, the more I love you - and I’m sure the baby will love you too. You’re gonna be their godmother, after all.”

“Godmother?” She can feel the tears rushing to her eyes. “Pol…” She engulfs her sister in a bear hug, careful not to press against her belly too hard.

“I just want you to be happy, Betty.” Polly’s voice is muffled against her shoulder. “When you’re okay with who you are, I’m okay too.”

“You’re the best, Polly. Really.” She pulls away, dabbing at her eyes. She feels physically lighter after having that conversation.

“Anytime, little sister.” Polly pushes herself to her feet and shuffles over to Betty’s closet, sticking her head in for a couple of minutes before re-emerging with an off-shoulder forest green skater dress and a pair of strappy pearl-coloured heels. “What do you think?”

Betty’s jaw drops as she approaches her to take the outfit off her hands. “Since when did I own these?” She immediately undresses and pulls the dress on; the hem of the skirt skims just a few inches above her knees (Which is an automatic no-no for Alice Cooper) and the heels on the shoes are a lot higher than the ones she wore for homecoming, but this outfit feels right. This is definitely the one.

“Who cares? You’re drop-dead gorgeous in them!” Polly laughs as Betty twirls around by the mirror. “I have a clutch that’ll go with it, so you’re good to go for tonight. What time are you supposed to meet them?”

“I have to be at Pop’s by nine, so about three hours from now.” Betty wobbles over to her window, cursing herself with every step; how is she supposed to woo Veronica in this outfit if she doesn’t know how to move around in it? “So I wait for your signal, and then I climb out the window, shimmy across the roof, and climb down the trellis?” She opens her window and peeks outside; the section of roof hanging underneath her window is wide enough for her to lie flat on her back without worrying about falling off, but she’s still a bit wary - plus, the trellis that runs along the side of the house has been there for years and she doesn’t know if it’s able to hold her. “Are you sure this is safe?”
“That’s how I’ve been able to see Jason behind Mom and Dad’s back for so many months.” Polly insists as she sits by her sister’s dresser to investigate her makeup options. “I wouldn’t tell you to do it if I didn’t think it was going to work. Now, since we have three hours to kill before you’re supposed to pretend you’re getting ready for bed, tell me everything about Veronica Lodge and why you’re head over heels for her.”

This is delightfully strange; Betty always imagined gushing over boys with her sister. She stifles a laugh before approaching Polly from behind and placing her hands on her shoulders. “It’s a good thing we have three hours, because this might take awhile.”

Betty somehow managed to escape the house unnoticed (And without falling off her roof and shattering every bone in her body), and now she’s stuffed in the back of Kevin’s truck with Veronica and Reggie.

“How are you so sure we’ll be able to get into this place?” Josie, who’s sitting in front, is examining her reflection in the vanity mirror. “Teenagers have been trying to sneak into The Roving Eye for years and very few have been able to do it.”

“Me being one of them.” Reggie proudly puffs out his chest. “At first glance the bouncer thought I was 21.”

“Seriously, Reggie?” Kevin rolls his eyes as he turns into the club’s parking lot. “Everyone knows you make a killing off selling fake IDs.”

Despite it being a Monday night, the place is packed. It takes a few minutes for Kevin to find a parking spot, and when they finally make their way towards the entrance they’re dismayed when they’re met with a lineup that stretches all the way from the door, down the sidewalk, and around the corner.

“Well, that’s it then!” Betty throws up her hands. “Line’s too long. Time to go home.”

“Hold on.” Veronica adjusts her top and struts past the line, ignoring the jeers and boos from the bystanders. When she reaches the bouncer she beckons with an index finger for him to lean down, and she whispers something in his ear before reaching into his pocket to slip what looks like a few hundred dollar bills. Betty, Josie, Kevin, and Reggie - who are still hanging back by the edge of the sidewalk - exchange incredulous glances before Veronica turns to wave them over.

The bouncer opens the door for them without a single word, and the group make their way inside. Betty’s eyes roam around the dark room as the bass thuds inside her chest, squinting at the multicoloured strobe lights feeling their way around the mob of dancing bodies. Veronica’s voice is barely audible over the loud music; she’s telling them to follow her. She leads them to a quieter corner of the club, towards the VIP section. They sit at a table with a white leather couch that wraps around it; numerous candles light the small booth, and there’s already a waiter standing by the entrance, ready to take their order.

“Three vodka cranberries for us ladies,” Veronica casually tells him before turning to face Reggie and Kevin. “And for the gentlemen…?”

“None for the DD.” Kevin rolls his eyes at Reggie as the waiter turns to leave. “And Scotch is from Scotland.”

By the time Betty decides to shrug off her jacket, the waiter’s back with their drinks. She awkwardly takes the lowball glass in her hand before sitting down; she watches Veronica take a relatively large gulp from her drink and raises an eyebrow at this. The brunette seems bent on having a good time tonight, but Betty can’t figure out why, and it’s beginning to bother her.

“What are you waiting for, B?” Veronica gestures to her drink. “Bottom’s up.”

“Uh, right.” Betty raises the glass to her lips and takes the tiniest of sips; her face scrunches in disgust when she tastes the bitterness of the vodka, and her cheeks heat up when Josie and Veronica laugh.

“Come on.” Veronica easily downs the last of her drink and extends her arm so Betty can take her hand. “You don’t go to a club to sit around. Let’s dance!”

Betty hesitantly takes Veronica’s hand, and her eyes widen she’s pulled to her feet with a surprising amount of vigour. She blinks through the darkness as Veronica drags her into the throng of dancers, shrinking her shoulders so she can squeeze through what little wiggle room she has. The dance floor finally opens up a bit towards the centre of the room, and Veronica swings around so that they’re facing each other. The group begins to dance together - well, it’s more like everyone’s dancing and Betty’s just awkwardly moving her hips to the beat. She cannot get into a rhythm no matter how hard she tries, and she’s sure she’s making a fool of herself but it’s too dark for anyone to actually see that she’s doing a bad job, so she isn’t too worried about getting laughed at. Reggie tosses his gigantic arms around all of them, hugging them close together in a tight circle, and once he starts jumping up and down the rest follow suit. The group laughs together and Betty can finally feel herself warming up to this whole club idea. Maybe this isn’t so bad after all.

The DJ changes the song to something even faster than the one that was playing before, and Betty’s anxiety is just about to make a grand re-entrance when Josie cuts in between them and steals Veronica away. Normally, Betty would be seething with unreasonable jealousy, but under current circumstances she’s more than happy to slip into the background - that is, if she doesn’t get trampled to death by the fifty billion other people dancing in this stupid club.

But she isn’t completely off the hook yet, as Kevin steps in and pulls her by the wrists. Reggie begins to aggressively dance behind her, and he looks so ridiculous that she can’t help but laugh, and that loosens her up just enough to start moving with a little more fluidity. She glances over her shoulder and her eyebrows rise high on her forehead when she spots another drink in Veronica’s hand. Where did she even get that from?

“C’mon, Cooper!” Reggie shouts over the music. “Shake it!”

Kevin nudges her with his shoulder, and she playfully rolls her eyes before resuming her sad excuse for a dance. She essentially becomes sandwiched in between the two boys, but she doesn’t mind so much, since they’re kind of hiding how bad she actually is at dancing. Every time she steals a glance in Veronica’s direction, she finds a new drink clutched in that small, manicured hand, and her concern continues to grow.

A few songs later the DJ changes it up a bit with something slightly slower (But of course still danceable). Josie finally breaks off from Veronica to dance with Kevin, and Betty takes full advantage of the opportunity by sliding over to the brunette.

“Hey you!” Veronica’s face is flushed pink, and she’s grinning from ear to ear. For the first time since they came here, she isn’t holding a drink.
“Hey yourself.” Betty chuckles and takes a step closer towards her. The song introduces its rolling bass line, and she realizes she’s heard this one before. “Having fun?”

“I am now.” The vocals kick in as the blonde’s eyes immediately drop to the sheen of sweat glistening on Veronica’s neck and chest, and she gulps. “I’ve been waiting all night for the chance to dance with you, and now I finally have it. I’m ecstatic.” She laughs into Betty’s ear as she swings her hips to the beat.

Veronica makes it look so easy - and so frustratingly attractive. “Uh, in case you haven’t noticed, I’m not as well-versed in this dancing thing as you are.”

“Oh, it’s easy!” The shorter of the two momentarily lowers her hands to place them on top of Betty’s, and when she guides them to her hips the blonde’s eyes widen. “Just put your hands here, and I’ll put my hands here-” Her hands shoot upward, throwing her arms around Betty’s neck and crossing her wrists behind her head. “-okay, and now all we have to do is move. See? Easy peasy.”

Their bodies are practically pressed up against one another; Betty can feel Veronica’s hips shifting against hers and it’s causing her pulse to thrum sporadically in her ears. The song jumps into the chorus and Veronica begins to sing along, and Betty hates how much she’s attracted to this. She’s fully aware that Veronica is far from sober, and after giving it some thought she’s pretty sure this has something to do with her mother forging her signature to give Fred Andrews that construction contract, but she’s finding it difficult to keep these things in mind when Veronica is rubbing up against her like this.

Veronica begins to swing her head side to side, her voice getting louder and a little more off-key, and Betty becomes so overwhelmed with the sudden desire to kiss her that she has to lean back a bit so she doesn’t actually do it - but Veronica notices the change in body language, and she gently presses the palm of her hand against the back of the taller girl’s hair. Betty reacts by dipping her head at the perfect angle so that Veronica can press her forehead against hers. Now their lips are inches apart, and if the temptation to kiss her was impossible to ignore before it’s even worse now.

Betty can smell the alcohol on her breath and she has to tighten her grip on Veronica’s waist because she’s starting to sway a little more erratically, but she can’t get over how dark this girl’s eyes are. Are they black? Are they brown? Are they both? Is there an end to them? How dark are they? How are they so goddamn huge? Why doesn’t anyone else have eye like hers?

She can feel Veronica’s hands moving to her face, and her heartbeat screeches to a halt - but before the brunette can make a move, the song ends, and Josie suggests they take a break. The shorter of the two hesitantly pulls away, biting on her bottom lip; she reaches for Betty’s hand and tugs her off the dance floor, back towards their table.

There’s a tray of glasses and a pitcher of water waiting for them; Betty immediately pours Veronica a glass and hands it over to her. The brunette gratefully takes it, finishing the glass in seconds before leaning in to rest her head on the blonde’s shoulder. Betty tries not to short-circuit at the contact, but judging by the way Kevin’s trying to hold in his laughter she’s failing miserably.

Josie pours her another glass. “Girl, you better hydrate. You practically left your body on the dance floor.”

“I wish, Josie, I wish.” Veronica groans as her arms slide around Betty’s middle. Her words are slightly slurred, and Betty hates herself for finding it so cute. “I wish I could leave my body sometimes - leave Riverdale, leave everything.”

Betty tries to think of something to say, but Kevin beats her to it. “Is any of this helping? Going out,
going Black Swan…any of it?”

The second glass of water goes down even quicker than the first. “When my dad got arrested, the police, the lawyers, the judge, the courts…they took everything from us - our houses, our cars, our club memberships, our yacht-“ Betty stifles a giggle when Josie rolls her eyes, but Veronica continues without so much as batting her eyelashes, “-even - I’m not kidding - the clothes off our backs. Anyway, my mom sat me down on the edge of my canopy bed.”

“Are you being serious right now?” Reggie interjects, but he immediately shuts up when Veronica sends him a death glare.

“-and she told me not to cry…” The brunette pauses; her arms tighten around Betty’s waist, and the blonde’s breath is caught in her throat. “Because there was one thing in this world that no one could ever take from me. Not ever.”

“Your trust fund?” Reggie opens his big stupid mouth again, and Veronica throws him the exact same death glare from before.

“My name, Reggie - which, after telling me that no one would ever take it…that is exactly what she did.” Her expression falters, and her eyes glaze over; she’s staring at something that only she can see. “Like it meant nothing. Like it was nothing. Like I was nothing.”

An awkward silence stretches out over the booth. Veronica’s left swimming in her thoughts and Josie and Reggie are exchanging confused glances as they try to figure out what Veronica’s referring to, which leaves Kevin and Betty to fix things. The blonde hesitantly reaches out, her fingers cautiously skirting over Veronica’s knuckles, and she slowly exhales with relief when the brunette doesn’t move away. She shifts so that their palms are kissing, and when their fingers lace together Veronica turns her head at the slightest to give her a small smile. Betty smiles back, squeezing her hand and finally feeling like she’s taking a step in the right direction.

But then the waiter returns with an unimpressed look on his face and ruins the moment. “I’m sorry, Miss Lodge, but your card’s been declined.”

“Really.” It’s more a statement than a question. Veronica immediately detaches herself from Betty, and the blonde has half a mind to clock the waiter in the face even though she has no reason to. “And let me guess - it’s been reported stolen.”

Reggie stretches his body against the sofa, kicking up his legs and resting his hands behind his head. “Yeah, sure, call the cops. We’ll be happy to tell them how old we are.”

Josie chimes in with a devilish smile. “Ooh, or I could call my mom - the mayor.”

Betty is usually against using privilege to gain the upper hand over other people, but seeing as in this case it’s either that or getting a ride home from Sheriff Keller and freaking out her mom, she decides to keep her mouth shut. Her jaw does dangle slightly, however, when Veronica casually pulls out a few more bills from her purse and hands it over to the waiter. “This should cover it.” She gives him a second to count them, and when he realizes she’s right he scoffs and saunters away.

It’s Josie’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “Veronica, did your mom cut you off?”

“She did.” The brunette doesn’t look one bit upset; in fact, she actually looks like she’s proud of herself.
“That’s a good thing?” Reggie asks.

Veronica clumsily leans forward and tries to reach for her jacket, which had tumbled onto the floor sometime ago, and nearly knocks over the pitcher of water on the table. Betty hastily snatches it for her and helps her put it on. “Oh, Reggie - this is how we Lodge women roll. We feint, we parry, we approach, we retreat. We’re like a cobra and a mongoose dancing.” She throws Betty another small smile before fluffing up her hair. “She blinked, which means, I suspect, that Hermione Lodge is ready to negotiate.”

Kevin fishes his keys out of his pocket and gestures for everyone to get up. Betty throws an arm around Veronica’s waist and helps her out of the club and towards the truck. This girl can somehow manage to walk in heels even when drunk. It’s amazing.

“Please don’t yak in the truck.” Kevin mutters as he rolls the window down for her. He drops Josie off first, then Reggie. When he pulls up by the Pembrooke, Betty tells him that she’s getting off here too, and like expected he gives her a suggestive grin.

“Okay, first of all - she’s drunk, and I would never do anything like that when she’s like this.” Betty protests, though her face is bright red. “Second of all, I just want to make sure she’s okay.”

“I’m right here, you know.” Veronica cuts in, but her stern expression quickly relaxes into a dopey grin. “But that’s very sweet of you, B.”

“Sleep it off, Lodge.” Kevin laughs before driving off. Betty resists the urge to flip off his retreating form, but when Veronica hiccups beside her she’s reminded why she got dropped off with Veronica in the first place. Her hand returns to the shorter girl’s side, gently pushing so that she’s leaning against her as the pair make their way inside.

“Rough night, Miss Veronica?” A kind-looking older man in a uniform restrains himself from chuckling when he greets them at the foyer. Veronica winks, and he doesn’t hold his laughter back this time.

“Who’s that?” Betty asks as she helps Veronica into the elevator.

“Oh, he’s our butler - Smithers.” Veronica answers nonchalantly, and Betty has to roll her eyes at this because of course the Lodges would have a freaking butler. “Y’know, I totally forgot to mention how pretty you looked tonight.” She pauses, her face stony, and Betty’s anxiety spikes because she thinks she’s going to puke right here in this tiny elevator, but she doesn’t and Betty visibly deflates with relief. “Did I say looked? I meant look. I mean present tense. You still look pretty.” She pauses again, craning her head so that she’s looking directly up at her. “You always look pretty. You’re the prettiest frigging thing I’ve ever seen.” She pauses again with another dopey smile on her face. “Eres la chica mas bella del mundo.”

Great, now she’s speaking Spanish. “Exactly how many drinks did you have tonight, V?” She tries to shake off her nervousness with a chuckle, but it only makes her sound more pathetic.

Veronica screws up her face in concentration as the elevator dings to tell them they’ve arrived at the third floor. “More than a couple, less than a handful?” She begins to count on her fingers. “Um, dois, três...”

That sounds like Spanish, but Betty doesn’t know enough Spanish to know if it’s actually Spanish or a completely different language. “And how many is a handful to you?” She gently pulls her inebriated friend down the hallway, towards door 305.
“Shhhhhhh.” Veronica raises a finger to the blonde’s lips. “Mom’s asleep. If she wakes up, it’ll defeat the purpose of us sneaking out in the first place. We’re gonna get em apuros.”

Betty suppresses a chuckle as she watches the brunette fumble with her purse in an attempt to find her keys. “You told your mom you were going clubbing before dramatically storming out of the Pembrooke.”

Veronica finally finds her keys; she misses the lock three times before actually unlocking her door. “Oh, right. Totally forgot I did that.” The front door opens with a slight creak, and she beckons for Betty to follow her inside. With the lavish furniture, crystal chandeliers, and marble fireplace mantle, it’s hard to believe the Lodges are on the verge of destitution.

Betty’s forced to stop gawking when she hears a thump - Veronica had drunkenly walked into an end table and is now on the floor, laughing like she had just seen the funniest thing in the world. The blonde’s eyes widen as she kneels over her. “Veronica! Are you-“

“My god,” The shorter girl rolls on her back, black hair strewn all over her face. “I’m such a mess. Eu amo isso.”

This would be funny if Hermione wasn’t sleeping so close by. “Hush.” Betty frantically glances upwards, half-expecting to see Veronica’s mother standing by the mouth of the hallway, but there’s no one there. “C’mon, V, you have to get up.” She reaches for her hands and slowly rises to her feet, pulling Veronica up with her, but when they’re at full height Veronica collapses against her and she has to take a step backward to support her weight. “V-”

“Walking is kind of hard right now.” The brunette mumbles into her shoulder. The effects of the alcohol are hitting her full force.

“Are you kidding me?” Betty groans. She’s sure it’s way past midnight; at this rate she can forget about sleeping. She wracks her brain for a solution, but all she can think about is the ridiculousness of her current situation: She’s awkwardly standing in her crush’s living room at an ungodly hour of the night - in heels and a dress, by the way - with her crush drunkenly leaning against her for support. Hermione must be an incredibly heavy sleeper because she should’ve woken up long ago with all the noise they’re making.

“I kid you not.” Veronica slurs back. “I think I forgot how to use my legs.” She laughs a little too loudly, and Betty has to shush her again. Ayúdame, por favour.”

Is she speaking Spanish again? Anyways, there’s only one way to get Veronica across this hallway now. “Alright, well…seeing as you’re sloshed out of your mind, I’m going to assume you’ll be forgetting this in the morning, so here goes nothing.” Betty lowers herself just enough so she can cup one hand under Veronica’s knees and lifts her up, quickly wrapping her other arm around her back.

“Oh, how romantic.” Veronica loops her arms around Betty’s neck as she’s carried bridal-style around her apartment. “Betty Cooper, you’ve swept me off my feet.”

Betty lets out an airy laugh because she has no idea how to react to that. A part of her wants to swoon, but if she does that means she’ll either do one of two things: Kiss Veronica out of the heat of the moment, or drop Veronica out of the heat of the moment - and neither of those are appropriate.

Veronica presses her cheek against Betty’s shoulder and mumbles something about her room being the second door on the left. The blonde quietly shuts the door open and is greeted with lavender walls and books - a lot of books. There’s a bookshelf to the far wall on the right that’s crammed with all sorts of titles, and there’s a smaller one underneath her window, next to her desk. There are...
framed photos of New York all over the walls, and when Betty takes in a deep breath she smells - with no surprise - nothing but lavender.

She makes her way over to the bed - queen-sized, of course - and gingerly lowers Veronica onto it. She attempts to pull away, but the shorter girl’s arms are still wound around her neck.

“Stay.” She murmurs, childishly tugging with her arms. “Pretty please? At least until I fall asleep.”

Betty feels like her face is inches away from an open flame. Her heartbeat is thumping in her ears.

“V, I-”

“Piensito todo el tiempo.” Veronica grins; she slides one hand to Betty’s cheek and gently brushes the skin with her thumb. “O. Tempo. Todo.”

Betty is at least 75 percent sure that what Veronica just said was borderline romantic. “I, uh…”

“Like, do you even have any idea how amazing you are?” Veronica pulls on Betty hard enough to the point where the blonde is forced to crawl into bed with her; she moves to sit with her back resting against the headboard, and Veronica shifts so she’s pressed against her side with an arm around her waist and her head on her shoulder. “You’re literally the most selfless person I’ve ever met. Like, you’ve done so much for me since I came here, and I just-“ She hiccups. “-I just hope you know that gostou muito de você. I literally do not know how I managed to live my life without you. The world is literally so much better now that I know you exist. Te adoro.”

“Do you usually say literally a lot when you’re drunk?” Betty distracts herself by threading her fingers through Veronica’s hair because if she spends any more time dwelling on The world is literally so much better now that I know you exist she’s going to spontaneously combust.

The shorter girl laughs and affectionately squeezes her waist. “See, that’s another thing - you actually notice me. Like, you see more than just the daughter of a criminal. Every time you look at me I feel like you see everything, and I should be afraid of that because that’s the last thing I want - to be an open book, to be this person who puts everything out there for everyone to scrutinize - but with you, it’s not like that. With you, I feel like it’s supposed to be that way.” Her voice dramatically drops to something a lot shyer. “I like that I can be vulnerable around you.”

Thank God she’s sitting down now, because if she was still carrying Veronica when she was saying all of this she definitely would’ve fallen over. “I’m glad you’re comfortable around me,” Betty focuses on the way her fingers easily pull through Veronica’s dark strands and briefly wonders what shampoo she uses. “But I’m not sure I agree with what you said earlier.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said I was the most selfless person you’ve ever met.” The blonde’s tone is quiet, unsure. “I just think it’s funny you say that because I actually think I’m the exact opposite. Lately I’ve been thinking about how things would’ve been so different if I didn’t leave for that summer internship. If I hadn’t gone and done something for myself for once, Polly might’ve never had to run away. Maybe Archie would’ve never gotten into that affair with Grundy. I could’ve stopped so many terrible things from happening if I just did what my mom wanted me to do.”

“Betty.” Veronica tries to sit up but she apparently doesn’t have the motor skills to do so; she gives up halfway and flops back against the taller girl. “Sometimes…sometimes we have to be selfish. You’ve spent your whole damn life being whatever other people wanted you to be. You were overdue for a chance to do things because-“ She hiccups again. “-b-because you want to do them, and not because you’re expected to.” Another hiccup. “No one is blaming you for what happened
while you were away. You weren’t the catalyst for any of those bad things. You were never the reason for any of them. Please don’t think that you are.”

Betty can feel the tears coming; she sniffs and swallows hard. “V…”

Veronica forces herself to sit up this time so she can take Betty’s face in her hands. She tenderly brushes the tears from her eyes and leans in to drop a kiss on her forehead. “You don’t have to believe me right now, but I’m going to do everything I can to show you what I mean when I say você é tudo para mim.” She pulls her in so that their foreheads are touching. “I didn’t know what I was missing until I found you. Você me completa.”

Betty has to keep reminding herself that Veronica’s drunk because she’s very tempted to kiss her right now. “I honestly don’t have the faintest idea of what you’re saying, but is it crazy to say that I feel the same way about you?”

Veronica’s still for a moment, her eyes running all over Betty’s face. She’s searching for something. “No, it’s not.” She whispers back.

She’s drunk, she’s drunk, she’s drunk. The silence looms over the both of them as they sit in this bed together with their foreheads pressed against each other. Betty can smell the cranberry vodka every time Veronica exhales and it’s only adding to the guilt that’s ebbing at her mounting desire to just say fuck it, lean in, and kiss her like what she’s been aching to do since that night in that musty old closet.

Veronica’s eyes meet hers, and they soften; she knows what she’s thinking, and it only makes Betty’s heart pound louder. She wants the exact same thing.

But what Betty does instead is lean back and sigh. “You need rest, Veronica.”

The brunette responds with a pout, which only makes Betty hate herself even more. “Tease.”

The taller girl chuckles as she sits up and shifts so that she’s sitting at the opposite end. “You’re wasted, Ronnie. You have to sleep this off.” She pulls off her friend’s shoes and drapes the covers over her, chuckling again when she yawns. “How about this: I’ll come over first thing in the morning, and we’ll walk to school together. I’ll even bring you coffee for the hangover we both know you’ll be suffering from.”

“What did I ever do to deserve—” Veronica pauses to yawn a second time. “—you?”

Betty laughs again as she rises to her feet. “Get some sleep, V. I’ll see you in the morning.”

The brunette hums as the blonde leans over her to brush the hair from her eyes. “What, no goodnight kiss?”

The question tugs at her heartstrings, but she stands her ground and hesitantly pulls away with a small, disappointed smile. “Ask me again when you’re sober.”

It doesn’t take long for Veronica to fall asleep; her eyes flutter to a close in minutes, and her breathing gradually decrescendos. Betty shakes her head in amusement as she makes her way over to the door, but just as her palm curves over the brass knob a sleepy, slurred voice murmurs out to her:

“I’ll be sure to remember that.”
Betty only gets about three hours of sleep, but she doesn’t mind so much. After everything that’s happened lately she’s used to getting by on practically nothing, and after what happened between her and Veronica last night she knew she wasn’t going to get much sleep anyway.

She gives up on trying to sneak in a few more minutes of sleep when her phone tells her it’s six in the morning, so she gets dressed and heads down to the kitchen to prepare breakfast for her sister and mother. She’s halfway done with the scrambled eggs when Alice shuffles in with the morning paper tucked under her arm.

“You’re up early.” She makes a beeline for the coffee machine, and her eyes close in bliss when she sees that Betty already made her a fresh cup. “You’re also a saviour.”

“I call it daughter’s intuition.” Betty smiles as she transfers the cooked eggs onto a serving plate. “You look like you had a rough night.”

“I stayed up late looking over you and what’s his name-”

“Jughead.”

“Jughead’s notes.” The unimpressed emphasis on Jughead’s name doesn’t go unnoticed. “Does he really go by that?”

“Mom, I’ve been friends with him since forever…you should know who he is by now - and when your birth name is Forsythe, you’d rather be called literally anything else.” Betty places the eggs on the table, in between the plate with toast and the plate with bacon. “What do you think?”

“I’ll be honest with you, it took a few times to fully wrap my head around everything, but in the end it all checked out.” Alice reaches for her fork. “You went to the Sisters of Quiet Mercy, that coroner’s report looks genuine, you have photos, newspaper clippings…you really went all out. I have to say I’m impressed, Elizabeth.”

Betty’s hand is frozen mid-air in between her plate and her mouth; the bit of bacon dangling off her fork comically plops onto her plate as she raises her head to gape at her mother. It feels like there’s a hot balloon rapidly inflating inside of her - did her mother just say she was impressed with her? Does she actually approve of something that she did? “Uh, what?”

“You did a good job. You set a strong foundation for this investigation. I would’ve expected this from a seasoned professional.” Alice casually flips open the newspaper. “By the way, the Blossoms know about Polly.”

Betty didn’t know it was possible for her eyes to get any wider. “What?”

“Your father left me a scathing voicemail about how Penelope Blossom stormed into his Sharebnb at two in the morning demanding to see Polly.” Alice pauses to take a bite of her toast. “She insisted that she stays at Thornhill, where she - and I quote - will receive the utmost care and attention.”

“But Dad didn’t believe any of that, did he?” Betty furrows brow as she tries to figure out how Penelope could’ve found out. The only logical explanation is that Cheryl spilled the beans, but she wouldn’t do such a thing…would she?

“Of course not. Your father may be a bastard but he does possess some common sense. He’s angry
with Polly right now but he knows better than to ship her off to the Blossoms - and even if he officially disowned her, it’ll be a cold day in hell before I’ll let Penelope think about taking my daughter away from me.” Alice takes a sip of her coffee.

“But at the end of the day, the baby is still half a Blossom.” Betty points out. “I agree - having Polly live with the Blossoms definitely isn’t the best idea, but there has to be some sort of middle ground. This kid is going to be Mrs. Blossom’s grandchild too; she has every right to see them, just like you.”

She can’t believe she’s actually sticking up for Penelope Blossom, but she has no choice. If she wants this blood feud to end she’s going to have to try and play fair. “Okay then, Miss Mediator, how do you propose we go about joint-caring for Polly and the baby with as little contact with the Blossoms as humanly possible?”

“That, I’ve yet to figure out,” Betty grabs the last slice of toast and backs out of her chair as she stands up. She pours the last of the coffee into a thermos and twists the lid shut. “But I’ll get back to you once I come up with something. I gotta go now, though, so I’ll see you after school.”

Alice raises an eyebrow and checks her watch. “It’s still a little early.”

Betty’s cheeks flush red, but she quickly hides it from her mother by turning her back on her and quickly exiting the kitchen to pull on her sneakers. “Softball practice!” She shouts over her shoulder before shutting the door behind her.

Fifteen minutes later, Betty’s by the front steps to the Pembrooke. Smithers greets her like he did just hours before and she patiently sits on a couch in the foyer. When Veronica finally arrives, the blonde has to hold in a laugh. “You look like you just crawled out of-”

“I wouldn’t finish that sentence if I were you.” The brunette warns, and her scowl deepens with Betty gives in and bursts into a fit of laughter. “You’re the worst.”

“Think again.” The taller of the two hands over the coffee thermos, and she grins when the brunette raises the lid to her lips and takes a long sip.

“Okay, fine - insult retracted. You’re actually amazing.” Veronica sighs and adjusts her sunglasses as she follows Betty out of the building. “Please tell me I didn’t make a fool of myself last night.”

The blonde blinks. “You don’t remember anything at all?” When the pair finally step outside she shrugs out of her varsity jacket and drapes it around Veronica’s shoulders.

“Not entirely.” The smaller girl admits. “I remember dancing, I remember pouring my heart out about my mom, and that’s about it.”

“So you don’t remember falling flat on your face after coming back from the club?” Betty smirks. “Or speaking in Spanish - or, well, I think it was Spanish. It sounded like it.”

“That explains the bruise on my shin.” Veronica mutters. “And I probably was speaking Spanish. Portuguese, too - Sportuguese, if you will.” She raises her free hand to fluff up her hair. “I hope I didn’t give you too much trouble.”

Flashbacks of carrying Veronica to bed flicker behind Betty’s eyes and she gulps. “No, you didn’t. I tucked you into bed and that was it.” She can feel the disappointment pulling at her from the inside but she stubbornly stuffs it down. It’s a good thing Veronica doesn’t remember the conversation they had last night. It’s a good thing she doesn’t remember telling her how she couldn’t imagine life without her. It’s a good thing. This is good.
Right?

By the time they get to school, Veronica’s finished off the thermos; she pulls Betty into the student lounge so she can refill it. To their surprise, the room is nearly full with half of the football team plus Kevin, Valerie, and Jughead.

“Betty.” Archie’s sitting on the couch, next to Moose - whose face is swollen and puffy with cuts and bruises. “Hey.”

“What the hell happened to you?” Veronica, lacking a filter as always, is gawking at the poor boy’s face.

“A bunch of us went to help Archie’s dad at the construction site yesterday.” Jughead crosses his arms. “Moose hung back while the rest of us went inside for a break and caught these guys in hoods trying to trash the place.”

“They said that as long we kept working, they were gonna keep coming back.” Moose is nursing a wound to the temple with an ice pack. “It was dark so I couldn’t see what they looked like, and everything just happened so fast…”

“Don’t worry, we’re gonna find who did this to you.” Kevin places a hand on his shoulder. “I talked to Joaquin and he said he can get us in.”

“In?” Betty raises an eyebrow. “Into where?”

“We’re going to go to the Southside to find those Serpents.” Archie explains. “There’s this bar where the Serpents hang out.”

The second Archie utters Serpents, Jughead visibly tenses up. “We don’t know if they were involved.”

“It’s still worth a shot if it might help Moose and my dad.” The redhead counters. “If we spot them, we can call Sheriff Keller and get these goons arrested.”

“Aren’t the Serpents a gang of dangerous drug dealers or something?” Veronica, who is still wearing her sunglasses, moves to sit on the armrest of the couch.


His reactions are baffling, but Betty knows this isn’t the time to ask why. “Everyone knows this, Jug.” She wishes the Bulldogs weren’t here so she can remind him that Polly explicitly talked about how Jason dealt drugs on the Serpents’ behalf.

“Popular opinions aren’t always synonymous with the truth.” Jughead’s eyes narrow. Even Archie looks confused.

“It’s possible that Clifford Blossom hired the Serpents to trash my dad’s construction site.” He furrows his thick eyebrows. “So are you with me or not?”

Instead of replying, Jughead merely rolls his eyes and abruptly leaves the room. Betty and Archie exchange hopeless glances for a second before the blonde decides to dash after their friend - but by the time Betty’s in the hallway Jughead’s lost among the busy group of students preparing for homeroom.
Jughead’s nowhere to be found, which means he’s going out of his way to avoid everyone. It’s lunchtime now and Betty and Archie have given up on trying to find him, so now the both of them are sulking in the cafeteria with Veronica and Cheryl.

“I’m sure he’ll come around,” Veronica (Who is still wearing her sunglasses) slips her hand under the table so she can place it on top of Betty’s. “But right now there are other things to worry about.”

“Right.” The embarrassment is making Betty’s cheeks burn a bright shade of red, and she knows this because Cheryl looks like she’s trying her hardest not to laugh. “How did your mom find out about Polly?”

“My garter snake of a mother swiped my phone while I was sleeping and read all of my text messages.” Cheryl rolls her eyes as she stabs at her salad with a fork. “She’s hell bent on getting Polly to stay at Thornhill because she wants the baby and nothing else. Once Polly pops it out, she’ll dump her at God knows where.”

“So my dad wants Polly but not the baby, and Cheryl’s mom wants the baby but not Polly.” Betty groans. “It’s an impossible situation.”

“But why would the Blossoms want the baby? There has to be a reason.” Archie frowns. “It might have something to do with what you and Jughead were investigating, Betty.”

“My great-grandfather’s murder?” The blonde furrows her brow as she gives it some thought. “It could be, but I wouldn’t know for sure. Jughead and I have hit a bit of a dead end with our research…but I think I have an idea of where I can look next, and you can help me with it.”

Archie immediately perks up at this, and Betty wants to laugh at how cute he looks. “Tell me what I have to do and I’ll do it.”

“Can I come with you to the Southside?” Her tone is reluctant because she knows he’s immediately going to turn her down. “I know you’re going to be concerned for my safety and everything but this is my only option right now. There’s a good chance Clifford Blossom knows where Jason is because of the Serpents; if I can find out who tipped him off, it might give me an idea of where I can look next. That bar you said you were going to - Polly mentioned that Jason met the Serpents at a bar when he made that deal with them. This could be the same one.”

Veronica sighs. “B, I think I can speak for all of us when I say that this isn’t a good idea. Plus, didn’t you say your mom wanted you to come up with a plan to get the Coopers and the Blossoms to cooperate on taking care of Polly?”

“Ronnie’s right, Betty.” Archie agrees with a nod. “I can’t risk bringing you over there. I would never forgive myself if anything happened to you.”

“I asked Kevin if Joaquin could take me to the Southside long before Moose got attacked at your dad’s construction site, so I had plans to go anyway. At least if we went together, there’ll be safety in numbers.” Betty counters. “And I can figure out a plan after I get what I need from the Serpents.”


“I knew chivalry wasn’t dead.” Veronica grins, and Betty rolls her eyes. “I have an idea that could get the Coopers and the Blossoms in one room without killing each other, though - what if my mom
and I were to host a baby shower?”

Cheryl begins to chew on her bottom lip. “That actually doesn’t sound like a bad idea.”

Betty can feel Veronica’s hand tightening against hers. “You want Polly to feel loved and supported, right?”

“Well, yeah.” The blonde shrugs. “But ideally by her own parents - and by in-laws who aren’t just in it for the next of kin.”

“Okay, so baby steps, girl. Get Polly, your, dad and Cheryl’s mom in the same room, in a public setting where they can’t fight, and voila - let the healing begin.” Veronica gives her hand another loving squeeze, and Betty’s heart skips like it always does. She’s beginning to wonder if she’s ever going to get used to that.

But she’s right, though - maybe this baby shower might do the trick. Both families are all about appearances, so there’s no way they’d sink low enough to argue in public, and the Pembrooke is neutral ground so there wouldn’t be any squabbling over who does what in terms of planning. “And your mom is okay with this?”

“She thinks it’s a great idea.” Veronica pauses to take a sip of her water. “I even convinced her to talk to your mom about it. I’m pretty sure the both of them are sitting at a booth in Pop’s right now.”

“Colour me impressed.” Cheryl smirks. “We should have this as soon as possible. This Sunday should do it.”

“And we can go to the Southside on Saturday so I can be there for both.” The pressure mounting in Betty’s chest loosens up a bit; she’s starting to feel a little better about the situation. She doesn’t expect her family and Cheryl’s family to immediately make amends at this shower, but it might be a good start. She has faith in Veronica.

“Perfect.” The brunette uses her free hand to pull out her phone. “I already have ideas for decorations.”

Before Betty knows it, it’s Saturday. She’s FaceTiming with Veronica as she’s getting ready for her little trip to the Southside.

“So Jughead’s been ignoring you and Archie for the past week - big deal.” Veronica’s sitting on her bed with a book. “You can get through the night without him.”

“Yeah, but we can’t figure out why he’s been ignoring us, and that’s what sucks.” Betty frowns as she sits on the edge of her bed to pull on her sneakers. “You saw how weird he was acting when Archie was talking about the Serpents. Why does he care so much?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” Veronica disappears from frame for a second, and when she reappears Betty lets out a snort. “What are you snickering at?”

“You wear glasses?” Betty’s shaking her head at her phone, which she propped up on her desk with a stack of textbooks. “Why am I only finding this out now?”
“I only need them occasionally.” The shorter girl huffs, but it only makes the blonde laugh again.
“Your reaction is specifically why I hardly go out in public with them.”

“I’m not laughing at them.” Betty flushes. “I think they look good on you - really good, actually.”

“Everything looks really good on me.” Veronica smirks, but her expression softens soon afterward.
“Are you sure you have to go to this?”

“Yes, for the thousandth time, I am sure.” Betty shrugs her varsity jacket on. “I don’t know why you and Archie are so worried. It’s not like I’m going to start a bar fight or anything. I’m literally just going to ask a couple questions.”

“And what if these Serpents don’t react kindly to a Northsider snooping around in one of their lairs?” The brunette raises an eyebrow. “I’m sure Archiekins and his glorious biceps will be able to help you out but in the grand scheme of things, you guys are just a handful of teenagers against an entire gang of adults. One wrong move and they’ll be eating you for dinner.”

“You’re beginning to sound like my mom.” Desperate to change the subject, Betty blurts out the first thing that comes to mind. “By the way, are you and your mom okay now?”

“We agreed on a set of terms, yes.” She takes the bait, much to the blonde’s relief. “As long as the affair doesn’t happen under our roof I’m going to pretend it doesn’t exist. She also has to tell Daddy that she forged my signature on the contract. In return, I’ll stop wilding out.”

“And you think she’s actually going to do it?”

“We called him earlier.” Veronica’s voice is significantly quieter. “It was the first time I’ve spoken to him since he got arrested.”

Betty moves to her desk chair so she can have a better look at her phone. “How did that go?”

Veronica’s silent for a moment; her eyes are downcast, and it’s causing Betty’s chest to ache. “This is gonna sound so stupid, but the second I heard his voice I burst into tears. I didn’t realize how much I missed him - but at the same time, I also found myself getting so, so angry. It’s his fault that Mom and I are in this situation, it’s his fault that we’re even here in the first place. He put us through so much trouble...and now that I’m finding out he’s not as innocent as he wanted us to believe, I’m just a flurry of emotions. I don’t really know what to think of him anymore.”

Jughead has problems with his dad, Veronica has problems with her dad, and now Betty’s starting to have problems with hers. Apparently this town is full of kids with daddy issues. “I think it’s normal to feel a billion different things right now, especially when there’s a lot you don’t know yet. I can sort of relate with my mom - I mean, I know I’m always going to love her because she’s my mom and everything, but she’s far from perfect. She’s made most of my life so far a living hell...but now that Polly’s back I’m starting to see a different side of her. She looked over my investigation notes and actually told me she was impressed. She never approved of anything I’ve ever done.”

Veronica lets out a small, sad laugh. “Don’t you hate how complicated relationships can be? Sometimes I wish things were a little more black and white.” She bites her bottom lip as she scrounges up what to say next. “I’ll be honest with you - when I found out I was moving to Riverdale I thought my life was over.”

“I’ve been thinking that way my whole life.” Betty mutters, and when Veronica laughs her stomach does that annoying flip-flop it always does when she laughs. Everything this girl does elicits a reaction from her, both physically and emotionally.
“But after moving here I realized that, I dunno, maybe my life is just beginning.” The brunette’s smile is adorably shy. “I can’t imagine myself being anywhere else.” She’s looking directly into Betty’s eyes when she says this.

The blonde reacts by awkwardly clearing her throat and rising to her feet. She’s still reeling from Monday night, when Veronica sort-of confessed feelings, and Tuesday morning, when Veronica completely forgot that she sort-of confessed feelings. “I have to go now, V.”

“Please text me later so I know you made it home in one piece.” The shorter girl sighs. “Just know that I’m going to be worrying about you all night.”

Betty can feel a blush coming on, but she hides it by turning away. “Thanks, Mom. I’ll talk to you later.” She hangs up and pockets her phone before heading downstairs. It’s nine o’clock and Kevin’s truck is waiting for her across the street on Archie’s driveway, exactly like how they planned.

Archie opens the door for her and she climbs into the backseat with him. “Ready?” When she nods, Kevin twists the key into the ignition and backs out of the driveway. The drive to the Southside is heavy and silent. Archie’s knee is bouncing; a habit he displays when he’s nervous.

“You okay, Arch?” Betty asks tentatively. She places a hand on his leg and it immediately stops moving.

He exhales slowly, pulling away from the window so he can give her a reassuring smile. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just want to get this over with, that’s all.”

She returns his smile. “You and I both.” The truck shudders as Kevin accidentally drives over a pothole; the Southside is grey and red with crumbling concrete and rust. There are a lot of condemned buildings lining the cracked streets, and the few people hanging around outside are wearing jackets and vests with the Southside Serpents emblem stitched onto their backs.

Kevin turns into the parking lot of a bar called the White Wyrm; it’s surrounded by motorcycles and vintage cars. When they step out, he leads them over to a boy who’s standing by the entrance. He looks about their age, with long black hair and frosty blue eyes. “Is this all of you?”

“Yeah.” Kevin gestures to his friends. “Joaquin, this is Moose, Archie, and Betty. Guys, this is Joaquin - my boyfriend.”

When Betty shakes his hand she notices how hard and calloused his fingers are. “Play it cool. Keep the eye contact to a minimum.”

She can feel Archie’s eyes on her; he already knows she’s going to break this rule, but he wisely chooses not to say anything. Instead, he turns towards Moose. “If you see the guys that jumped you, we leave and we call Kevin’s dad.”

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“Short and sweet, just the way I like it.” Joaquin smirks and turns on his heel so he can lead them inside. The White Wyrm is dark, save for a few lights dangling over the pool tables and a neon Serpents sign hanging by the bar. Betty doesn’t think there’s a single person here who isn’t wearing leather, aside from their group. There’s also a perpetual stench of cigarette smoke and strong liquor in the air that makes her want to gag every time she breathes in.

“We’re all gonna die.” Kevin’s gaping at a tank with a yellow boa constrictor slithering around inside. Joaquin pulls him over to an empty pool table while Moose and Archie disappear into the crowd to look for the culprits. Betty’s left awkwardly standing by the snake tank, half-wondering if she should follow Archie and half-wondering if it’s safe enough for her to venture out on her own.
She’s beginning to regret wearing her bright blue and gold Riverdale High varsity jacket, because it’s making her stick out like a sore thumb.

Where is she supposed to start? There has to be dozens of Serpents in this place and any one of them could’ve been Jason’s contact. Maybe this was a bad idea after all.

A banging noise pulls Betty out of her thoughts; Archie’s suddenly on a pool table, pinned down by a Serpent. Moose, Kevin, and Joaquin are being held back by other Serpents. There’s a lot of hooting and yelling as Betty pushes her way through the crowd; her heart begins to hammer in her ribcage as she tries to think of a way to get all four of them out of this situation, but just when she opens her mouth to say something a louder voice booms over the crowd and immediately shuts everyone up.

“That’s enough, Mustang.” Why does that voice sound so familiar? “Let ‘em go - I’ll take care of this.”

Everyone glances upward, and Betty’s eyes nearly bulge out of her skull when she spots FP Jones - Jughead’s father - making his way down the steps from the second floor. The crowd easily parts for him as he saunters over to them.

“Mr. Jones?” Betty croaks with disbelief as her eyes run over his worn leather jacket. So this is why Jughead was so uptight earlier.

“C’mon.” He places a hand on her back and jerks his head towards the door. When they step outside he orders Kevin and Moose to get lost; Betty and Archie begin to follow them to the truck but FP shakes his head. “Not you two - you stay.” He waits for the other boys to leave before raising his voice. “What the hell are you doin’ here?”

“Looking for the thugs that trashed my dad’s equipment.” Archie clenches his fists. “We figured it was the Serpents angry for getting kicked off their land, but now that I know you’re a Serpent I’m thinking this is personal. Going after my dad - his…his company! This is payback, right? For when he fired you?”

Archie’s definitely jumping to conclusions with this, but it’s probably best she doesn’t say anything for now. “Man, you’ve got a bigger imagination than Jughead and that’s sayin’ something.”

“This isn’t a joke!” Archie yells. “My dad could lose everything!”

“What, you think I’m responsible?” FP scoffs. “That I’ve been what - waitin’ all these years for a chance to get back at your old man? Nah - kid, life’s too short. You don’t know that now…” His eyes glance at something behind them; Fred just veered into the parking lot with his truck. “But you will.” Fred steps out, looking anything but happy. “I called him the second you stepped foot in the bar.”

“Get in the truck, Archie.” Fred’s eyes are trained on FP. “You too, Betty.”

Archie looks like he’s about to say something else, but he holds his tongue and gestures for Betty to go first. She scrambles into the back while Archie takes the front passenger’s seat; she flinches when he slams the door shut. “I can’t believe Jughead kept this from us.” He’s glaring at the dashboard. “He knew all along!”

“Archie, I really don’t think Jughead knew anything about the guys who attacked Moose.” She leans forward, sticking her head in between the driver’s seat and Archie’s. “I’m sure he has his reasons for not saying anything.”
“Betty, his dad is the leader of the Southside Serpents. Of course he’d cover for him.”

“You don’t know what Jughead’s been going through lately.” Betty grits her teeth in annoyance. She promised Jughead she wouldn’t tell, but she knows that Archie would never find out otherwise, so she might as well. “Did you know Jughead’s been living at the Twilight Drive-In? He’s been camping out of an old supply closet at school after it shut down. He hasn’t lived at home for months.”

Archie falls silent for a couple of minutes as he tries to digest everything. “Did he tell you this?”

The pain in his voice stabs into Betty’s insides and she’s suddenly starting to feel guilty for saying anything even though she knows it was the right thing to do. “No, I actually found him leaving the boys’ locker room one morning. He was taking a shower there.”

That answer didn’t help one bit; Archie’s expression looks anguished. “Why would he hide this from us?”

“I’m sure it’s a pride thing.” Betty shrugs, trying to act like she doesn’t see the jealousy building up inside of him. “He probably didn’t want to impose or whatever. I told him he could stay at my place but he turned it down. Maybe you should ask him, Arch.”

He deflates against his seat, looking utterly defeated; Betty’s heart drops to her stomach. “Yeah, maybe.”

Why, oh why does she screw everything up? “Do you think I’ll be able to talk to FP about Jason? He has to know something, seeing as he’s the leader and all.”

“Probably.” Archie’s fiddling with his hands.

She’s starting to get annoyed again. “What is it, Archie?”

He finally turns his head to acknowledge her, but Fred steps back into the truck just as he’s about to reply. “I don’t know what you were thinking when you decided to come here but I’m going to let you know right now that this is one of the worst ideas you’ve ever had. Not only have you jeopardized your safety, Archie, but you put Betty at risk too.”

“Did you know Jughead’s dad was a Serpent?” Archie stares out of the window as the truck turns out of the parking lot. Betty leans back, hoping to God that she could just melt into the seat and disappear forever.

“He’s been in and out of that gang for as long as I’ve known him,” Fred replies, but his tone is still cross. “And thanks to him you were able to get out of that place unscathed, so you should be grateful.” He peeks at his rearview mirror. “How’re you holding up, Betty? You okay?”

“Y-yes, I’m fine, Mr. Andrews.” Betty nervously folds her hands atop her lap and nods. “I chose to join Archie tonight, so please don’t think he made me come with him or anything. I’m just as guilty as he is.”

“We’re keeping this a secret from your mother. We don’t need any more drama tonight.” Fred sighs in resignation, and for the rest of the ride home no one says another word.
“I’ll have to admit,” Alice glances around the Pembrooke as she places a dessert tray on the table Betty’s currently decorating. “The Lodges do have taste.”

“I’m really glad they came up with this idea.” Betty agrees as she smoothes out the wrinkles from the tablecloth. “I just hope Dad shows up. Polly needs him more than ever.” She glances over her shoulder, where Polly’s greeting guests with Veronica. It’s been a hectic day with everyone scrambling to get the Pembrooke gussied up for the baby shower. Alice knows absolutely nothing about what happened last night; Polly covered up for her yet again, telling Alice that she was just at Pop’s with friends. The least Betty can do in return is ensure this baby shower remains intact throughout the afternoon - and without any casualties.

“Speak of the devil.” Alice mutters under her breath, causing the blonde to turn her head towards the front door. Hal’s awkwardly standing by the entrance; he nervously searches the crowd for a familiar face, and when he finally spots his older daughter he ambles over to her. Alice grabs Betty by the arm and drags her over to him. “Hal - you’re here.”

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world.” Hal clears his throat. “Polly, I just want to say I’m sorry. I may not agree with…the choices you’ve made as of late, but that doesn’t mean I no longer love you or see you as my daughter.” He sticks his hands in his pockets and absently scuffs the floor with his shoe. “I’m so glad that you’re here, and that you’re safe, and that all four of us are together again. That’s all that matters to me.”

There’s something about the way Hal sounds that makes Betty think he’s up to something, but she feels guilty for being suspicious. She can’t remember the last time her family was together like this without anyone yelling or arguing. She should be enjoying this moment - so why does it feel so inauthentic?

“Dad…” Polly walks into her father’s open arms, sniffing against his shoulder as he holds her close. Alice is barely holding back a sob herself, but Betty can’t seem to shake off the feeling that there’s something wrong with this. Alice hugs Polly from behind, and Betty tries to wrap her arms around her parents and her sister, but she still can’t find it in herself to get caught up in the moment.

“We’re here!” The front door swings open with a bang; Cheryl struts in with a very fancy-looking stroller, followed by Penelope wheeling in Rose on her wheelchair. “No big deal; it’s only the best stroller money can buy.”

Polly detaches herself from her family to gawk at Cheryl’s present. “So…expensive.”

“All I ask in return is that you make me your baby’s godmother.” Cheryl’s smile is blindingly white as Polly blinks in confusion. “Just kidding!” She spins on her heel to take her grandmother’s wheelchair, but not before muttering, “So not kidding,” Under her breath. “C’mon, Nana Rose - let’s get you a good spot by the food.”

“Penelope.” Hal steps in between Cheryl’s mother and his daughter. “I see Cliff is still out on his business trip.”

“The maple syrup business is ever-changing; Clifford likes to be where the action is.” Penelope raises an eyebrow as she scrutinizes him. “Are you going to allow me to talk to the mother of my future grandchild now, or what?”

Alice shoots Hal a reprimanding look, and he heaves a sigh before dutifully stepping aside so Penelope can approach Polly. “I just want you to know that when I first heard about the baby, my initial instinct was to embrace the baby but not you.” Then she does something no one else was expecting; her stony expression softens, and she reaches out to take Polly’s hand. “I was wrong. I
hope you can forgive me.”

Even Cheryl, who’s on the opposite side of the room with her grandmother, is gaping at what just transpired. Hal looks unimpressed, and Betty looks more confused than anything. What’s with the sudden change in heart? Is this a ruse? Is she trying to butter up Polly so that she can trick her into giving her the baby when it arrives?

And what about Jason? Does she know where he is? Does Clifford have him?

All of these questions are whirling around Betty’s head like it’s the damn Indy 500 and it’s making her dizzy; she has half a mind to grab a drink (Preferably one with alcohol) when Polly smiles and squeezes Penelope’s hand. “That’s really nice of you, Mrs. Blossom. Thank you.”

Alice looks like she’s about to say something unkind, but Betty shakes her head and catches her mother by the wrist. “Think happy thoughts, Mom. We’re having the shower at the Pembrooke for a reason, remember?”

Alice rolls her eyes and begins to head for the food. “Those crab cakes better have real crab.”

The group disperses and the party resumes; Alice stuffs her face because it’s the only thing that’s preventing her from verbally assaulting Penelope, Hal’s in the corner quietly sipping a drink, and Betty is just trying to keep sane. The tension between her family and Cheryl’s family is so thick it’s almost suffocating, and she has no idea how to alleviate any of it.

“You look like you could use this.” Veronica pops up beside her with some punch. She watches Betty take a sip, and she laughs when the blonde’s expression puckers at the taste. “I might have added something else to it when your mom wasn’t looking; sorry, I should’ve warned you.”

“No no - this is exactly what I needed.” To Veronica’s surprise, Betty knocks the drink back and finishes it in one gulp. “At this rate, getting drunk’s the only way I can put up with the rest of the day.”

“Well, you can’t get completely wasted.” The brunette tuts as she gently pries the cup from her friend’s hands. “Your sister is the woman of the night, after all; you’re going to have to keep a good head on your shoulders.” She eyes Rose, who’s waving what looks like a necklace over Polly’s outstretched hand. “What in the blue hell is happening over there?”

“Occultism at its finest.” Betty mutters under her breath as she approaches the older woman and her sister. The necklace has a gold chain, and the pendant that’s swinging over Polly’s palm is some kind of purple crystal.

“This necklace reads the baby’s aura.” Rose croaks; her single milky eye is wide with fascination. “Predicts the sex.”

Cheryl, who’s standing over her grandmother with her arms crossed, looks like she’s bored out of her mind. “Take everything she says with a grain of salt. Nana has dementia.” Behind her, the Pussycats exchange disbelieving glances.

“Oh!” Rose bounces in her seat, startling everyone.


“Babies.” Rose gapes. “It’s twins - one of each!”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Veronica laughs just as Hermione announces that Polly will be
opening her gifts in a few minutes. “Guess it runs in the family.”

The party gathers around the sitting area; Betty pulls up a few dining chairs for herself, Alice, and Polly, while Penelope and Cheryl take the sofa. Hal awkwardly stands behind Alice’s seat with his arms crossed, not really sure what he’s supposed to be doing. Polly starts with the gift closest to her, slowly working her way through the pile. She gets the works: A mobile, crib sheets, clothes, toys, blankets, bath and kitchen equipment - with every opened gift Polly’s smile grows bigger and bigger, and Betty can’t help but feel a stirring in her chest because despite all of the crap that’s been happening lately she’s glad she was able to share this one happy moment with her sister. It’s nice to pretend they’re just in a room with their friends celebrating her impending motherhood, like it’s the only big thing happening in their lives right now, like there isn’t something uglier and more sinister lurking underneath the surface.

“Okay,” Betty reaches over and plucks Hal’s gift from the pile. “Now it’s time for Mom’s gift.”

“It’s nothing special.” Alice begins to wring her hands. “I, uh, wish I made the time to get something better for you.”

Polly slowly pulls the tissue paper away from the bag, tipping it over so that whatever’s inside tumbles onto her lap. “Mom…” She gasps as she takes the plastic nightlight and turns it over in her hands. “It’s my nightlight, from when I was a little kid. How did you…where did you even…?”

“I saved it.” Alice’s smile is serene, though her hands are still fidgeting with each other on her lap. “I know how much you loved it and how it made you feel safe, and I wanted you to be able to pass it down to your baby one day.”

If Betty closed her eyes at that very moment she would be able to recount the numerous times that little plastic nightlight saved her throughout her childhood. Unbeknownst to Alice, Polly primarily used the nightlight for Betty and not for herself; Betty was deathly afraid of the dark as a child but Alice never allowed her to sleep with Polly because apparently letting your siblings sleep together causes developmental problems later in life (Or so she wanted her kids to think). Every night, after their parents tucked them into bed, Polly would sneak into Betty’s room to plug in the nightlight into her wall. If anything, that nightlight is a symbol for how much more nurturing and motherly Polly was to her than Alice ever was - but maybe things will be different now. She’s only hoping.

“Open ours next, dear.” Penelope smiles and sets her cup of tea on the table in front of her.

“Wait,” Hal raises an eyebrow and gestures over to the stroller. “I thought you already got her something.”

“That is a family heirloom.” Penelope replies indignantly when Polly pulls a wooden rocking horse out of a box. It looks hand-crafted, hand-painted, and very, very old. “Great-Grandfather Blossom used to play with it. Isn’t it magnificent?”

Great-Grandfather Blossom - that’s Jasper, isn’t it?

“It’s beautiful.” Polly awes at the toy, running her fingers over the head of the horse.

“We just want you to know that Thornhill’s gates will always be open to you.” If Betty squinted, she would be able to see that Penelope is actually begging instead of inviting Polly to stay with her. “The child would want for nothing - you would want for nothing.”

“Do you think you can just waltz in here with a bedbug-infested Trojan horse, wave a blank cheque around, and steal my daughter?” Hal narrows his eyes. Alice hisses his name out of the corner of her
“I didn’t think you wanted her.” Penelope smirks, her eyes dropping to his curled fists. “Didn’t you want to exile her to the Sisters of Quiet Mercy like some pariah?”

“She’s staying with us.” Alice glares. “And if anything, it was to keep you away from your family.” She rises from her seat; Betty pinches the bridge of her nose while Polly awkwardly clears her throat and drops her gaze to the floor. “She is not gonna step foot in that twisted, poisonous house of yours.”

“So you didn’t want to ship her off to the Sisters because you were ashamed?” Penelope’s on her feet now; she takes a couple of steps towards Alice, her sneer growing wider and wider. “If you think you’re more capable of taking care of her than us, why did your own daughter choose running away from home over living with you?”

“Mother-” Cheryl starts, but Penelope raises a hand to silence her.

“Is it possible that Polly thought living on her own in God knows where was better than being with her own family?”

Betty can feel it coming again - that weird disconnect from when she was stuck in the middle of an argument between her mother, Fred Andrews, Archie, and Miss Grundy. She grips onto the fireplace mantle for support just in case her brain decides to disobey her again and do its own thing; she can feel Veronica’s stare boring holes into her but she keeps her own eyes trained on her fragmented family.

“How dare you-” Alice steps in to close the gap, and Hal is about to join her when Polly scrambles to her feet and pulls both of her parents back.

“That’s enough!” There are tears clinging to her eyelashes. “All of you! This is why Jason and I chose to leave this place - because of this hate, this pointless, stupid fighting.”

Regret shadows Alice’s features and she reaches out to Polly. “Honey, don’t-”

“Don’t touch me.” Polly recoils. “We were supposed to be together, and you didn’t let us have that - neither of you. And I may not know where Jason is right now but what I know for sure is that he’s in a lot of danger, and it’s all thanks to you.”

The room is heavy with silence. Hal abruptly curses under his breath before storming out of the apartment. Hermione lets out an awkward laugh, downs the rest of her wine, and tries to bring the party back to life by announcing the caterers have dinner prepared in the dining room. Desperate for something to do, the crowd listens and quickly follows her lead, leaving the Cooper girls on their own.

“B?” Veronica’s just about to head into the other room with Cheryl; both of them look worried. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“Y-yeah.” Betty nods, but she isn’t looking at either of them. “I’ll join you soon.” When her friends leave, she mechanically returns to her seat.

“Polly, I’m sorry.” Alice sighs, “It’s just…that woman-”

“Didn’t want to send me away, or tried to convince me to have an abortion.” Polly cuts in. “And if you didn’t do any of that, if you just left Jason and I alone, none of this would’ve ever happened. We would’ve never had to run away, Jason would’ve never had to risk his life just to get us out of here.”
She sniffs and swipes at her eyes with an arm. “You would’ve rather left me alone in some home for troubled kids instead of doing what a good mother should do and supporting her child, even if you didn’t agree with my choices.”

“I never wanted you to feel alone, or unwanted, or unloved.” Alice pleads. “I promise you, you’ll never have to feel that way again.”

Their voices are getting quieter and quieter but Betty knows they aren’t moving farther away.

“What about Dad?” Polly asks.

“Dad’s just going to have to get over it.” Betty forces herself to speak, but the words feel strange on her tongue, like she’s speaking a language she didn’t know she was fluent in.

“Are you sure he isn’t going to just try and make another appointment for me?” There’s biting sarcasm in Polly’s voice.

“You heard him earlier - he said he still loved you even though he doesn’t agree with everything you’ve done. He’s going to learn to accept everything whether he likes it or not.” Alice tries to reach for Polly again, and this time she lets her. “Give me a second chance, Polly. Come home with us tonight.”

Polly slowly raises her head to give her mother and sister a smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

Alice cries the entire drive home. When they reach the front steps of their house it takes Alice several tries to unlock the door because the tears are preventing her from seeing clearly. She collapses on the couch in the family room, and the only thing Betty can do is hold her and wait for the sobbing to stop.

“I’m sorry, Mom.” Her tone is flat and lifeless. “We tried.”

Alice finally falls asleep a couple of hours later, completely tuckered out from her broken heart. Betty quietly makes her way up the steps and into her room, pulling her phone out of her pocket and tossing it on her end table before falling face-first onto her bed. She tries to focus on the softness of the sheets and the way her pillow smells like fabric softener, but she can feel herself floating farther and farther away from her body. Her fingers curl over the edges of her mattress, as if gripping onto it hard enough will keep her in place.

She sighs and rolls on her back before reaching for her phone. Maybe she should talk to Veronica - talking to another human being might help remind her that she’s real, that she exists.

Her screen flashes with two new notifications: A text from Cheryl reassuring her that she’s going to keep an eye on Polly and make sure her mother doesn’t do anything to her, and a missed call from Jughead. Apparently he called her ten minutes ago, but she didn’t seem to hear her phone ring or feel it vibrate even though she knows for sure it was in her pocket during the time that he called. Apparently she’s worse than she thought.

When she calls him, he picks up in two rings. “Betty?” He’s breathing hard, and it sounds like he’s outside.
“Jug?” She forces the inflection in her words to make it sound like she’s capable of expressing emotion. “Where are you?”

“I have bad news.” He pauses for a second; is he running?

“Just tell me.” She mutters. “I’m not in the mood for dramatics right now.”

“The box is gone. Someone must’ve stolen it.”

“Well, we still have the photocopies we made.” Betty bolts straight up and makes a beeline for her desk, but her heart plummets to her stomach when she doesn’t find what she’s looking for. “No, no, no...no...” She rushes into the hallway and barges into her parents’ home office, sifting through every sheet of paper she can find. “Shit.”

“Betty? What is it? What's wrong?” Jughead’s voice goes unheard as she tears through her house, combing through every single room and crying in frustration when she finds nothing. The hand that isn't holding her phone is clenched tight; the blood from the open wounds on her palms is trickling down her wrist and staining the cuff of her sleeve.

“It's gone.” She sniffls as she curls up on her sister's bed like the helpless child that she is. “All of it. It's all gone.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title (And the song that plays in The Roving Eye) is taken from "Pretty Girl" by Hayley Kiyoko.
“What?” Jughead splutters in disbelief. “What do you mean, it’s gone?”

“I mean exactly what I mean, Jughead.” Betty groans as she forces herself up, stumbling out of her sister’s room and into the bathroom so she can rinse out her wounds. “I searched everywhere. All of my notes, the photocopies, everything - someone must have stolen it.”

“But who?” There’s a strange rustling in the background. “Clifford Blossom is still out hunting for his son. He’s the only likely culprit.”

“C’mon, Jug - the answer’s obvious.” Betty places her phone on the edge of the sink and turns on the speakerphone so she can dab at her cuts with some cotton swab and antiseptic. “Ow!”

“Betts?” Jughead’s tone rises with alarm. “You okay?”

“Y-yeah, yeah.” She grimaces, continuing to curse under her breath as she rummages through the medicine cabinet for gauze. “I just…stubbed my toe. Where the hell are you, by the way? Actually, where have you been the past couple days?”

“Not important.” He replies hastily, which prompts Betty to raise an eyebrow in suspicion. “Now, who else did you say might’ve stolen our stuff?”

“My dad.” She clumsily wraps the gauze around her hand, her teeth clenching tight as she painfully attempts to make a fist. “He knew my mom and I were going to be at the shower, so it was the perfect opportunity for him to break in and take all of our notes without anyone noticing. He must’ve found out somehow that you had the original copies and went and stole those too.”

“But he was at the shower with you guys, wasn’t he?”

“He came late and he left early. There was plenty of time to pop in, take everything, and leave.” Betty takes her phone off speaker, shuffles back into Polly’s room, and collapses face-first onto her bed. “He was acting weird at the shower - like, he was being overly nice, as if he never hated Polly for dating Jason in the first place. It was so…out of place, It made me feel like he was hiding something, or buttering us up. Does that make any sense?”

“I think so.” Jughead pauses for a second. “Open up.”

Betty bolts back up. “What?”

“I’m outside.”

In a half-daze she somehow makes her way downstairs without waking up her mother, who is still passed out on the couch in the family room. She quietly opens the door and finds Jughead standing there, his face flushed and his shoulders heaving up and down with laboured breaths. The fuzzy collar of his corduroy sherpa jacket is slouching off his shoulder. “Did you run here?”
“It was an emergency.” He protests as he makes his way inside. “Where did you last leave your notes?”

“My room.” She places a finger to her lips as she leads him upstairs. “My mom’s asleep, so don’t make too much noise.”

“Hold on.” He wraps his fingers around her wrist, and she glances over her shoulder to look at him. Underneath his sheepish expression, he looks rather gaunt - more than usual - and there’s a bit of dirt smudged under his cheek.

“Jughead,” Betty slowly rolls his name on her tongue, her eyes narrowing. “When was the last time you’ve eaten something? And when I mean something, I mean food that isn’t pre-frozen or canned.” When he fails to give her an answer, she abruptly changes course and pulls him into the kitchen.

“Wait, Betty.” He protests, though his eyes are glued on the bowl of fruit sitting on the island counter.

“Sit down.” She points to the table and wrenches the fridge door open.

“I was going to ask you if your mom knew anything about this,” He grumbles as he obeys her orders and settles down on one of the chairs. “Not if you had anything to eat.”

“Jughead, we’ve been friends for years, and I know for a fact that you can’t function without food.” She rolls her eyes as she pulls out last night’s leftovers - meat loaf, mashed potatoes, green beans, and gravy. She prepares a plate for him and sticks it in the microwave. When the food is finished heating up, she places the plate in front of him. “Don’t act like you don’t want this.”

“Shut up.” He immediately digs in, and Betty smirks triumphantly before taking the seat across from him. He practically shovels the food into his mouth, and Betty would’ve found this amusing if not for the very likely possibility that he probably hasn’t had a home cooked meal in months.

“Jughead…” She begins to trace circles on the wooden tabletop with an index finger. “Before we talk about the missing notes, I have something to ask you.”

“What happened to your hand?” His mouth is partially full and it’s kind of hard to understand him, but he’s pointing his fork towards her bandaged hand and she immediately puts two and two together. “I thought you said you stubbed your toe.”

“Accident from the shower.” Betty briskly replies, leaning back against her chair and clearing her throat. “Mom dropped a wine glass and I cut my hand trying to clean it up.” Jughead looks unconvinced, but she plows on anyway. “Archie and I saw your dad on Saturday.”

Jughead stops eating. He drops his utensils and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “Well, Riverdale’s a small town.”

“We went to the White Wyrm.” Betty keeps her eyes trained on his, which are growing wider and more fearful. “He was with the Southside Serpents. He’s their leader, Jughead - all he had to do was say a few words and the crowd parted for him like he was their messiah or something. He was wearing a jacket with a fricking snake on it! You knew about this all along, didn’t you?”

Jughead lowers his head just enough so he can break eye contact with her. She can tell he’s embarrassed and she starts to feel bad, so she softens her tone. “Jug, what’s been going on lately? Is everything okay with you and your dad?”

“I told you he’s leaning on the bottle again.” He mutters as he hesitantly returns to his food. “It drove
“Does him being a Southside Serpent have anything to do with it?”

“I’ve had to deal with him being a Serpent my entire life.” He sighs and begins to push the rest of his mashed potatoes around his plate with his fork. “He left when me and Jellybean came along as a promise to my mom, but the Serpents were never far away. He re-joined after Archie’s dad fired him because it was the only job he could hold down; he kept it a secret from her…but she obviously found out. That and the drinking.”

Betty shakes her head, not really sure what to say, or if she should say anything at all. “Geez…I’m sorry, Juggie. I had no idea any of this was happening.”

“I didn’t want anyone to know - especially Archie.” He shrugs. “You know how he is with helping people.”

The blonde chuckles. “That’s supposed to be a bad thing?”

“He’s probably pissed.” Jughead forlornly scoops the last of the meat loaf into his mouth, swallowing in record time. “But what can I even say? His dad is sort of - no, he is the reason why my dad’s back with the Serpents…even if he did have a good reason for firing him.” He heaves a defeated sigh and pushes his plate away, leaning against the back of his chair and shaking his head. “I don’t know, Betts. I can only take so many empty promises. I hate it when he disappoints me, y’know? I hate what he did to my mom, what he did to our family. Sure, we were far from perfect, but at least there was a semblance of normalcy when we were under the same roof.”

“The longer you hold off from talking to Archie about this, the angrier he’s going to get.” Betty slides her injured hand over his, but he twitches and pulls away. Sometimes she forgets he isn’t a fan of being touched. “He thinks you’re keeping this from him because…” Flashback to Saturday at the back of Fred’s truck, staring into Archie’s distraught face. Guilt stabs into her when she remembers the way his eyes lost their lustre when she told him about Jughead’s living situation, and suddenly she can feel a stinging coming to her eyes.

“Betty?” Jughead’s terrified. “Uh, are you-”

“S-sorry.” She runs her sleeve across her face, laughing nervously. “It’s just…he really does care about you, Jughead. He thinks you’re keeping this a secret because you know your dad had a hand in Moose’s attack or whatever.”

“And I know for a fact that he didn’t.” Jughead’s voice hardens again and the anger returns to his face, but Betty’s so, so tired of this. “So if you could just tell him-”

“Can the both of you just drop this stupid male ego thing already and just talk to each other?” She rolls her eyes. “You know I love you both, but I’m not going to choose sides or act as your messenger because you’re too full of testosterone and pride to do the grownup thing and talk face-to-face.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Jughead raises up his hands to show he concedes. “I’ll talk to him, okay? I’ll find a way to talk to him about this - I promise.” He leans forward, resting his forearms on the table. “Now, back to our original conversation - does your mom know anything about this, and what motive would your dad have for stealing the box and our notes? Don’t you think he’d want us to prove whether or not Jasper actually killed Charles?”

“She does; I told her everything, and she looked at all of our stuff and thinks we have a real case. I
think she wants to help out. As for my dad…I don’t know, maybe he wants to take the investigation in his own hands or something.” Betty shrugs, though she has to admit that she didn’t think of that before. If there’s blatant evidence of the murder, wouldn’t her father want the news to go public? He’d encourage her and Jughead to continue searching for clues, instead of trying to impede…right? “He’s the only person who would have a motive for stealing them - the only person who’s around, that is. If Cliff Blossom wasn’t running around the country looking for Jason I’d say it was him.”

Jughead pulls off his beanie, revealing a mop of messy black hair. “Okay, so let’s say your dad stole everything. How do we get them back?”

“I know where his Sharebnb is.” Betty suggests. “We can break in and steal them back.” She grabs Jughead’s plate and heads over to the dishwasher. “Would it be weird if I asked your dad questions about this?”

She doesn’t have to turn around to see Jughead’s aghast expression, because she can hear it in his tone. “Do I even have to answer that?”

“Think about it, Jughead.” She returns to her seat. “The Serpents were the last people to see Jason before he left Riverdale. Clifford could’ve found out from them.”

“Cheryl also knew about it.” Jughead’s reply is swift, defensive. “What if he wrung the truth out of her?”

“Cheryl would’ve told us if that was the case.” Betty sighs. “I get it, Jug - you don’t want your dad to disappoint you further, but you have to be open to the possibility that he might be involved in this. What if he knew about Jason and Polly’s plan to run away and hid it from you all this time? You’d want to know why, right?”

“Yeah.” His eyes are concentrated on his hands, which are fiddling with his beanie on the tabletop. His voice is small, almost childlike.

“Then we have to consider him a suspect.” Betty’s hand twitches as she thinks about reaching out to him again, but she decides against it. “We have to talk to him. He might know something. Sometimes the answer’s where we least expect it.”

“Right.” Jughead rises to his feet and pulls his beanie back on. “Okay, I guess that’s our next course of action. We don’t really have anything else.”

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” Betty raises an eyebrow. “It’s the middle of the night. Whoever stole Rose Blossom’s box knows where you sleep now - it isn’t safe. You can take Polly’s room.”

“Where’s Polly sleeping?”

“She, uh…” Her hand begins to sting again, and she lets out a watery sigh. “She decided to stay with the Blossoms.”

“Gee, Betts - that’s tough. I’m sorry.” He half-turns and awkwardly reaches towards her, stiffly patting her on the shoulder. Jughead was never really good with dealing with emotions, so him actually making an effort to try and comfort her means a lot. It’s enough to make her feel better, at least for now. “Look, let me talk to my dad, okay?” He ambles over to the front door and throws her a tired smile. “You worry about finding those notes.”

“Don’t forget to talk to Archie!” She calls out to him as he makes her way out of her house and down the front steps. He raises his hand in acknowledgement when he hits the pavement, whistling
an unfamiliar tune to himself with his hands in his pockets.

“What?” Betty blinks incredulously as she and Archie cross the street the next morning.

“I swear!” He chuckles and shoulders his bag. “Jughead comes knocking at my door at, like…one in the morning, demanding that I come outside to talk to him.” He raises a hand and ruffles the back of his head. “He explained everything, about moving out of his dad’s place, the Serpents…why do I have a feeling you were involved in this somehow?”

She shrugs, but she’s unable to conceal the giant grin on her face. “I may or may not have nagged him into doing something about his living situation.”

“I talked to my dad about it and he said he’s gonna offer FP his old job back.” Archie’s grin is rivalling hers. “It took some convincing, but Jughead and I are gonna make it work. We’ll help his dad get back on his feet, and he can move back in with him once he’s all settled.”

“Is he going to live with you in the meantime?”

“Well,” Archie frowns. “I told him he’s more than welcome to stay at my place but you know how he is. He wants to figure stuff out on his own, get things sorted out with his dad first.” He sighs as he raises his head; Riverdale High is just a couple of blocks down. “I didn’t believe you at first when you said he was sleeping under the stairs at our school. I wanted to believe that you were lying.”

“Why would I lie about something like that?” Betty protests, but Archie holds his hand up to stop her.

“I know, I know. I was just…” He pauses, like he has to think about what to say. “Angry, I guess. You and Jughead have been spending a lot of time together lately—”

“Because we’re trying to solve the mystery of my great-grandfather’s murder.” She hastily interrupts him, desperately trying to find a way to divert the conversation from a topic she really doesn’t want to talk about right now. “I’m sorry we haven’t kept you in the loop about this, Archie. In fact, I feel horrible about not being there for you as often as I should be.”

“Don’t sweat it.” He gives her a weak smile, and it only makes her feel worse. “Things have been weird lately, so it’s hard to keep track of anything.” He frowns. “So you have no idea why Polly decided to stay with the Blossoms? And what makes you think your dad’s the one who stole all your stuff?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Arch. I texted her this morning just to check up on her but I haven’t heard back from her yet.” She sighs when they finally reach school grounds. “As for our stuff, I don’t even know where to start looking.”

“Looking for what?” Veronica unexpectedly pops up in between them, startling the duo. Her gaze immediately drops to Betty’s bandaged hand, and the blonde retaliates by quickly pushing it into the pocket of her varsity jacket.

“Clues.” She mumbles half-heartedly, knowing Veronica’s going to grill her on the hand thing the second Archie’s gone. “When I got home from the shower last night, all of my notes from the investigation were gone - then Jughead called and told me that the box full of Jasper’s things were
“But didn’t you say he believes Cheryl’s great grandfather killed yours?” The brunette cants her head like she always does when she’s confused, and Betty inwardly curses herself when she feels her heart leap. “Why would he want to hide evidence that proves he was right?”

“That’s what Jughead said, but who else would’ve stolen them? He’s the only one with a motive - aside from Clifford Blossom, but he’s not in Riverdale.” The trio enter the school and make their way towards Betty’s locker. “It has to be him.”

Archie pulls out his phone and squints at the screen. “Oh, crap - I forgot I was supposed to meet Val in the music room. I’ll catch you guys in class!” He zooms off down the hallway, and the girls laugh at his retreating form for a moment.

“Y’know, it’s nice to see him in a happy, healthy relationship with a girl who isn’t twice his age.” Veronica muses as Betty pulls out her English binder from her locker - and right on schedule, she leans closer and speaks in a tone only the blonde can hear. “Speaking of happy and healthy…are you okay, B?”

Her fingers skirt over the bandages, forcing Betty to suck in a sharp breath. “I-it was just…” Her brain is foggy and unclear because Veronica’s standing so damn close, and she swears she’s never hated herself more than she does now. This isn’t the time to be a lovesick, useless lesbian. “Last night was a lot to take in with Polly and my notes getting stolen. I needed to feel in control of something, anything - I know it sounds stupid…”

“It doesn’t,” Veronica gently pries her injured hand open, frowning as she pulls her fingers across the taller girl’s palm. “But the next time you feel the need to do this, the next time you think you’re going to do it, you tell me, okay? I don’t care if it’s 4 in the morning, I don’t care if it happens at the exact same time a new episode of The Bachelorette is on.” Her eyes find hers, and Betty wants to drown in those brown irises. She wants to sink in their warmth and never, ever kick back to the surface. “Call, and I’ll come running - no matter where you are.”

God, if only they weren’t standing in the middle of a crowded school hallway right now… “O-okay.”

Veronica dips her head and drops a kiss on the centre of Betty’s palm. Dumbfounded, the blonde watches as the shorter girl closes her hand and kisses the back of it before weaving their fingers together. What did she do to deserve two kisses on the hand and a hand-hold? “C’mon, we’re gonna be late.”

Betty can’t help but feel self-conscious as the two of them make their way towards English class together hand-in-hand. It suddenly feels like the entire school is staring at them, but every time she glances around no one is actually paying attention - or at least it looks like they aren’t. Does everyone just assume they’re together now, or are they just used to Veronica being so touchy-feely with pretty much everyone?

*But she’s especially touchy-feely with you,* Her mind teases as they enter the classroom together, taking their usual seats. Jughead’s already at his desk, cheerily munching on a bag of chips.

“Isn’t it a bit too early for that?” Veronica wrinkles her nose in disdain. Jughead responds by staring her straight in the eye, grabbing a large fistful of chips, and shoving them into his mouth, chewing nosily and allowing a few of the crumbs to tumble onto his shirt and pants. Betty suppresses a snort as Veronica rolls her eyes.
A few more students trickle in, including Archie, Valerie, and Kevin, and class finally begins. They’re going to sit through yet another round of presentations; the assignment was to write a creative piece of work in any kind of form and present it to the class. Betty initially hated the idea, but Jughead insisted that if she was going to be a big shot journalist someday she was going to need to be comfortable with loads of people getting exposed to her writing. She already presented her work last week: She wrote an “investigative article” on the Elm Street Pooper, a seemingly invisible assailant who left sizeable turds in Alice Cooper’s rose garden at the exact same time every single day. After doing some super serious detective work, she concluded that the culprit was none other than Vegas, Archie’s dog. Needless to say, everyone loved it.

Unlike the rest of her friends, who looked bored to death, she enjoyed listening to the other students’ presentations. Before she knows it, nearly an hour has passed and they’re down to the last presenter of the day: Ethel Muggs. The poor girl’s knees are shaking and her voice is quivering with nervousness, but the poem she’s reciting is surprisingly dark and vulnerable. With every new line, Betty finds herself pulled in further.

“They put me in a wooden box,
As I desperately opposed.
But all my screaming was for naught;
My mouth had been sewn closed.

Crawled up in bed was just a girl,
Needing Daddy’s arms to hold her.”

This clearly came from personal experience, but what could’ve happened to her that would inspire something so bleak?

The bell rings not long after Ethel finishes, and the first thing Betty notices is how quick Veronica leaps from her seat to follow Ethel out into the hallway. She turns to Kevin, who shrugs in response, and the two decide to leave together.

“What do you think that was about?” He asks when they make a left back towards Betty’s locker.

“I don’t know, but I’d like to find out.” She can feel the beginnings of jealousy festering in her gut but she knows this isn’t the time for that. If Veronica connected with Ethel’s poem, that means she’s going through a lot more than she’s letting on - and what kind of friend would Betty be if she isn’t helping her with her own problems?

Both of them have spare period now, and since there really isn’t anywhere else to go they end up in the student lounge. When Kevin opens the door, Betty’s surprised to find Veronica chatting with Ethel on one of the couches.

The brunette turns her head in their direction, beaming. “Betty and Kevin will be there!”

“Yeah?” Veronica’s almost bouncing in her seat with excitement.

“Yeah.” Ethel gathers her things and rises to her feet.
“Great! I’ll see you Saturday.” Veronica calls after her as she waves goodbye. When Ethel’s gone, she enthusiastically pats the spot next to her. “Come, come!”

“Uh, what was that about?” Kevin sits to her left and Betty takes the right.

“You guys heard her poem.” Veronica shrugs. “It was a cry for help, if I’ve ever heard one.” She pauses, her expression softening; she bites her bottom lip and her brow crinkles with thought, like she has to really think about what she’s going to say next. “The likes of which I’ve vowed never to ignore, not after…”

“Oh, this is gonna be good.” Kevin’s tone is light, teasing, but it doesn’t settle whatever’s brewing within her.

Betty decides to return the favour for once and moves her hand over hers, her fingers filling in the spaces between the brunette’s as she squeezes reassuringly. The shorter of the two visibly relaxes, her shoulders shrinking and the creases on her forehead slowly fading, but her frown stubbornly stays put. “Okay, so last year at Spence my girlfriend Katy and I terrorized this other girl, Paige.”

Wait, wait, wait.

Wait.

Did she just say-

“Hold on.” Kevin shakes his head. “When you say girlfriend, do you mean like a best friend that’s a girl? Sorry to detract from what sounds like is going be a very personal conversation about your mean girl past, but why do straight girls always refer to their platonic female friends as girlfriends? If you’re gonna use the word girlfriend use it as it was intended to be used; it’s very misleading!”

Veronica’s still frowning, but she looks more annoyed than distressed. “I’m not trying to mislead you.”

Oh.

Oh.

Betty suddenly feels dizzy, like she just spent the past few seconds twirling in circles. She can barely feel the couch she’s sitting on, let alone Veronica’s hand in hers. Did someone turn up the heat in this room? Why is it so hot in here?

If she ever goes back to feeling normal, the first thing she’s going to do is murder Kevin. She knows that he knows what Veronica meant when she said girlfriend; the faux shock on his face is frustratingly easy to read. He totally baited Veronica into talking about this so he can prove a point - and boy, was his point proven.

“Wait,” Betty’s tongue feels thick and spongey. She has no idea how she’s able to form coherent words. “So you’re…?”

“Bisexual. Have been for years,” The shorter girl casually finishes for her, like they’re discussing something as easy as the weather. “And I’ve never tried to hide it. Kevin, I expected better from you. Didn’t you tell me you stalked my Instagram profile from top to bottom when you heard I was moving to Riverdale?”

“Well, yes, but I didn’t want to assume-”

“There are a lot of unassuming photos in there. Plus, you just assumed I was straight.” The brunette
counters with a flat tone. Betty’s still trying to recover after short-circuiting over Veronica openly declaring her bisexuality - that, and the fact that they’re still holding hands even after her declaration like there isn’t a double meaning or not-so-hidden message behind it.

“Can I continue now?” Veronica gives Betty’s hand a squeeze, which hurls her further down the hole. Just when she thought the dizzy/floaty feeling was beginning to go away, it comes back in a whirlwind, knocking the poor, overwhelmed blonde back against the couch. She swears she can see a knowing smirk teasing the corners of Veronica’s red lips, but she attributes it to wishful thinking because she can’t take any more truth bombs right now. “Anyways, we were terrible to this girl. One time, we made her drink gutter water.”

That one sentence was enough to bring her crashing back to reality. “Ew.” Kevin scrunches up his face in disgust. “Why?”

“Because she was…there.” Veronica throws up her free hand. “Because she was a misfit and we were class-A brutal bitches. By December, Paige couldn’t take it anymore.”

“Oh my God.” Kevin gapes. “Did you drive her to suicide?”

Veronica actually looks like she’s going to cry. “Her parents found her unconscious on the bathroom floor with an empty bottle of aspirin. If they waited a moment longer to take her to the ER she wouldn’t have made it. She ended up transferring schools and going into therapy.”

The shorter girl’s face is wrought with grief. Kevin and Betty exchange apprehensive glances, not really sure what to do. Veronica just confessed that she almost made another girl kill herself - what are they supposed to say? Oh, I’m so sorry? That doesn’t sound right; it’s almost like you’re offering condolences, like the girl died or something. Betty tries to run through a quick list of replies in her head but she can’t pick one. They all sound indirectly offensive in one way or another.

“V…” Is all she can manage to say. Her sentence trails off and she resorts to squeezing her friend’s hand, hoping the gesture will tell her everything she wants to say.

“If I can make Ethel Muggs’ life a little better, even for one afternoon, I’m going to do it.” Veronica squeezes back. She glances at Kevin, then turns to lock eyes with Betty. “I’m through with the girl I used to be, and if I’m not making a conscious decision to step farther and farther away from that girl with every passing day I’m not doing this right. Ethel deserves to be happy, and she deserves to know that she isn’t alone.”

“They’re settled.” Kevin smiles. “We’ll do something nice for her. All of us.”

“I told her to come over for dinner on the weekend, and that you’ll all be there.” Veronica’s voice cracks a bit, like she’s trying to hold in tears. Suddenly it feels like someone just dropped a large rock on Betty’s chest; there’s an unmistakable heaviness pressing down on her, threatening to crack her ribcage and crush her lungs. It’s a strange, suffocating sort of pain, sort of like the way she feels when she knows Archie’s heartbroken over her not reciprocating his feelings, but a hundred times worse. She looks at Veronica and the unshed tears glossed over her eyes and she hears the wavering in her voice and she can feel that rock sinking farther and farther into her.

“We’ll be there, V.” Betty croaks under the crushing weight, forcing herself to squeeze her hand one last time. Veronica smiles back, and just like that the rock suddenly loses ten pounds.
“Slow down.” Cheryl heaves a dramatic sigh before reaching into her locker for her top. “Take a deep breath. Start from the beginning - and in a frequency human beings can hear, please.”

“Did you know about this?” Betty’s frantically pacing the girls’ change room, still decked out in her softball practice clothes. “Veronica’s attracted to girls! She’s been attracted to girls this entire time and I’m only finding out now!”

“You can’t be serious.” She can practically hear Cheryl rolling her eyes. “You needed her to say she was bi in order for you to figure out she was bi? How much more obvious did it have to be, Elizabeth? Should I have blasted Halsey from my phone every time she held your hand?”

Betty can feel her cheeks burning. “I wasn’t going to assume anything! You can’t just slap a label on someone just because you think they’re something!”

“Trust me, Tegan or Sara, the only person who was assuming anything was you.” Cheryl emerges from her locker fully dressed in her Vixens uniform. “You are pathetically slow on the uptake, aren’t you? Then again, it only took you sixteen years to figure out you were gay.”

If her cheeks were burning before, they’re practically incinerating now. “Cut it out - I already hear enough of it from Kevin.”

“Whatever. Your love life isn’t terribly important to me.” The redhead flips her hair over her shoulder. “I thought you wanted to know how your dear sister was.”

Oh, right - Polly. Her sister. Her sister, who voluntarily left her own family and went to live with another family because she couldn’t stand how messed up her home life was. “Is she okay? How’s the baby?”

“Well, it turns out Nana was right about the whole twins thing.” Cheryl is annoyingly casual about this, her eyes half-closed and her tone dull like she’s talking about something as mundane as paint drying. “They visited the doctor this morning and I was informed that she is indeed carrying twins - a boy and a girl.”

Maybe Rose is a witch after all… “Uh, wow.”

“I don’t trust my mother one bit around her, but not to worry - I’ll keep an eye out.” Cheryl bends over to pick up the pair of pom poms sitting on the bench.

“I’ve been trying to text and call her but she isn’t answering.” Betty frowns. “I understand not wanting to talk to our parents, but…” She bites her lip and sits on one end of the bench; she opens her injured hand and caresses the bandages with the other. “Polly and I used to never hide things from each other. We never kept secrets. Now I feel like I don’t even know her at all.”

“Hey.” Cheryl sits next to her and places a hand on her shoulder. “Jason and I never used to keep things from each other either, and look what happened to that. I think, in any kind of relationship, it’s okay to keep a few secrets. We all have a few things we’d rather keep to ourselves, and there’s nothing wrong with that.” She squeezes, and Betty unconsciously raises her bandaged hand to place it on top of Cheryl’s. “They wanted to tell us everything eventually, but things just got…a little mixed up before they were able to. It sucks, but we have to make the best of it.”

It’s always so jarring when Cheryl is being nice to her. A part of her still thinks she has an ulterior, more sinister motive. “You’re right.” She laughs humorlessly to herself and wipes her eyes. “I’m sorry for being so selfish - I keep forgetting that you’re more or less going through the same thing I am.”
“It’s not selfish.” Cheryl chides. “Now, I have a question for you: Who do you think would anger my parents the most if I brought them as an escort to our annual tree-tapping ceremony this weekend?”

Betty raises an eyebrow. “Tree-tapping ceremony?”

“It’s some stupid family tradition that supposedly honours the Blossom bloodline or whatever.” The redhead answers flippantly before closing her locker door. “The maple tapping’s something Jason and I have done since we could walk, but since he isn’t here I’m going to have to take someone else. It lasts the whole weekend and it’s very, very exclusive.”

“This sounds like an important event; shouldn’t both your brother and dad be present for this?”

Cheryl shrugs. “So it seems, but this week’s the official start of the maple syrup season, and Daddy insisted we carry on without him this year.” Her expression darkens. “According to Mother, he said he had very important business to attend to, and as much as he wanted to be here to upkeep family tradition, he couldn’t stray away from his work.”

“Which means he’s still looking for Jason.” Betty tacks on, and Cheryl nods in agreement. “Well, I guess that’s a good thing; it means we still have some time. Who did you have in mind in terms of an escort?”

“Archibald was my first choice, naturally, but he turned down the offer.” Cheryl sighs dramatically. “Says he has a girlfriend, even though this request has absolutely no romantic intent behind it whatsoever, but after giving it some thought I realized that he would be the one person my parents would’ve wanted to come in Jason’s place, so it wasn’t a good idea anyway.”

Betty suppresses a snort. “So you’re basically looking for the exact opposite of Archie.” Cheryl nods again. “What about Reggie?”

“Also thought about it, but he’s still too ideal: Comes from a reputable family, has money and good connections…I need someone they absolutely despise, someone they can’t wring some kind of benefit out of.” Cheryl taps her chin and scrunches her brow in thought; exactly five seconds later, her chestnut eyes widen with a sudden revelation. “That’s it!”

“What?”

“I can’t believe I haven’t thought of this earlier.” Cheryl’s grin is slanted and wicked, and for some reason it’s making Betty very nervous. “That hobo friend of yours - Forsythe!” Her expression remains unchanged, even after Betty bursts out into a fit of hysterical laughter. “Laugh all you want, but he’s the perfect candidate: Homeless, possesses no connections to anyone worthwhile, lacks any sense of personal style, manners, class, or-”

“Insults aside, I actually agree with you, Cheryl.” Betty’s wiping the tears from her eyes. “What I find hilarious is that you actually think you have what it takes to convince him to go to this thing.”

“You’re not very fluent in the language of persuasion, are you?” Cheryl’s smirk is still stretched across her bright red lips. She jokingly shakes her pom poms. “I know food is his kryptonite, so that won’t be a problem - plus, with Daddy still gone, this gives your partner in crime easy access to his quarters in Thornhill. He could snoop around all he wants - my mother will be too preoccupied trying to entertain the board of trustees the entire evening - and unearth whatever clues you may need for your little investigation.”

Now that sounds like too good an offer; not even Jughead will be able to resist that. After hitting so
many dead ends, this may be the only chance they have right now. “Well, I’ll believe it when I see it.” Betty crosses her arms in an attempt to look more intimidating, but judging by the redhead’s bemused expression it isn’t working.

Cheryl saunters past her, brushing her shoulder against hers and only glancing back when she reaches the door.

“Trust me, Betty dear, you will.”

The week breezes by almost as quickly as the temperature drops. By Saturday morning, Riverdale is blanketed with a thick layer of white, fluffy snow. Road salt sprinkled across the asphalt gives the blacktop a salt and pepper look from the view out of Archie’s bedroom window. On the other side of the frosted glass, the redhead and his ponytailed best friend are rolling with laughter.

“I can’t believe it.” Betty is squirming on Archie’s bed, tears squeezing out of the corners of her eyes. “This is custom-made?”

Jughead’s standing by Archie’s guitar, dressed in a bright red tuxedo with a black satin trim on the lapels. The look is topped off with a black shirt and matching red bowtie. He’s still wearing his beanie, but he promised he’ll take it off when he actually has to wear the suit - which is tomorrow night, at the private dinner with the Blossoms and their board of trustees. Today is the actual tapping ceremony.

He raises his arms and does a half-turn. “What do you think? Totally My Fair Lady-esque, am I right?”

Archie’s sitting backwards on his desk chair, grinning from ear to ear. “The Blossoms paid for all of this? At least you have something to wear to prom now.”

Jughead turns his nose up at prom. “You should have seen Cheryl’s mom’s face when I showed up at Thornhill for the fitting.” He tugs on his jacket lapels and puffs out his chest, examining himself in the mirror. “Is it just me, or is red my colour?”

The blonde finally recomposes herself and rises to her feet, heading over to her friend to pinch a piece of dust sitting on his shoulder. “Okay, seriously now - please, while you’re there, in between your sleuthing - would you talk to Polly for me? I just want to make sure she’s okay.”

“My dad said that FP’s the best foreman he’s ever had.” Archie pipes up. “Things are looking good.”

Jughead doesn’t look as confident. “Well, like what Betty said, it’s only the first week.”

“But it’s a good start, right?” Betty offers, and she frowns when Jughead’s expression doesn’t lighten up. “I know it’s hard to be optimistic, Jug, but I think your dad needs you more than ever right now.
You don’t have to move back in right away, but...you have to let him know that you’re there to support him.”

“I know.” He answers a little too quickly - a sign he wants to change the subject. “Don’t you have a lunch date to go to, or something?”

Archie raises an eyebrow, and she awkwardly clears her throat. “Lunch party. Kevin and Ethel are coming too.”

“Ethel?” The redhead echoes. “I didn’t know she and Veronica were friends.”

“Things haven’t been great at home for her lately, so Veronica wanted to do something nice for her.” Betty shrugs before pulling her phone out of her pocket and glancing at the time. “Crap, I was supposed to be there ten minutes ago!”

“Sorry about that.” Jughead gestures to himself. “I totally get why you’d get lost in thought gawking at this. It really brings out my curves.”

Archie whips a pillow at him. “Okay, this is getting weird.”

“I’ll see you guys later.” Betty laughs as she races down the stairs and out of Archie’s house, hastily throwing on her varsity jacket as she does so. She tries her best to jog to the Pembrooke without slipping on the icy sidewalks; it takes a grand total of fifteen minutes to get there, and when Smithers greets her at the door she’s a sweaty, heaving mess.

“Ah, Miss Cooper.” His expression is slightly confused, and it's clear he's trying very hard trying not to laugh. “We’ve been expecting you.”

“Sorry, sorry...” The blonde continues to mutter a string of semi-coherent sorrys as she sloshes her way across the lobby. Her hands are still numb from the cold by the time she presses the button to the third floor in the elevator; the short ride up gives her a few minutes to shove any wayward blonde strands back into her ponytail. She sucks in a deep breath to steady herself as she steps out of the elevator and half-turns to make her way down the hall, mentally chanting to herself with every step.

This is just a party, you're just hanging out with your friends, this is for Ethel and not for you, it's not a big deal that her mom is going to be there, it's not like the last time you were in her apartment you were carrying her bridal style to her room...

Betty knocks on the door; it opens with a wide swing and Veronica’s standing there with her usual blinding smile and dark, dark eyes - and all coherent thought is wiped from the blonde’s mind. Where is she again? What is she doing here? Has she been here before?

“B! You’re finally here!” The shorter girl exclaims, immediately reaching out to take her hand. She makes a face as she pulls her inside, taking off the varsity jacket for her and briefly stepping away to hang it in the coat closet. “God, you’re ice cold. Did you walk through this dreadful weather?” When she returns she cups her hands around hers and blows on them, frowning.

“Uh.” Betty’s jaw is hanging, too preoccupied with the intimate gesture to come up with a better reply. “Yeah.”

“I could’ve just gotten Smithers to pick you up.” Her laugh, a chorus of silver bells, rings clearly throughout the sitting area as she leads Betty further into the apartment. Kevin and Ethel are sitting in the dining room, with Hermione at the head of the table. “Look who finally decided to show up.” She drags the taller girl over to the table and gestures for her to sit down.
“Sorry for being late.” The blonde finally manages to find her voice again, though she can still feel the heat on her cheeks. She glances up and the first thing she sees is Kevin suspiciously staring back at her; she rolls her eyes, and he smirks.

“No need to apologize,” Hermione, looking so elegant she might as well be the centrepiece in a Renaissance painting, gives her an ethereal smile and nods at the amazing spread of food. “We were just getting started. Please, help yourselves.”

“Did you make all of this yourself, Mrs. Lodge?” Kevin’s tipping a juicy filet mignon from the serving plate onto his own. “It looks and smells divine.”

*Suck up,* Betty mentally mutters to herself as Veronica hands her the salad bowl. They eat in semi-awkward silence for a moment, but it doesn’t last long; Veronica, ever the icebreaker, dives straight into a conversation about the time she bumped into Karlie Kloss while shopping in Paris one summer, and how they ate at a cafe that served the best crepes that ever existed.

“Ethel,” Halfway into the conversion the brunette peers across the table, her eyes dropping on the other girl’s untouched plate. “You haven’t eaten at all.”

“Sorry.” Ethel mumbles, setting down her utensils. “I’m just…not really hungry.”

“Anything we can help with?” Veronica asks a little too eagerly. Betty doesn’t have to look at Kevin to know that they’re both thinking the same thing right now: Why is she trying so hard? There’s the whole bullying thing, but why does she have the feeling that there’s more to this?

“It’s just my parents.” Ethel sighs. “All they do is yell at each other.”

Betty wants to show her support for both Ethel and Veronica, so she chimes into the conversation. “My parents are fighting right now too. It’s terrible.”

“I think my dad had some bad luck with our savings.” Ethel’s eyes lower to her hands, which are fidgeting with each other on her lap. “Now my mom says we’re gonna have to sell the house. My dad is just so…crushed. I wish there something I could do to help him.”

“Girl,” Veronica’s voice is uncharacteristically soft. “We have a lot more in common than I thought. We lost our place at The Dakota.” She half-rises from her seat and leans across the table to pat Ethel’s hand. “Look, being ruined sucks…but you have your family and you have us. You’ve got this, Ethel Muggs.”

At the mention of Ethel’s name, Hermione’s expression questionably darkens. “Muggs?” She echoes her daughter, her eyebrows high on her forehead.

Ethel looks confused. “Uh, it’s Dutch. We lost the third G when my Grandpa Manfred came over.”

Hermione responds by scooping up her wine glass and draining whatever’s left in it in one gulp. Veronica’s face scrunches with confusion, and Betty’s sure her expression isn’t much different than hers. What exactly is it about the Muggs’ misfortune that would cause Hermione to act so strangely? Does she know something that they don’t know? There has to be something she associates with Ethel that would elicit such a reaction, but whatever it is Betty knows she won’t be able to find out what that is - at least not now.

The dinner thankfully manages to resume with minimal awkwardness. At the end, Betty offers to help clear the table but Hermione insists that she and Veronica do it, as she needs to speak with her daughter in private. Naturally, this raises suspicions.
“I’ll call you the second I’m able to.” Veronica whispers to her as she, Kevin, and Ethel get ready to leave. She pushes up on her tiptoes and plants a swift kiss to the blonde’s cheek. “Thank you for coming tonight. I really appreciate it.”

She likes girls.

She likes girls.

She likes girls.

Kevin snorts, and Betty fights off the temptation to smack him upside the head. “Don’t worry about it, V. I’ll talk to you later.” She waves goodbye before turning to leave the apartment with Kevin and Ethel, and when the door closes behind her she leans against the opposite wall, glancing up at the ceiling and sighing. The spot where Veronica kissed her feels like it’s glowing.

“Look at this smitten kitten.” Kevin smirks, while Ethel stands next to him with a confused look on her face. He takes Ethel by the elbow and leads her down the hallway towards the elevator, leaving an abashed Betty by herself - which was what she actually wanted, because she feels like if she accompanied them home she’d just be tormented by Kevin the entire time.

After giving herself a few minutes to calm down (And an extra couple of minutes to berate herself for being so stupid and lovesick and all that dumb crap) Betty finally gathers herself and leaves the Pembrooke. The brisk walk back to her house was exactly what she needed, and the bitter cold kept her mind distracted from worrying about when Veronica was going to call.

When she steps through the front door of her house, she did not expect to see Jughead sitting with her mother at the kitchen table. Alice is licking a piece of cherry off her thumb as she slides a knife cleanly through a freshly baked pie. “Oh, hello Elizabeth. I didn’t think you’d be back so soon.”

“What exactly is going on here?” Betty quirks an eyebrow as she cautiously enters the kitchen. Jughead, who is wearing a bright red S shirt underneath his sherpa denim jacket, is hungrily licking his lips as he watches Alice drop a gigantic slice onto his plate.

“Why didn’t you tell me your little friend here was our fox in the henhouse? He told me all about that Blossom cult ceremony.”

“First of all, I was completely unaware that the both of you speak to each other in the first place.” The blonde takes a seat across from Jughead, who is too preoccupied with wolfing down his slice of cherry pie to acknowledge her.

“I figured I’d head over here after the ceremony to report back.” Jughead’s mouth is still half-stuffed with food so he’s only semi-coherent. “You’re not far off, Mrs. Cooper - there were some aspects of that tree tapping ceremony that could’ve been b-roll for The Wicker Man.”

“How’s Polly?” Betty shrugs off her jacket and hangs it on her chair. “Is she okay? Did she say why she decided to stay with the Blossoms instead?”

Jughead sets down his fork, frowning. “Couldn’t get a word out of her, unfortunately - but my guess is that she’s there to find out where Jason is, and if he’s even alive. She wants you to know that she shouldn’t worry, but it’s obvious she’s there with a purpose. She wants to get to the bottom of something.” He shrugs. “Aside from that, the Blossoms seem to be treating her just fine - maybe even a little too fine, but seeing as she has two of their spawn growing inside of her they’re probably just taking some extra precaution.”

“She made her choice.” Alice sighs before handing Betty a slice of pie and sitting at the head of the
“Like what-” Her nose wrinkles with displeasure, “-Jughead said, she’s probably there to investigate something, most likely the whereabouts of the father of her twins.”

“There was something Cheryl said about her mom.” Jughead pulls what’s left of the pie closer to him so he can cut himself another slice. “Something about being worried that after the scandal with Jason and Polly, the board of trustees might try and steal the company from the Blossoms.”

Alice’s expression lights up at this. “Do you hear that, Betty? This can be a story - a hostile takeover. The fall of the Blossom empire.”

“But what exactly does this have to do with me and Jughead’s investigation on our great-grandfathers?” Betty fires back. “If you write a story that attacks them while Polly’s still in Thornhill, that’s just going to make things worse - way more worse than things already are! It won’t give Polly a reason to come home.”

“Enough about Polly.” Alice’s tone hardens unexpectedly, which throw both Betty and Jughead off. “She’s the one who betrayed us, not the other way around.”

“We can’t just publish an assault on them just because you’re upset Polly chose the Blossoms over us.” Betty can see the unshed tears stubbornly clinging to her mother’s eyelashes, and a lump begins to grow in her throat. “I know, Mom - you’re really hurt over this. I am too - but we can’t lash out at the Blossoms. Jughead said that they’re actually taking care of her, which is a good sign. At least we know she’s safe.”

Alice lets out a shaky, watery puff of breath before using her apron to dry her eyes. “Sometimes I just want to take the easy way out, you know? Sometimes…sometimes I just want to feel, even for just a second, like I’m not the one who lost everything.”

Jughead awkwardly tries to sink into the background by helping himself to a third slice of pie. Betty sniffles and takes her mother’s hand. “I know, Mom, I know. I think our best course of action right now is to focus on the investigation. Someone out there doesn’t want us to know the truth - which means there’s someone out there who knows what really happened to Great-Grandpappy Cooper.” She pauses to wipe her own tears away. “Rose Blossom gave that box of old things to Jason before he ran away to be with Polly, expecting him to bring it along, but he said he wanted nothing to do with it, that he wanted to leave Riverdale’s secrets behind and start new. There was something in that box that Jason didn’t want to take with him into his new life with Polly in Montreal, something that Clifford Blossom is most likely hunting for. Jughead and I must’ve overlooked it somehow; it must’ve been something small, something that could easily be missed if you don’t know what you’re looking for.”

“Clifford and Jason were absent at the ceremony, like expected.” Jughead cuts in, his cheeks round with mouthfuls of pie.

“Which might mean Clifford hasn’t found him yet.” Betty continues, but not before crinkling her nose in disgust at her friend’s eating habits. “Then someone somehow finds out that Jughead has the box and snatches it while he was away, which means there’s someone around here who knows what Jason knows.”

“So everything was taken?” Alice asks. “Even the backup notes?” When Betty and Jughead nod, she smirks. “Lesson number one in investigative journalism, kids: Always make a backup of your backup.”

“You made copies?” Maybe there’s hope after all.
“Thumb drive.” Alice replies with a smug smirk. “I keep it in a place not even your father knows. It’s safe and sound.” She rises to her seat and takes the empty pie tin, blinking at it in disbelief for a second before taking it to the sink. “Betty, would you like to accompany me to the Register one of these nights?”

“What for?”

“I’m sure you figured it out already but who else would have a motive for taking the box other than your dad?” She turns the sink on and begins to rinse the tin. “I say we head into the office tomorrow and do a bit of snooping on our own - see what he has and if he knows more than he’s letting on.”

“But why would he keep all that stuff at work?” Jughead points out. “Wouldn’t it be safer to keep it at his Sharebnb?”

“Trust me, he isn’t that smart.” Alice huffs indignantly before turning off the water. She grabs a nearby dishtowel and begins to dry the tin. “He’s not very good at hiding his tracks. If he was the one who took the box, we’ll find a semblance of it somewhere at the Register.”

Their conversation comes to an abrupt halt when Jughead’s phone begins to buzz. He fishes it out of his pocket, and when he reads his father’s name on the screen his eyes widen. “I gotta go. Thanks for the pie, Mrs. Cooper.”

Betty almost asks him if she’s going to spend the night under the stairs again, but she decides against it at the last minute. That’s a conversation they should have when her mother isn’t within earshot. “Take care of yourself, Juggie.”

“Sure, if I survive tomorrow night. If you don’t hear from me, contact the SIU - the Blossoms probably stuffed my mangled corpse in between Thornhill’s walls.” He smirks and gives both Cooper women a small wave before making his way out of the house. He seems to be in quite a hurry; is there an emergency of some sort?

The second Jughead closes the front door, Alice heaves out another sigh, which prompts Betty to raise an eyebrow at her. “What do you have against him, exactly?”

“It’s not him.” Her mother grimaces as she collects the plates from the table. “It’s what he reminds me of.”

That wasn’t an answer Betty was expecting. She opens her mouth to ask what she’s talking about, but closes it when she realizes she probably won’t get an answer. Instead, she heads upstairs to her room and bellyflops onto her bed, groaning into her pillow and lying in defeat for a moment before rolling on her back to stare up at the ceiling. Now that she finally has a moment to herself, she remembers that she’s supposed to be expecting a call from Veronica. She pulls out her phone and frowns when she doesn’t spot any notifications on her screen; her first reaction is to text and ask if everything’s okay, but maybe there’s a reason why she can’t called yet. Maybe it’s something she isn’t allowed to talk about, or maybe it’s something Veronica only feels comfortable talking about face-to-face.

Whatever the reason may be, it’s making Betty’s anxiety flare up. Her stomach is twisting like it’s being wrung dry, and the lump in her throat from earlier is back with full force, pressing into her larynx and blocking her airways. She tries to tell herself that she’s just acting up for no reason, that there’s no reason for Veronica to feel like she owes her an explanation for what happened; the last thing she wants is a repeat of their stupid argument from Jason’s faux funeral.

Despite the anxiety eating away at her she finds herself struggling to stay awake, and she ends up
slipping into unconsciousness with her phone still sitting in her semi-open fist.

Betty wakes up Sunday morning with nothing from Veronica. Instead of doing the sensible thing, which is to reach out to her and ask if everything’s okay, she spams Kevin’s phone with texts until he wakes up and agrees to meet her for brunch at Pop’s.

“Sundays are meant for sleeping past noon.” He runs a hand through his hair, making it stick up at the back. “How exactly is this an emergency, Betty?”

She gapes at him, genuinely offended. “She promised she was going to call me.”

“She said she was going to call you as soon as she could.” Kevin grumbles before reaching for a menu. “Has it ever occurred to you that maybe, just maybe, she needs a moment to herself before she feels comfortable telling someone else about it?”

Betty rolls her eyes at him even though she knows he’s right. “But what if she’s hurt? What if something happened to her?”

“I sincerely doubt Hermione would do something of the sort to her own daughter.” His tone is blunt. “Aren’t you supposed to be learning how to trust each other more or whatever? That was supposed to be the main takeaway after that huge spat you guys had.”

“Don’t remind me.” Betty groans just as Pop swings by to take their orders. “Should I just text her? Am I supposed to wait?”

Kevin closes his menu and pushes it away to rub his temples. “I still can’t believe you woke me up for this.”

“Look, I don’t know how this works, okay?” Her cheeks are bright red and her expression is flustered. She flops back against their booth, throwing her hands up in defeat. “This is all so new to me. I’ve never actually liked someone like this before.”

“What about Archie and that Brad girl from California?”

“That was different.” The blonde huffs. “With Archie, I thought I loved him that way, until I found out it wasn’t. With Brad, it just happened so quickly, it was more like a spur of the moment thing - but with Veronica, there’s like…this buildup, this gradual growing into…” She flails her hands a bit, trying to figure out how to continue. “Something, but I don’t know what that something is. What exactly is this? Where is it going? Where are we going to end up?” She shakes her head. “Obviously I want this to go in a specific direction, but what steps do I have to take to get there? How do I know that the path I’m currently on is the right one?”

Kevin’s eyes widen. “Whoa, okay. Slow down. You’re overthinking this, Betty.”

“I know I am!” She exclaims. “That’s what I hate - I’m perfectly aware that I’m freaking out over this and I feel like an idiot, but at the same time I can’t help it. Kev, she’s driving me crazy - in a good and bad way. I can’t…I can’t stop thinking about her. I’m constantly thinking about what she might be doing, where she is, if she’s happy - and when I’m with her I’m still thinking about her. Is that crazy? I look at her and I wonder what she’s thinking about, if she looks at me and thinks the same thing.” She nervously begins to pull her fingers through her ponytail. “It’s stupid, I know.”
“It’s not stupid.” Kevin reaches across the table to take her free hand, squeezing in affectionately. “Bettes, what you’re feeling - the confusion, the craziness, all of it - it’s valid. You’re valid, okay? It’s always overwhelming when you find out the person you like you actually likes you back.”

The red in Betty’s cheeks burn ten shades darker. “We haven’t confirmed that.”

It’s his turn to roll his eyes. “Don’t start with me, Betty Cooper. You two are so into each other it’s amazing neither of you made a move yet - minus the closet incident. To be honest, I wonder what Veronica’s waiting for? I figured she’d be the one to do it.”

“Who knows.” Pop returns with their food - BLT for Kevin, omelette for Betty. “All I know is that she’s going to be the death of me.”

They tuck into their meals, and Kevin is nice enough to silently listen to her complain about having these stupid feelings and not knowing what to do with them. Afterward, she lets him go so he can go back to sleep, and she spends the rest of the early afternoon trying to find ways to distract herself from Veronica. She starts by heading to the park, sitting on the swing and rocking back and forth for a little bit - but then she realizes how sad that must look to people who are walking by, so she quickly gets up and resumes wandering around town. After loitering at the library for about an hour she finally decides to send the brunette a quick text just to check up on her.

Hey V. Just wanted to see how you’re holding up. I’m here if you need me, ok?

She stares at her screen for a few minutes, trying to decide whether or not she likes it. Her heart rate jumps up the second her thumb presses Send, and she becomes slightly dizzy to the point where she needs to lean against a nearby wall to gain composure.

“Betty?” Archie, who just happens to be walking by, is standing in front of her with his hands in his pockets. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” She dismissively waves a hand, forcing herself to stand on her own two feet. “Just a little stressed out, that’s all. I, uh, haven’t been able to stop thinking about Polly. I’m also kind of worried about Jughead. I didn’t just send him to his own death by getting him to agree to go to this weird ceremony thing with Cheryl, right?”

“Believe it or not, Jughead knows how to fend for himself. I’m sure he’ll be fine.” The redhead chuckles as Betty falls into step with him. “What were you doing at the library?”

“Research.” She answers quickly. She keeps one hand in her pocket, pressed up against her phone, in case Veronica replies. “Just to double-check that this tree-tapping ceremony and the dinner is a legitimate maple syrup tradition and not a Satanic human sacrifice ritual. What about you? Where are you headed?”

“I was actually just heading back from sitting in at a morning rehearsal with the Pussycats, and then I had lunch with Val.” His response is so…normal, so mundane. She envies that. “How was your thing with Veronica?”

The mention of the brunette’s name sends a jolt to her nervous system. “It was alright, I guess. I dunno - her mom said she needed her to speak in private about something towards the end, and Veronica said she’s gonna talk to me about it afterward, but I haven’t heard from her since. It’s not weird to be worried, right?”

Archie frowns as they cross the street. “No, I think you have a good reason to be worried. Did you try reaching out to her?”
“Yeah, I was actually just texting her when you came along.” Betty pulls out her phone and sighs when finds nothing blinking back at her. “Nothing yet.”

“Give her time.” His shoulder casually brushes against hers; she glances up and sees that they’re making their way towards the school football field. “You know, the more I think about it, the more alike Veronica and Jughead are.”

She snorts. “Don’t say that around her; she’ll be genuinely offended.”

“I mean it, though!” His laughter is a low rumble in his chest, full and warm. It’s one of Betty’s favourite sounds in the whole world. “They’re both into old books and movies, they’re super stubborn, they always need to be right…” He shakes his head in disbelief. “You’d think that they’d be good for each other, but then you see how often they fight and you start thinking that it might not be such a good idea after all.”

“I don’t think you’re compatible if you’re too alike.” She muses as they step off the sidewalk and onto the field, the thick snow crunching beneath their shoes. “You need to have gaps in between you, spaces that you can fill in for each other. You have to become two pieces of a whole in order for your relationship to work out, and if the both of you are the exact same shape that just can’t happen. You won’t be able to fit into each other - but at the same time, I don’t think you can be too different either. There can’t be too many empty spaces in between; you won’t be able to fill all of them in. There has to be a balance between your differences and similarities, which is why I think it’s so hard to find that perfect someone, y’know?”

Archie hums to himself as he drinks in her words. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Maybe that’s why Val and I get along so well.”

She smiles at this. “So things are good between you two?”

“More than good - they’re great.” He smiles back. “It feels…really nice to care for someone who cares right back, in the exact same way.”

Intentional or not, his words sting. She almost wants to apologize for what he’s implying, but that would mean they’d have to talk about feelings, and…nope. Just nope. She can’t do it, not yet, not now - and she knows it’s only going to get worse the longer she waits, but she can’t bring herself to. Archie is literally the sweetest person she’s ever met and she still can’t fathom why she can’t bring it in herself to love him the way he loves her. He’s been nothing but good to her all these years, and this is how she repays him - by constantly finding excuses to not talk about their feelings because she’s too selfish to tell him the truth.

Betty’s so caught up in her thoughts that she doesn’t notice Archie’s stopped walking alongside her a few minutes ago. Something hard and cold suddenly crashes into her back, prompting her to whirl around. She spots him bent over, scooping up some snow in his hands, and she narrows her eyes at him. “Oh, it is on, Archie Andrews!” She ducks just in time, narrowly dodging his second snowball, and reaches down to grab some snow. Once she forms a baseball-sized lump in her hands, she winds up her arm before throwing it in his direction, hitting him square in the face.

“Oh my God,” She gasps in between fits of laughter. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean-hey!” She squeals when the redhead hits her with three snowballs to the shoulder and chest area. The pair end up chasing each other around the football field and throwing as many snowballs as they can make. After tiring each other out, they build their own snowman in the middle of the field. Instead of a top hat, Betty fashions a familiar-looking crown made out of twigs and leaves.

Wet, cold, and their hands numb from touching snow all afternoon, they decide to head back to
Archie’s house to warm up. He loans her a pair of his pyjama pants and a shirt so their clothes can dry off; he gets the fireplace going while she fixes some hot cocoa in the kitchen. By the time the fire is roaring in the living room and the cocoa is as hot as it can get, it’s veering into the early evening.

Archie gratefully takes a mug of cocoa from her as she sits next to him on the couch. “When was the last time we had a snowball fight?”

“We were eleven,” Betty quips. “And Jughead built a snow fort that was practically impenetrable.”

“Oh yeah!” The redhead laughs. “What did he call it again? It was something so stupid…” He scrunches up his face as he sifts through years of happy childhood memories, his eyelids clenched tight.

“Fortythe Jones.” Betty answers, and when he bursts out laughing she does too. Why can’t it be like this all the time? Why isn’t this the way things are supposed to be?

Archie sighs as he comes down from his laughing high, leaning forward in his seat. The flames flicker in his dark brown eyes and for a second he looks pensive, almost solemn. His biceps are threatening to burst through the sleeves of his t-shirt, and the veins in his forearms are pushed up tight against his pale skin. It almost looks like he’s been carved out of marble. In some weird alternate universe, Betty’s sure she would have found this attractive. “What I would give to go back to those days, when we didn’t have all these things to worry about.”

“You’re speaking as if we’re fifty years old or something.” She chuckles. “Then again, the stuff that’s stressing us out now isn’t what most teenagers stress over.”

“Like missing people, corruption, and unsolved murders?” Archie jokingly suggests, and she grins at him in response. “For what it’s worth, I wouldn’t have wanted to stress through it with anyone else.”

“Me too.” She replies automatically, only to regret it a half-second later. She isn’t totally lying - if there was anyone she could choose to be with when the world ends, it would most likely be Archie (Though Veronica is quickly rising as a close contender for completely different reasons) - but at the same time she knows how easily her words can be misinterpreted.

He turns away from the fire to glance at her; his stare is soft, yet the way he’s looking at her makes her feel incredibly vulnerable, like he’s trying to pull out a hidden meaning from her expression. She gulps as he begins to lean in, and when his eyes flutter closed her heart is pounding so loud it’s making her chest ache.

“Arch-” She mumbles, beginning to pull back, and scrambling to figure out how to explain this once he realizes she’s rejecting him, but for once in her life she has a stroke of luck; his phone begins to buzz, and he ends up reeling back so he can answer it.

“Dad?” She begins to exhale with relief, but the tension flares right back up when she hears the anxiety in Archie’s voice. “What? Why is he - okay. No, but I’m with Betty. Okay, that’s probably a better idea. We’ll be right there.”

“What’s wrong?” She asks as he gently pries her cocoa from her hands and sets both of their mugs on the coffee table.

“We have to go to Thornhill.” He helps her to her feet and reaches for their jackets. “FP somehow found out about Jughead being invited to the Blossoms’ place and he’s not having it.”

“What?” The blonde blinks as she pushes her arms through the sleeves. “Why would he care so much?”
“Not sure,” Archie rushes to the front door and hastily pulls on his sneakers. “But he was at work when he found out and he just stormed offsite without saying a word. My dad thinks he had a couple of drinks on the way.”

One of the few good things about Riverdale being a small town is that everything is practically walking distance. It’s chilly out, and the both of them are still decked out in pyjamas, but they manage to scurry across town and make it to Thornhill in just under ten minutes. Betty can spot Fred and FP’s trucks parked by Thornhill’s gates; they’re standing on one side of the gate, while the Blossoms, Polly, and Jughead are standing on the other.

“Jughead!” FP’s hands are wrapped around the iron gates, and he’s shaking them violently. “What the hell is goin’ on? Why are you here? What the hell are they doin’ to you?”

“You better step off my property if you know what’s good for you, you hoodlum.” Penelope hisses, but her threat goes unheard.

“It’s nothing.” Jughead’s voice is low, and it’s obvious he’s trying to hide his embarrassment. Betty can smell the alcohol on FP even though she’s standing a few feet away from him. “I’m taking care of it. Can you please go home? You’re…” There’s a lot of strain in his expression when he utters the last word. “Drunk.”

“What kind of maple syrup-coated crap did they lure you in with, huh?” FP sticks his arms in between the gate and points at Penelope and the board of trustees. “These bastards tryna hang you high an’ dry like they did your old man?” He gestures to Jughead’s red suit and his neatly combed hair. “Look at you! They’ve got you all gussied up like you’re the belle of the damn ball. They’re danglin’ the carrot an inch from your nose, and just when you think you’ve got your hands on it they pull it away at the last second and laugh in your face. Trust me, I know all about the games these Blossoms play on people like us.” He turns to glare at Penelope. “You think you can make a joke out of my boy?” He lets out a humourless laugh. “Well, screw that! I will tear these damn Blossoms a new one if-”

He begins to shake the gate again, and this time it’s hard enough to undo the latch on the other side. It swings open and he storms through, his fists curled tight against his thighs. Penelope gasps and holds an arm out towards Polly, stepping backwards with caution. Betty locks eyes with her sister for a split second, but Polly immediately turns away and steps farther into the crowd so that she’s no longer visible. Cheryl melts away with her, giving Betty an apologetic look before disappearing.

Fred lunges after FP, grabbing him by the forearms and trying to get him to stop, but FP overpowers him and shoves him away. “Hey! He’s my son. He is my son, Fred. You’d do the same for your boy - you have done the same for your boy! I’ve seen it myself!” He pauses to spit on the pavement and wipes his mouth with his sleeve. “Let me do this.”

Jughead steps in between his father and the Blossoms, grabbing him by the collar and gently pushing him past the gate and back towards the trucks. “Dad.” His voice is soft and his head is hung low. “Don’t make things worse. Please.”

FP stands stock-still, seemingly frozen in place. The others watch awkwardly, knowing this has turned into a conversation between them, but for some reason they’re unable to step away. Even Penelope looks like she’s leaning in somewhat, trying to hear what Jughead is saying.

“Yeah.” FP finally replies, his voice nothing higher than a hoarse whisper. “Alright then.” He backs away from his son, patting him on the shoulder before stumbling towards his truck. “You, uh - you comin’ home…with me?”
“He can stay with us, Mr. Jones.” Archie speaks up. “We already offered.”

“Is that what you want?” FP half-turns to look at Jughead, who’s staring at his shoes. He nods in understanding, but his eyes are glassy. “Maybe that’s for the best, if uh, if you don’t mind, Fred.”

It takes Fred a few seconds to answer. “Whatever you want, FP. It’s between the two of you.”

“I’ll go with you, Dad.” Jughead sniffs and rubs his nose; his eyes still trained to the ground as he makes his way towards the truck. “You’ve been drinking - I’ll take you home…then I’ll go and stay with the Andrews’.”

FP deflates with disappointment, but he quickly sucks it up and places his hands on his son’s shoulders; his eyes are rimmed red and sections of his hair are sticking up. His stubble looks unkempt and his clothes are wrinkled. Betty tries to think back to a time when she hasn’t seen Jughead’s dad look so unruly, but she can’t recall. “Son, listen to me.” He breathes in, steadying himself, then leans in so that his face is inches apart from Jughead’s. “I’m gonna do what you want and get my act together.” His hands lower to Jughead’s lapels. “I’m gonna get your mom and Jellybean home so we’re all under the same roof. I promise, but I just need a little time to do that - not a lot, not long; a month, two at the most.” His hands rise again, his palms pressed against Jughead’s cheeks. Betty can see the tears threatening to spill out of her friend’s eyes and it makes her want to cry too. “Hey - I will be back on track. Alright? You, uh, you believe that, don’t you?”

Jughead’s shaking slightly, probably trying his hardest not to cry in front of all these people - but all Betty wants is for him to let loose and cry. He doesn’t have to hold everything in like this - he doesn’t have to continue going through this alone. “Yeah.” His voice cracks slightly, and that’s when she starts crying for him. “I believe you, Dad.” He leans in to hug him, and FP looks surprised at the gesture before slowly wrapping his arms around his son to return it.

Betty glances behind her and sees that the Blossoms, Polly, and their board of trustees have already retreated back to the confines of Thornhill. This incident just opened up an entirely new can of worms: What exactly was FP insinuating when he said that the Blossoms were trying to hang Jughead high and dry just like him? He had to have cut a deal or something with Cliff Blossom, which means that the Serpents could be involved in this search for Jason. Maybe the Serpents ratted him and Polly out after all…

Fred, Betty, and Archie pile into the truck and follow Jughead and FP back to the Sunnyside Trailer Park, where the Jones home is located. Their trailer looks even more run-down than the last time Betty saw it; piles of trash are lined by the front steps, along with rusty car parts and old car tires. They give Jughead a second to lead his dad inside; it only takes him a few minutes before he’s back out again with a bag full of clothes. He wordlessly clambers into the back with Betty, and he spends the whole ride to the Andrews home staring out the window.

Betty wants to reach out to him, to let him know that she’s there and that he doesn’t have to face this alone, but she isn’t sure if it’s a good idea, so she tries to think of other things to think about. For the first time in hours, she remembers that she’s waiting on a reply from Veronica; she pulls her phone out of her pocket and her heart sinks when she finds no incoming texts or missed calls. As if this evening couldn’t get any worse.

Fred pulls up on the driveway a few minutes later and all three teenagers hop out - but before Betty crosses the street to her house she marches straight up to Jughead and throws her arms around him, pulling him close. He stiffens against her for a moment, but just as she begins to regret her decision she feels his arms pull around her and ferociously hug her back. Seconds later she feels another pair of arms; Archie’s hugging them both, nuzzling his head in between theirs.
They remain like that for a few minutes, holding each other, freezing together in the late fall weather, not saying a single word.

Betty can tell how tough a person is by how quickly they bounce back after something terrible happens to them. Jughead just so happens to be one of the toughest people she knows.

“You’re right, Betts.” He’s nodding his head in agreement as they walk with Archie to school the next morning. “My dad did insinuate that the Serpents are involved in this somehow. He made it sound like Clifford promised them something but didn’t deliver.”

“We can’t be totally sure, but I think it’s safe to assume that this is related to Jason somehow.” Betty frowns. “You don’t think your dad will tell you anything?”

“Nope - I already tried, even when he was drunk. Whatever happens within the Serpents stays with the Serpents. They’re a close-knit bunch.” Jughead shoulders his bag. “By the way, I got to talk to Polly again last night, during a very awkward dance.”

“I’m going to have to hear about this dance later, but what did you talk about?” Betty asks eagerly. “Did she say why she’s staying at Thornhill?”

“She knows Clifford is looking for Jason. He and Penelope apparently threatened him, which is part of the reason why he had this escape plan in the first place.” Jughead frowns. “She’s been blowing you off because she wants to make it look like she genuinely wants to stay there. She’s trying to figure out what they’re threatening Jason with, and once she does she’s planning on exposing the truth.”

The sun somehow feels warmer and the sky looks bluer. Betty’s shoulders aren’t sagging as much as they were before, and it no longer feels like there’s an elephant sitting on her chest. “Juggie, this is amazing news. From what it sounds like, Jason knows something his parents don’t want him to know, and they’re afraid he’s going to say something.”

“Exactly, which is why Clifford’s hell bent on finding him.” Jughead adjusts his beanie.

“How will we be able to find out, though? If Polly’s trying to trick the Blossoms into thinking she’s there for real by ignoring Betty, she won’t be able to contact us if she finds anything.” Archie sticks his hands in his pockets and absently kicks at some snow. “And how can we find out if the Serpents are involved for sure?”

“We’ll figure it out.” Betty mutters as the three of them ascend the front steps to their school. “We always do.”

Once the trio head inside the building they separate to head to their lockers, promising they’ll meet up at lunch to do more brainstorming. Betty tentatively turns the corner towards her locker, and she sucks in a breath when she finds Veronica at hers, rummaging through it for her textbooks. Her body language is a little hard to read, so she doesn’t know if it’s appropriate to approach her and ask if everything’s okay, or if she’s even in the mood for a simple hello.

Instead, the blonde heads to her locker and pretends to look for her own textbooks, silently hoping the shorter girl will approach her first. Her heart sinks when she hears Veronica’s locker door close, and she whirls around so she can catch her before she leaves but her eyes widen when she finds
Kevin standing between them instead.

“Oh my God,” He’s huffing, like he ran all the way here. “Did you hear?”

Veronica raises an eyebrow; her eyes flit over to Betty for a split second, but they quickly return to Kevin. “What?”

“Remember when you went swooping in to save Ethel ‘cause you thought she might be suicidal?”

The blood drains from Veronica’s face. Betty immediately steps closer towards her, ready to do whatever she needs to do. “Oh, no…she, she didn’t-”

“No,” Kevin shakes his head. “But her dad did. He swallowed a whole bottle of sleeping pills. He’s gonna be okay, but…”

Betty can’t see her expression, but she knows Veronica is shaken up by this. The brunette brushes past Kevin, holding one hand to her face as she attempts to push through the morning rush. Betty tries to follow after her, but it’s difficult to keep up when she’s going against the current of students hurrying to their lockers and classrooms. She tries to keep an eye on her as she falls farther behind, her heart rate increasing with every step Veronica takes away from her. She doesn’t know what she’s thinking, she doesn’t know what she’s planning to do once she finds a space where she can be alone, and the endless possibilities scare the shit out of her.

“Sorry, excuse me…” Betty squeezes through the last row of students, finally able to break away from the crowd so she can head straight into the change room. She checks every corner of the lockers to make sure she isn’t hiding anywhere, even going so far as pulling back the curtains on every shower stall. She finally finds her by the sinks; she’s bent over one of them, her shoulders heaving with sobs. The sun peeking in from the grimy window catches on something by her stilettos, forcing Betty to squint at first, but when her eyes adjust they widen when they find pearls scattered across the tiled floor. She had ripped the iconic necklace from her neck in a fit of…anger? Despair? Betty’s not exactly sure what to call it. What she does know is that each pearl probably costs more than her mother’s car.

It suddenly hits Betty that this is the first time she’s ever seen Veronica cry. She’s never seen her this vulnerable, all scrunched up with her arms held tight against her, like she’s bracing for something painful. She’s used to seeing her strut through the hallways of this school with her head held high, her hips swaying with more confidence Betty’s ever had in her entire life, and a designer bag swinging from her elbow. Veronica Lodge doesn’t cower. Veronica Lodge doesn’t flinch. Veronica Lodge definitely doesn’t cry.

And that’s why it feels like her chest is caving in - because she’s been wrong this whole time. Veronica Lodge does cry, but only when she thinks nobody is watching.

The brunette begins to sink to the floor, her manicured hands still clutching to the edges of the sink. Betty lunges over to her before she collapses entirely, slipping her arms around her waist and pulling her onto her lap as they crash down together. Veronica responds by throwing her arms around her neck and sobbing into her shoulder. The blonde swallows hard, not really sure if she’s supposed to say something at this point, but even if it was appropriate, what could she say?

So she holds her, squeezing her waist every now and then to remind her that she’s here and she isn’t going anywhere. She threads her fingers through Veronica’s hair and thinks about how effortless the motion is, how she can run through every strand without getting caught on a knot. She breathes in and smells the lavender, and it takes a world’s worth of effort to not bury her face in her hair and ruin the moment. Every sob, every hiccup that wracks through this girl’s tiny body sends a kick to Betty’s
chest; she can feel the pressure weighing down on her ribcage and she’s beginning to find it difficult to breathe, but she doesn’t care. What matters to her most right now is the girl in her arms and how she can make the pain festering inside of her stop.

“I failed.” Veronica finally pipes up after an entire weekend of silence. “I failed, Betty. I was supposed to help her. I made things worse.”

“No you didn’t.” She murmurs into her hair. “You did what you could. What happened to her dad was completely out of your control. There was no way you could have seen that coming.”

“There was, though.” She pulls away just enough so she can tearfully glance at her, and the hurt strewn all over her face brings a new kind of ache to Betty’s chest. “I could’ve done something. I don’t know what, but I know I could’ve done it. Whatever it was. But I didn’t - and now Ethel’s suffering and I feel like this is all my fault and.”

“Hey, hey.” Betty pulls her in, her palm gingerly pressed against the back of her head as the brunette begins to cry again. “None of that, okay? It’s not your fault. What happened to him wasn’t your fault.”

“Yes it was.” Veronica’s voice is muffled against her neck. “I should have answered your text yesterday, but I didn’t know what you were going to think of me if I did.”

The blonde’s brow crinkles with confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“You know what my mom wanted to talk about in private?” She pulls away again, laughing bitterly as she wipes the tears from her eyes. “The Muggs family made investments with Lodge Industries. My dad is the reason why Ethel has to sell her house. My dad is the reason why her dad tried to kill himself. I’m the reason why Ethel’s been so miserable lately. Do you know what that feels like, Betty? Do you know what it’s like to know you’ve ruined someone else’s life?”

It takes the taller girl a moment to process the new bits of information, and when she finally does everything clicks together. Of course Veronica didn’t want to talk to her all weekend. Of course she feels responsible for her father’s mistakes. Of course she’s trying so hard to help Ethel with her problems. Of course. Of course.

“No, but I do know what it’s like to constantly be associated with your parents.” She answers slowly, thoughtfully, carefully. “I know what it’s like to be looked at and only be seen for what your parents have said and done.” She sighs and shrugs her shoulders. “I know this is different and I can’t even imagine what kind of pain you’re feeling right now - but please, don’t try to do this alone. You reached out to Ethel because you thought she was struggling with something on her own, right? Maybe you should take a page from your own book and let someone help you for once.” She pauses for a second. “You told me that if I ever needed you, I can call you, no matter what time it is or how far apart we are from each other, and you’d come running. I want to do the same for you.”

The smaller of the two softens at this, even allowing herself to smile just a little before fresh tears spring to her eyes. “You know what, you’re right. I should have called you like I said I would that night. I should have answered your text. I’m sorry, B - I just…” She throws her hands up in defeat, laughing humourlessly again. “I’m just so used to having people abandon me when I need them most. My so-called friends back in New York would just bail the second I knew I was going through something. I had no one to confide in.” She crumples against Betty once more, curling one arm around her neck and absentmindedly grabbing a fistful of the blonde’s denim shirt with her other hand. “I keep forgetting that it’s different now. I have you.”

Those last three words melt inside of her, and she wants to believe so badly that she isn’t letting it
show but she knows better. She’s sure Veronica can hear her thudding heartbeat, since her ear is pressed up against her neck, and she’s very sure Veronica can feel her sudden rise in temperature. She just hopes to God she doesn’t start sweating. She’s a nervous sweater.

Betty gives Veronica’s waist another squeeze before she slides her hands down to her wrists. She rises to her feet, pulling the brunette up with her. “You’ll always have me.” She can feel a painfully large lump rapidly growing in her throat as she threads their fingers together. She swings their joined hands, and when Veronica smiles she lets out a soft chuckle. “I get why you couldn’t talk over the weekend, but just know that I would never think badly of you because of something your dad did. You’re not him, V. You will never be. If people can’t see that, it’s not your fault.”

The shorter of the two lets out a sigh. Her eyes wander upward, towards the ceiling. “Oh, Betty Cooper, I don’t know how I managed to live most of my life without you.”

The blonde can feel another hot blush coming to her face, so she lets go of Veronica’s hands and squats down again, reaching for a few stray pearls. “Now you’re just being dramatic.”

Veronica laughs before returning to the ground to help her, and Betty doesn’t bother fighting the grin forcing its way onto her face.

If all was right in the world, Betty would’ve been able to spend her evening with Veronica so she can distract her from everything that’s going on with her father and the Muggs family, but that’s not the world she’s living in.

Instead, her mother is dragging her across the snow at 9 in the evening towards the Riverdale Register’s office. Alice is one thousand percent certain Hal has the stolen notes stashed away somewhere there, even though both Betty and Jughead know that if he did, he would’ve hidden it somewhere less obvious and accessible.

“Mom, it’s not going to be there.” She groans for the billionth time as she watches her mother fumble with the keys, but she never needed to unlock the door in the first place; Hal is already inside, probably closing up for the night. When he notices his wife and daughter standing outside his brow furrows for a second before heading over to let them in.

“What are you two doing here?” He asks as they walk in, stomping their feet on the welcome mat to get rid of the snow clinging to their soles.

“Looking for the story you’re stealing from your own daughter.” Alice begins to rummage through all of the files and papers on Hal’s desk. “I know you have them here somewhere, Hal.”

Betty flushes with embarrassment as her father throws his hands up, incredulous. “What evidence are you talking about, Alice?”

“The shoebox!” Alice briefly pauses her search to hiss at him. “The box that contains blatant evidence that Charles Cooper was murdered by Jasper Blossom. You stole it from us and we want it back.”

“I have absolutely no context for this.” He crosses his arms. “What evidence are you talking about?”

“Don’t play stupid with me.” She jabs a finger at him. “Rose Blossom entrusted Betty with a box of
keepsakes. One of those keepsakes included Charles’ true autopsy report, which was proof his death wasn’t an accident.”

“Mom-” Betty protests, but her father cuts her off.

“Why on Earth would I want to hide that sort of thing? My family spent years trying to find proof of his murder. Don’t you think I would’ve wanted that kind of information to go public?”

“Obviously, which is why you stole everything.” Alice barks. “You wanted to say it in your own words - a tell-all exposé on the Blossom clan and all of the glorious corruption that followed your grandfather’s untimely death. Of course you’d want to take the credit for yourself.”

“I seriously don’t know what you’re talking about, Alice.” Hal chuckles and turns to face his daughter. “Do you mind telling me what your mother is talking about?”

“Jughead and I started a little investigation of our own.” Betty’s nervously wringing her hands, trying her best to distract her fingernails from digging into her palms. “We wanted to dig deeper into the Cooper/Blossom feud, and we ended up with solid evidence that Great-Grandpappy Cooper was murdered. We don’t really know who did it or why it was done, but that autopsy report spoke for itself. Rose Blossom was the one who gave the report to us, which implies that the Blossoms were involved in the cover-up.”

“By the way,” Alice pipes up. “Polly’s living with the Blossoms now, so congratulations - you finally got what you wanted. She’s officially out of our lives.”

Hal doesn’t even flinch at the mention of Polly. “It’s great that you found new evidence, but I still don’t know what you’re talking about - and, quite frankly, being accused of stealing it is a little insulting.”

“That’s it.” Alice sets her purse on the desk and shoves Hal aside to bend over the computer keyboard. “If you have the evidence, there’s a good chance it’s on this - and I don’t need your permission to access it.” She types in her name and password, but when invalid login blinks back at her on the screen her expression sours. “What did you do, Hal?”

Her father’s expression is smug. “Well, you kicked me out...so now I’m kicking you out.”

Alice takes a few steps closer towards him until their noses are inches apart. “If we can get to the bottom of this investigation we can finally end this stupid, pointless feud - and maybe, just maybe, we might have a chance in hell to get our daughter back.”

Betty feels like she needs to intervene somehow, but she’s frozen in place - much like their last argument, when her mother kicked her father out of the house. “You are done here, Alice.” Hal growls. “You’re fired.”

She expects her mother to say something venomous in return, but to her surprise the only thing Alice does is pick up her purse and walk straight out of the office. Betty scrambles to keep up with her, taking one last second to glance back at her father before she follows her mother back out into the cold. When she turns back to face her mom, she raises an eyebrow when she finds Alice standing still by the curb. “What?” She asks wearily, knowing full well she’s going to regret it soon.

Alice bends over to pick up a loose brick sitting by the gutter, and Betty’s eyes widen. “I want my daughter back, you bastard!” She pulls her arm back and hurls the brick towards the glass door. It happens so quickly that the younger Cooper is barely able to register what’s going on before it’s too late.
Hal’s gaping at them on the other side of the door, and Betty knows if they stay any longer he’s going to call law enforcement. “Mom.” She grabs Alice by the elbow, shaking her slightly so she can get her to move, and when she finally does she allows her daughter to pull her down the street and back to their car. Alice manages to drive home despite being slightly hysterical; she makes a beeline for the kitchen and pours herself a generous amount of wine.

“Mom.” Betty tries again, her tone more exhausted than the last time. “I’m sorry for not telling you sooner, but Jughead got another chance to speak with Polly. She’s safe, she’s okay. She didn’t choose the Blossoms over us - she’s actually there to spy on them.”

Alice collapses on a chair and swipes at her eyes. She somehow looks relieved and anxious at the same time “When we were at her shower and she told us she wanted to stay with the Blossoms, I thought, at the back of my mind, that…what if this is it? What if this is finally the time that she doesn’t come back?”

“She will, Mom.” Betty takes the seat next to her. “And right now, she’s our woman on the inside.” She reaches for Alice’s hand and squeezes. “We still have your thumb drive, right? We’re going to write this story. Write it with Jughead and I, at The Blue and Gold.”

Alice laughs to herself. “The school newspaper?”

“Yeah, but it’s something, right?” Betty implores. “Sure, the Register would’ve been more ideal but you still have a medium for your message. Let’s put an end to this blood feud, for once and for all.”

Alice’s eyes water up, and she lets out a sad chuckle before wiping her tears away. “You’re right - but if your father’s telling the truth and he has no idea about the shoebox, that means our thief is still at large.”

Her mother has a point there. Hal was the most probably suspect. Who else would’ve taken it? There isn’t anyone else in town who would have a reason to. “We’ll solve this, Mom. We will.” She rises to her feet and hesitantly lets go of her hand. “I need to catch up on some homework. You’ll be okay on your own down here?”

Alice laughs again, this time with a little more vigour. “I’m the one who’s supposed to be asking you that.” She waves her off with the hand not curled around her wine glass. “I’ll survive somehow.”

It’s surreal to be having this friendly rapport with her mother. Betty almost wants to pinch herself to make sure this is actually happening. “Goodnight, Mom.

“Goodnight, Betty.”

Betty tells Archie and Jughead about the incident the next morning on their walk to school. Now that her father isn’t a prime suspect, they’re stuck in the dark yet again. They don’t have any leads, they nearly exhausted all their resources, and they don't know how much time they had before Clifford finds Jason. The only thing they can do is hope that Jason is really good at hide and seek.

“Well, like you said,” Jughead sighs as they make their way up the stairs of Riverdale High. “We’ll figure it out. We always do.”

The first thing the blonde notices when she heads to her locker is the lack of Veronica. They always
make the short walk to homeroom together. Betty figured that maybe, for some reason, Veronica decided to head to class early, but when she walks into the room and doesn’t find her sitting at her usual desk she begins to worry.

“You haven’t seen Veronica around, have you?” She whispers to Kevin just as their teacher starts up their lesson for the day. Kevin shakes his head, and the worry bouncing around inside of her intensifies.

Veronica isn’t at their usual table at lunch, and she is absent at all of the other classes they have together. Betty, Archie, and Kevin send her texts but they go unanswered. When school ends for the day Betty heads over to the gym to ask Cheryl if Veronica ever mentioned skipping Vixens practice today, but she said she hasn’t heard anything.

“Always knew that girl was a criminal, but I never pegged her for a truant.” The redhead scoffs. “She’s lucky she’s one of our best fliers, or I would’ve booted her for this.”

“You don’t think anything’s happened to her, do you?” Betty bites her bottom lip as she checks her phone for the sixth time in the past minute. Still nothing.

Cheryl, who’s sitting on the floor with her legs stretched out, bends over to touch the toe of her right foot. “Well, I can’t deny that bailing and not making a fuss about it isn’t in her character. Have you tried contacting her?”

“Texts, but no answer.” She frowns. Veronica knows she can reach out to her if something’s wrong. They went over this already, they promised to be more open with each other…

And just like that, the phone in her hand starts to vibrate. Veronica’s name flashes across her screen, and Betty rolls her eyes at the smirk on Cheryl’s face before turning away to take the call. “V? Where are you? I’ve been worried all-”

“Can you come with me to the hospital?” Her voice is meek.

The word hospital sends Betty into full blown panic mode, and before she gives Veronica a chance to explain she pulls her varsity jacket on and races out of the school, nearly slipping on the ice clinging to the steps. She runs as fast as she can with her bag bouncing off her shoulder, her cheeks stinging from the cold.

I swear to God, Veronica, if you hurt yourself…

She skids to a stop at the entrance to the emergency room; Veronica is waiting by the entrance wearing her black cloak - which is way too thin for this kind of weather, Betty mentally chides - holding a pot of white lilies. She puffs out a sigh of relief, but her eyes widen when she realizes why the brunette is here.

“You don’t have to do this, Ronnie.” She says when she finally approaches her. She can see the redness around her dark eyes, and her chest threatens to implode. “This isn’t your fault.”

“I do.” She insists, her eyes hesitantly glancing at the automatic sliding doors. Betty loops her arm around hers and guides her inside; she asks reception what floor they’re supposed to go to, and the pair ride the elevator in silence. Once they reach the right floor, Betty leads her again, gently pulling her into a waiting room, where Ethel and her mother are sitting.

“Hey.” Ethel's cheeks are stained with tears. “Mom, these are my friends - this is Betty, and this is Veronica.”
Veronica opens her mouth to speak, but it takes her a few seconds to say anything. “Mrs. Muggs, Ethel, um…” She drops her gaze to the flowers she’s holding. “We heard what happened and we wanted to leave these flowers with you.” She hands the pot over to Ethel, who takes it gratefully.

“That’s very kind.” Mrs. Muggs replies tearfully. “Thank you.”

“Please don’t thank me.” Veronica swallows.

“We’re just so glad Mr. Muggs is gonna be okay.” Betty tries to smile, but it’s hard. She finds hospitals depressing in general. She takes Veronica’s elbow and tries to turn her around. “We’ll see you at school, Ethel?”

Veronica allows her to steer her towards the hall back to the elevators, but just as they get to the doors she stops. Betty knows why, and she leans towards her so she can whisper in her ear. “You don’t need to do this, V.” She echoes her statement from earlier, but just like the first time, it goes unheard.

The shorter girl turns on her heel and returns to the Muggs’, who are visibly confused. “Ethel? Mrs. Muggs? There’s something I need to tell you.” She begins to fiddle with the thin gold bracelet hanging off her left wrist. “My name is Veronica Lodge. My father is-”

“Hiram Lodge.” Mrs. Muggs finishes for her. Her expression is the exact opposite of what it was just seconds earlier. “And you’re showing your face here?”

“Mom.” Ethel shakes her head. “She’s my friend.”

“She’s not your friend, honey.” Mrs. Muggs narrows her eyes at Veronica, who looks like she was just slapped in the face. “Her father’s a criminal. He’s the reason Dad did this to himself.”

Now Ethel’s expression darkens. “Ronnie…is that true?”

Betty wants so badly to say something, but she knows it isn’t her place. Veronica doesn’t hold back the tears this time; they spill down her cheeks, dripping off the end of her jaw. “Yes, and I’m so sorry. I wish I could do something.”

“Sorry isn’t good enough.” Mrs. Muggs hisses. “You wanna do something? Tell the truth - your father is ruining lives. He deserves to sit behind bars for the rest of his miserable life.” She wraps an arm around her daughter and leads her away from the duo, sparing Veronica one last glare before they return to Mr. Muggs’ room.

Betty can see the impending meltdown on Veronica’s face; she takes her hands and leads her back towards the elevators, and when the doors slide to a close she pulls her in as close as she can and tries her best to hold the brunette together as she splinters into pieces in her arms. Veronica’s crying so hard her shoulders are shaking, and she’s gripping onto the front of Betty’s jacket as hard as she can in her small fists.

This isn’t right, Betty thinks to herself as she watches the floors count down. She’s supposed to be the stronger one. She’s the one who’s supposed to be holding me while I sob like a baby.

They finally reach the ground floor, and Betty wraps her varsity jacket around her before guiding her outside. “Do you want me to take you home?”

She feels Veronica’s head move against her shoulder, shaking side to side. “That’s the last place I want to be right now.”
So Betty decides to take her to her house, since it’s the only other place they can really go, and she’s sure the brunette isn’t in the mood for a milkshake. She leads her through town, trying not to show that she’s shivering because she knows Veronica needs the jacket more; when they finally reach the Cooper household she takes her upstairs to her embarrassing pink room, where Veronica slides into her bed, pulling her in with her.

“I am done lying for him.” The smaller girl’s voice is slightly muffled against her collar, and Betty responds by combing her fingers through her black hair. She seems to like that; she closes her eyes and nestles closer, taking in a deep breath and sighing. Her eyelashes are so long they’re nearly brushing her cheeks. Even though she’s been crying all day, her skin is still flawless and her mascara isn’t running. Her lavender perfume still smells like she just sprayed it on a few seconds ago.

If Veronica wants to lie in her bed like this for the next week, she’s more than happy to do it. She’ll skip school if she has to. She’ll march right into jail and tell Hiram Lodge that he should be ashamed of himself for inflicting so much pain on someone so perfect, someone so undeserving. There is nothing she wouldn’t do for her, nothing she wouldn’t want to protect her from - even from her own flesh and blood, if need be.

They stay like this for a little while, saying nothing. Betty comfortingly rubs Veronica’s biceps as she lies against her, her head pressed against her shoulder and her thin arm draped across her chest. This is the closest they’ve ever been, yet Betty isn’t on the verge of cardiac arrest like she expected to be. Her face doesn’t feel like it’s on fire, and she isn’t sweating out the Niagara Falls. In fact, she feels comfortable. She feels right at home, like this is just another part of her regular routine. Like this is something she’s been doing for years.

But why?

She knows the answer. She always knew. What’s the use in fighting it anymore? Kevin was right. Jughead was too. So was Cheryl. She’s the biggest idiot in the universe for not seeing it sooner, and she’s an even bigger idiot for denying it. This is so much more than the childhood crush she had on Archie, so much more than the summer fling she had with Brad - and it’s about time she acknowledged it.

You love this girl, Her brain answers. You love her.

She glances down at the girl in her arms, who seemingly dozed off, and she tightens her arms around her.

I do, She responds as she kisses Veronica’s forehead.

I do.
I Won't Ever Be The Same

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is taken from "Carry You" by Novo Amor.

Their dynamic changes drastically after the incident at the hospital. As the days go by, Betty and Veronica’s affections gradually become more and more public: Holding hands while walking to school, Betty’s arm slung around Veronica’s shoulder as they sit with their friends at lunch, Veronica planting a kiss on Betty’s cheek as a thank you for walking her home, cuddling in Veronica’s gigantic bed at the Pembrooke after a long day of softball and Vixens practice - they’re just a few of the dozens of things they’re no longer afraid to do with people around.

And the most shocking part about it is that no one is batting an eye. There aren’t even rumours spreading around - at least there aren’t that she heard so far, and if there are any they must be very good at keeping it from her. Betty should honestly be happy that no one’s kicking up a fuss about this, but at the same time she can’t help but be a little annoyed. She spent all this time worrying about what everyone will think of her once they find out she’s no longer attracted to Archie - and was never really attracted to him or guys in the first place - and now that it’s pretty obvious that she’s attracted to girls, everyone’s just milling about like she hasn’t just outed herself to the whole damn town. What gives?

But it’s not like she hasn’t directly said anything about it yet - in fact, she hasn’t even talked to Veronica about it. She’s just assuming she knows because of the way they act around each other, and for now it feels adequate. As eager as she is to finally allow herself to be herself, she isn’t quite sure how to word it.

“B?” Veronica’s glancing up from her spot against Betty’s shoulder, innocently batting her eyelashes and making the blonde’s heart skip a billion beats. “You okay?”

It takes a couple of seconds for Betty to pull herself out of her thoughts and reacquaint herself with reality; they’re sitting on her bed with their algebra textbooks and papers strewn all over the mattress. “Uh, what? Sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

The shorter of the two quirks a dark eyebrow. “You were supposed to be helping me with this.” She points to an unsolved problem on her worksheet, a smirk curving her lips. “Lost in thought again?”

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The blush on Betty’s cheeks is almost as dark as Veronica’s lipstick. “Sorry. I, uh…” Veronica pulls away from her homework and nestles against Betty’s side, curling her arms around her waist and nuzzling her cheek against her shoulder. As a result, the blonde’s brain short-circuits. “Um, well, you’re supposed to…er-”

“I think we’re overdue for a break, anyway.” She can hear the grin in Veronica’s voice and she’d be annoyed if she didn’t find it so cute. “So, fill me in on your adventures with Sherlock Jones - any updates? New leads?”

She sighs. “Nope. Jughead’s been trying to get a word out of his dad but nothing’s working. FP’s dedication to the Serpents is air-tight.” Her fingers twitch against Veronica’s hip. “Cheryl hasn’t heard anything about her dad or Jason, which means they’re still out there playing cat and mouse.
Neither of us have an idea where to start looking next and it’s frustrating.”

“Maybe you guys should take a step back for a little bit.” Veronica suggests. One of her hands is on Betty’s chest, absentmindedly picking at the fluff sticking to her teal flannel shirt. “You’ve been squinting at this for so long you’re probably missing the bigger picture. Give yourselves a day or two to rest, then jump back into it. Your brains and eyes could use a vacation.”

Betty frowns. “You’re probably right. We need a break.” She stretches her arms over her head and yawns. “Are you hungry? I can order pi-”

A sharp tapping at her window startles the both of them, nearly knocking Betty out of bed. She scrambles to her feet and lets out a frustrated grunt when she spots Archie on the other side. “Can’t you text like a normal person?”

“Does he do this regularly?” Veronica asks as the redhead’s foot gets caught on the windowsill on his way in and tumbles onto the carpet.

“Both he and Jughead think it’s funny to take the ladder from his dad’s garage and climb on over here whenever they feel like it.” The blonde mutters as she crawls back into bed with her.

“Sorry, but I just remembered something on my way home from football practice and I had to tell you as soon as possible.” Archie sheepishly rubs the back of his head as he moves to sit on the floor with his back against the wall.

“Well, what is it?” Betty crosses her arms.

“It’s Jughead’s birthday this weekend.” Archie’s fiddling with the sleeve of his varsity jacket. “Did you know that?”

Oh shit. Betty grabs her phone, scrolls through her calendar, and there it is: A notification for Jughead’s sixteenth birthday this coming Saturday. They’ve been friends for how long now, and she still doesn’t remember the exact date? Great. “Oh my God, I totally forgot.”

“To be honest, I think that’s what he was going for.” The redhead chuckles. “He doesn’t like making a big deal out of it. Every year he goes to a double feature at The Bijou; it’s, like, this tradition. The last few years, I’ve been his movie buddy, but I was thinking that maybe you should go this time.”

She can feel Veronica’s fingers tighten ever so slightly around her arm, and she gulps. “Uh, why can’t we just go together?”

“Because I was thinking that maybe we could throw him a small surprise party.” Archie shrugs. “You can distract him with the movie while I set stuff up at home. My dad’s away in Chicago all weekend, so we have the place to ourselves.” He turns his head towards the brunette. “Veronica, you can help out, if you want.”

Betty brightens at this idea. “That sounds great, Arch. Maybe you can invite his dad - he’ll like that.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but when someone doesn’t like making a big deal out of their birthday, doesn’t that usually mean they don’t want grand gestures like a surprise party?” Veronica interjects. “I actually think this may be the only thing Jughead and I will ever agree on.”

Betty raises an eyebrow. “You don’t like celebrating your birthday?”

“I used to, and the parties were the social highlight of the year.” The brunette replies indignantly. “But after the scandal with my dad and everything, I lost taste for it. Knowing that people only went
to my birthday parties just for the free booze and food, and not actually because they genuinely wanted to celebrate my birthday…it was a tough pill to swallow.” She lowers her gaze to her lap. “Now they’re just reminders of how shallow and lonely my life really was.”

Betty instinctively takes her by the waist and pulls her in. The smaller of the two hugs back, her head fitting perfectly into the curve of the taller girl’s neck. For a second they forget that Archie’s sitting a few feet away from them. He coughs into his fist, prompting the two to raise their heads and look at him - Betty, with a scarlet stain on her cheeks, and Veronica looking like she just woke up from a long nap.

This is another thing that’s been on Betty’s mind lately - out of all the people she expected to make a fuss about her and Veronica’s new dynamic, she figured it would’ve been Archie. He’s obviously affected by it, but he hasn’t said anything so far. Why?

“It won’t be a grand gesture.” His tone is hesitant and awkward, and it’s only making Betty’s embarrassment worse. “It’ll just be small party - me, Val, you guys, Ethel, Kevin, Cheryl…maybe she can get Polly to come too.” He throws his hands up. “It’s his sixteenth birthday - everyone deserves to have a party on their sixteenth birthday, even if it’s a small one.”

Betty can’t help but agree with Archie. Sixteen is a milestone, and it should be celebrated. “Alright, maybe he won’t be bothered if it’s just us.”

Archie grins and tells her how excited he his to start planning the party, but as he barrels into his plans she can’t help but feel like this is a bad idea. Veronica doesn’t look so convinced either, which is only making her more doubtful. It’s just a little birthday party with less than ten people - what can go wrong?

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Betty makes it a habit to wake up a little earlier than usual so she can head over to the Pembrooke and walk Veronica to school. The temperature has dropped significantly in the past few days and Betty can barely feel her face, but she can’t start her morning without Veronica.

“You do know that the Pembrooke is, like, in the complete opposite direction from where you live, right?” The brunette laughs as the blonde wraps an arm around her shoulder. “You’d make it to school a lot faster without coming here.”

“It’s not that big of a deal.” Betty squeezes her, and the both of them giggle in unison. “I like walking with you, even if that means I have to sacrifice my punctuality.” This elicits another laugh, and Betty’s chest swells at the sound. She’d be content listening to this girl laugh for the rest of her life.

They don’t separate until they get to their lockers, and when they grab everything they need they’re drawn towards each other again; Veronica’s hand finds hers and they walk to homeroom together, acting like they’ve been doing this for years. No one bats an eye, no one turns to stare.

The morning breezes by and the pair find themselves sitting in the cafeteria with Kevin and Archie. The redhead’s so engrossed in his plans for Jughead’s party that he barely notices Betty’s arm around Veronica’s waist.

“He’s never had a birthday party, so we were thinking of having one for him - like, a low-key surprise party.” Archie pauses to take a sip of water. “Just us.”
“Mm,” Veronica hums, her head tilted and her brow furrowed. “But you did mention he isn’t a fan of birthdays. Do you really think this is a good idea?”

Kevin shakes his head. “Everybody says that, but nobody means it.”

“You’d know that I’d grab at any excuse to wear a cute party dress, but I honestly cannot see Riverdale High’s very own Holden Caulfield reacting positively to this.” The brunette presses on. “He’s a lone wolf.”

“It’s going to be super small.” Betty insists. “Inner circle only. He won’t even-”

“Oh my God.” Kevin’s head is raised, glancing at the cafeteria’s entrance. “Don’t turn around.”

So, naturally, the entire table turns around.

Chuck Clayton saunters past the doors, his gigantic arms swinging as he casually makes his way past the tables. He isn’t wearing that usual irritable smirk of his, but Betty can easily see it in her head. She’s suddenly back at Ethel’s pool house - he’s standing by the edge of the water, his eyes softening with awe as he watches her emerge with that bodice, all that lace, that black hair…

She hisses in pain just as Chuck breezes past their table, but doesn’t look at her hands. She already knows.

“Holy Chuck.” Kevin gapes. “I think his lats got bigger - not that I care, because he’s evil incarnate…”

“What’s Chuck Clayton doing back?” Archie’s blinking rapidly, trying to process this information.

“He got suspended, not expelled.” Veronica mutters. She reaches under the table and slides a hand down Betty’s arm, and when she finds her hand she squeezes affectionately. “He should’ve been drawn and quartered for what he did.”

Betty’s too focused on Chuck to pay attention to the conversation. He’s circling the room, looking for something; it takes him a few minutes, but when he finds what he’s looking for his eyes widen and he makes a beeline for one of the tables towards the back of the room. When he sits at Ethel’s table Betty suddenly shoots up to her feet and makes her way towards them.

“Stay away from her, Chuck.” Her fists curl into tight balls, and she presses them against her thighs.

“Easy.” The disgraced football star raises his hands to show he means no harm. “Look, I only came here to apologize.” He rolls his eyes and swivels back to face Ethel. “You don’t have to go Dark Betty on me.”

*Dark Betty* is what triggers a reaction; Betty lunges forward, her eyes flickering with a kind of anger she’s never felt before. “I’m *not* going-” She slams her fists on the table, lips pulled back over her teeth, almost snarling. It’s only when she sees the frightened look on Ethel’s face that she realizes she may have reacted a little too strongly. Chuck, on the other hand, looks unimpressed, almost like he expected this to happen.

The blonde reels back, straightens up, and takes a deep breath. “I’m not going dark *anything.*” She lowers her voice to a near whisper as her fingers curl inward. “Ethel, is Chuck bothering you?”

“Relax, Betty.” Ethel swallows hard. “It’s fine.”

Chuck throws her a shit-eating grin. “Yeah, Betty. We’re fine.” He folds his hands atop the table and
squints at her. “Now, the real question is…are you?”

The way his tone sounded when he asked her made it obvious he’s trying to get a rise out of her, so she backs off and wordlessly returns to her table. Archie and Kevin look confused, but the second she sits back down Veronica reaches for one of her hands and gently pries her fingers open so she can inspect her wounds.

“What was he doing?” She asks; she’s looking straight at her but she can feel her hands caressing hers. “Was he accosting her?”

“No,” Betty exhales slowly, trying to calm herself. “He was apologizing.”

“Oh, I’m so sure.” Veronica rolls her eyes. “Chuck Clayton doesn’t have a contrite bone in his muscle-bound body.”

“Can we talk about something else?” Betty shakes her head. “Like Jughead’s surprise party; there’s a lot we can’t do, a lot we can’t control - but we can make sure that he has the best damn birthday of his life.”

Veronica, Archie, and Kevin exchange uncertain looks, but she knows that they know it’s better (And safer) to go along with the hasty change in topic. “I already told you that my dad’s away. We can do it at my house.” His brown eyes find hers. “I think we could all use a good time.”

Veronica’s hands are still on hers, but she’s smiling. “Now you’re talking my language.”

Archie doesn’t tear his gaze away, and for some reason it’s making Betty uncomfortable - and she hates that it is. Archie and uncomfortable do not belong in the same sentence.

“It’s gonna be epic.” He says, and it chills her to the bone.

Archie tells her later that he managed to get FP to come, which brightens Betty’s spirits. As the afternoon rolls along Chuck becomes a distant memory, and by the time school ends she’s too busy with her Blue and Gold duties to think about him. She’s spending part of the early evening finishing up on some editing when Alice strides into the office. “Great news, Betty - I just had a terrific meeting with Principal Weatherbee, who agrees that the Blue and Gold can benefit greatly from my professional guidance as your new advisor.”

Her mother’s enthusiasm is endearing, to say the least. “That’s great, Mom.” She pushes away her laptop and reaches for her notebook.

“So, what are we working on?” Alice takes the seat opposite her desk. “Any updates on the case?”

“No, but we do need to start writing up a list of supplies for Jughead’s birthday party.” Betty chuckles.

Alice’s response isn’t what she’s expecting. “You’re really falling for this Jones boy, aren’t you?”

She can hear the record scratch going off in her head.

“What?”
Her mother rolls her eyes. “Don’t play dumb with me, Elizabeth. A mother always knows when her daughter’s headfirst in the throes of love.”

Betty clamps her eyes shut. “It’s not like that.”

But if it isn’t like that, how is she going to explain what it’s really like?

_Oh, Jughead and I are just friends. I actually like girls, and I’ve always liked girls._

_So, remember when I thought I was in love with Archie for most of my life? Well, about that…_  

_I’m gay, Mom. G-A-Y. Gaaaaaaaay._

_I can check myself into the Sisters of Quiet Mercy if that makes things easier._

“Look, I just want us to be open about this.” Alice shrugs. “I don’t want you to think that you can’t talk about this with me. I don’t want Polly happening all over again.”

“It’s not going to happen again.” Betty reassures her, her expression exasperated, but on the inside she’s having a crisis. “Jughead and I are just friends, Mom. I don’t see him like that, he’s--” _Aromantic asexual. Too in love with food to love anything else. A guy. A member of the opposite sex. _“-kind of like a brother to me.”_

Alice doesn’t look convinced. “Well, whatever it is you two share, just make sure that you don’t tell him everything about yourself. That’s the one of the many mistakes I made with your father.”

Betty raises an eyebrow. “I thought you were supposed to tell your partner everything.”

“I shared my secrets, fears, doubts…all of that, with him, and he ended up using them against me.” Her mother sighs and reaches for Betty’s notebook, scanning the short list scribbled in the margins. “There are some things about myself that I struggle with, things that I should’ve kept to myself until I was ready to share with someone I truly trusted.”

Veronica wouldn’t use her secrets against her like that, right?

_Well, you’d have to be with her in order for her to use them against you in this context in the first place._ Her brain chides, and she mentally slaps herself for it.

Conflicting thoughts about her relationship with Veronica aside, Betty really wants to know more about these secrets her mother is talking about, but secrets are secrets for a reason. “Again, we’re not like that, but I still trust him.”

“Of course you do.” Alice smiles, and Betty’s sure she’s still convinced her and Jughead are an item, but at this point it’s better to let her believe that’s true instead of telling her what the actual truth is. If she isn’t ready to tell Archie, she definitely isn’t ready to tell her mother. If Polly was sent to the Sisters for an unplanned pregnancy, what’s going to happen once her mother finds out about her younger daughter’s attraction to other girls? “And you should - but just not with everything.”

As if on cue, Betty’s cell phone begins to vibrate. When she sees Veronica’s name on her screen she almost wants to bring her phone to her face and kiss it. “It’s Veronica, Mom - I have to take this.” She abruptly gets up and moves into the hallway. “V? What’s up?”

“Do you think it would be a little impulsive if I bought two one-way tickets to Madagascar right now?” She asks, and the question is so random that Betty can’t help but laugh.
“What are you talking about?”

“Daddy’s attorney is here and he says that Mom and I have to give a statement at his trial that - and I quote - *speaks to his character.*” Veronica groans. “Apparently, if he looks more human, he could get a lesser sentence - but how can he expect me to speak to his character, now that I know that he’s a liar and a thief and a fraud? How am I supposed to get up on that podium and talk about how great of a father he is when he screwed over Ethel’s father? At this point it’s just so much easier to give up and run away from it all.”

“Gosh, I’m so sorry, V.” Betty rubs the back of her neck. “What does your mom think of all of this?”

“She wants me to speak.” The brunette scoffs. “Despite everything Daddy’s done, she still wants him here. I don’t get it. He’s obviously not the man he said he was, but she’s not buying any of it. I am beyond frustrated.” She pauses to sigh. “Oh, and I haven’t even gotten to the juiciest part of this story yet.”

Betty blinks. “There’s more?”

“So I hatched this plan to get back at my parents for putting me in this predicament: I wanted to dig up more dirt on my dad, any sort of evidence that I can use against him. I would agree to talk about how supposedly human he is, but when I get up there to speak I’d pull a fast one and bring up whatever I managed to find.” Another pause; there’s a rustling sound, like she’s shifting something. Betty can picture her lying stomach-down on her bed with her ankles crossed up in the air, and she finds herself blushing for some reason. *God, you’re so useless.* “Smithers told me that the Pembrooke’s basement is sort of like a storage unit, so I head on down there and I end up finding these old invoices that show monthly payments - and I’m talking about significant amounts of money here - from Blossom Maple Farms to Lodge Industries.”

That’s something she didn’t expect to hear. “Do you think the Blossoms might be involved in your dad’s arrest?”

“I don’t know, but there’s definitely some sort of sinister connection. These monthly payments have been happening for decades - since the forties, to be exact - until about five months ago, which was exactly when Daddy was arrested.” There’s a slight shifting again. “I was thinking that maybe Clifford Blossom implicated Daddy to get out of paying for this monthly fee…but what are these monthly fees to begin with? Why have they been going on for so long? What exactly is the nature of the relationship between Clifford and my dad?” She groans again. “There are way too many variables to make a solid case for this, and I hate it.”

This, honestly, is a whole other investigation on its own - one that’ll probably take just as long to solve as her great-grandfather’s murder. “I get why you want to get to the bottom of this, V, but I suggest you keep this to yourself…at least for now. If the Blossoms find out you’re snooping around their finances, who knows what they’ll do to you. If they’re willing to threaten their son and chase him around the country so they can keep a secret, there’s nothing they wouldn’t do to you in order to keep another.”

“Trust me, I’m well aware of the consequences.”

“Did you say that these payments have been going on since the forties?” Betty scratches her cheek with her index finger. “That’s around the same time my great-grandfather died. It can’t be a coincidence…can it? Do you know how long the Lodges have been in Riverdale?”

“That, I’m not sure of.” Veronica answers meekly. “Maybe that’s something your mom can help us out with. She probably knows where and how to find this kind of information.”
Maybe this won’t be a separate investigation after all. “Good call.” Betty glances back inside the Blue and Gold office; her mom is still sitting where she left her, scrolling through her phone.

“Speaking of which, I was just in the middle of a conversation with her when you called. Do you think we can continue this later? I just don’t want to leave her hanging - and now that I actually have an assignment for her, she can get off my back instead of accusing me and Jughead of being…” She wrinkles her nose in disgust. “A thing.”

Veronica laughs. “Are you serious? Did you tell her that you aren’t?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think she believes me.” Betty mumbles as Veronica laughs a second time.

“Anyways, I’ll talk to you later, V. Do you want me to head over afterward?”

“I’ll think I’ll be okay for now, but I will definitely take you up on another call.” Yet another pause. “It’s so much easier falling asleep to your voice.”

Her phone suddenly feels white hot, and she fears if she holds onto it any longer it’s going to fuse with her skin. “I’ll call you when I get home.” She promptly hangs up and stuffs the phone into her pocket before wobbling back to her mother.

Okay, so they also developed this other habit where they Facetime each other right before bed and fall asleep together while staying on the line. Veronica’s voice being the last thing she hears before going to sleep helps put her mind at ease, and it makes her forget about all of the things that have been stressing her out lately. It almost makes her feel like she’s there lying next to her, and since they can’t be physically together every night this will have to do for now. Plus, sleepy Veronica - gravelly/slightly slurred voice, heavy-lidded eyes, perfectly tousled hair - is one of the most adorable things in the world and no one in their right mind would pass up an opportunity to witness it.

“That must’ve been one engaging conversation if she kept you out for that long.” Alice looks suspicious when Betty returns to her desk. “You know I don’t approve of her, Betty.”

“And you know that I’m going to be friends with her no matter what.” The younger Cooper fights back. “Also, thanks to her I may or may not have a new lead in our investigation, and I want you to look into it - so do you mind putting aside your biases for a second, for the sake of journalistic integrity?”

Her mother rolls her eyes. “Fine. What is it?”

Relieved that she finally has nothing else to say about her and Jughead, Betty happily dives into an explanation about the connection between Lodge Industries and Blossom Maple Farms.

The week passes by surprisingly quickly, and before anyone knows it, it’s Saturday. Jughead is blissfully unaware of the surprise that awaits him when Betty heads over to Archie’s house that afternoon to pick him up - or, at least, that’s what he wants them to think.

“So, why is Betty your replacement again?” Jughead raises an eyebrow as Archie comes rushing down the stairs.

“Sorry, Jug.” The redhead answers sheepishly as he heads into the living room. “Promised Val I’d head over. She’s having dinner with her family and she really wants me to be there. I’ll make it up to
“Am I not a good enough movie companion for you?” Betty crosses her arms, feigning annoyance.


“Perfectly fine.” Archie pauses to grin at him. “Just looking for my keys. You guys go on ahead.”

“Oh…” Jughead draws out the second syllable as Betty pulls him out of the house. He wisely refrains from asking any more questions as Betty drives them to the Bijou in her mom’s station wagon, instead making light conversation about school and the Blue and Gold. When they arrive, Betty buys their food, and she lets Jughead choose where they sit - right in the middle of the theatre, not too close and not too far.

“Kevin told me that you and Chuck had some scene in the cafeteria earlier this week.” Jughead says as Betty hands over the popcorn. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there, I was just caught up in a few things.”

Desperate to avoid the subject, Betty Fires back with a question. “With your dad?”

He shrugs and stares forlornly at the popcorn. “I want to believe him, Betts. I really do. It’s just…” He sighs. “This is the last chance I’m gonna give him. If he doesn’t get his act together in the next few months like he said, that’s it. I can’t be around him anymore.”

Maybe this isn’t the best way to change the subject, especially since today’s his birthday. “Let’s hope for the best, okay? It’s your birthday, Juggie. You shouldn’t be depressed.”

He chuckles quietly before plunging his first into the tub of popcorn, grabbing a sizeable amount and shoving it into his mouth. It takes him a few seconds to swallow all of it. “Right. So back to what I was talking about before - what exactly happened between you and Chuck that night at Ethel’s pool house?”

“Veronica asked me to keep those details under wraps, okay?” She sounds a little short, and she feels bad but she really doesn’t want to talk about it. The last thing one of her closest friends needs to know is that she’s plagued with a myriad of unaddressed mental health issues.

Jughead gets the hint and backs away, returning to his popcorn. “Alright.” There’s an awkward few seconds of silence. “The only reason why I’m asking is because Kevin made it sound like you were really upset.”

The only thing I’m upset about is finding out from Archie that today’s your birthday, and that you guys have been going to the movies on your birthday for years.” She rolls her eyes, trying to appear playful so this conversation can take a lighter turn. “I get that not everyone is a fan of celebrating, but it’s your sixteenth. If any one of your birthdays had to be a big deal, it should be this one.”

“An American Werewolf in London” begins to flicker on the screen. “Sorry.” The beginning to An American Werewolf in London begins to flicker on the screen. “I never pegged you as an American Werewolf kind of girl - y’know, the whole beast within kind of thing.”

She knows he’s joking, but the coincidental double entendre makes her uneasy. “You’re a jerk.” He laughs again, and she forces herself to laugh with him so she can keep up the facade.

When they finally leave the theatre the sun is already down and a few stars are poking out of the night sky. Jughead animately talks about the movies they just watched on the short drive home, and it gives Betty a little more optimism about this party. If he’s in a good mood, that must mean he’ll be
able to take this surprise party well.

When she pulls up on her driveway and they cross the street towards Archie’s house, she notices a few shadows moving in the window, so she hastily thinks of something to talk about to distract him. “So, uh, did your dad wish you a happy birthday?”

He scoffs and sticks his hands in his pockets, searching for the key to the front door. “Birthdays at the Jones household were used as excuses to make us look like a semi-normal family, even for just a few hours. If anything, him not wishing me a happy birthday is a gift in itself.” He finally finds the key and slides it into the lock. The house is dark when they step inside, but when they round the corner the lights switch on and everyone jumps out from their hiding spot.

“Happy Birthday!” Kevin is standing by the entrance to the living room with Joaquin. Archie is standing in between them with his arms around their shoulders; his right hand is clutching a blue plastic cup. Ethel is standing underneath a Happy Birthday sign strung up with tape, Cheryl is brooding in the corner with her arms crossed, and Valerie and Veronica are standing by a table laden with snacks.

“Oh.” Is Jughead’s only response; he’s blinking rapidly, looking like he’s about to malfunction. Archie stumbles over to give him his own greeting, throwing his arms around him and squeezing him tight. Betty notices Jughead pulling away and whispering something to him, his face half-disappointed, half-confused, but she tries not to let it bother her so much - though she can’t ignore how…loose Archie looks.

“Is he okay?” She asks Valerie, her eyebrow raised as Veronica makes her way over to greet Jughead - in Spanish, of course. “He seems a bit off.”

Valerie rolls her eyes. “He pre-gamed a little bit. I think something’s bothering him, but he won’t say what.” Kevin’s with Jughead now, introducing him to Joaquin. “You better get the cake.”

This is already off to a bad start. Instead of dealing with it Betty listens to Valerie and rushes into the kitchen to fetch the cake from the fridge. She, Archie, and Kevin made it earlier - a cute little hamburger-shaped cake with sixteen candles mottled on top. She quickly lights the candles and slowly makes her way back into the living room, singing the Happy Birthday song as best she can without going too off-key. The rest of the group joins in, and Jughead’s eyes soften at the slightest; he almost looks grateful, and it’s good enough for her.

“C’mon.” She bumps her shoulder against his and holds the cake up to his face. “Make a wish.”

“Oh,” He blinks again, still not sure how to take all of this in. “Okay.” He takes a few seconds, and then finally blows out the candles. Everyone applauds and Archie lets out a high-pitched whistle, and things start to feel okay again. Jughead, still looking like a deer caught in the headlights, awkwardly makes his way around the room to thank everyone.

Veronica briskly brushes past the group and dashes towards the kitchen, but Betty doesn’t think too much of it at first; she’s too concerned with Archie being drunk and Jughead looking overwhelmed. The last thing she wants is for this night to go horribly, so she attempts to get Jughead to mingle some more before handing the cake over to Kevin and gently pulling Archie aside. She can smell the alcohol on him and he’s swaying slightly. “Valerie told me you’ve been drinking.”

“It’s a party.” He shrugs before raising his cup. “You’re supposed to drink at a party.”

She prays the cup away from him and sets it on a nearby table. “This isn’t like you. What’s wrong? Did you and Valerie get into something?”
“No.” He shakes his head. “I don’t really want to talk about it right now, okay? Can we just try to enjoy the party?”

“Alright.” She answers hesitantly. “But you know if there’s something bothering you, you can tell me, right?”

“I know.” He rubs the back of his neck and mutters something about checking up on Valerie before shuffling away. Betty sighs and takes a quick look around the room and notices that Cheryl is missing. She knew that she was against coming here in the first place, but Betty insisted she come since she was technically part of their group now. She couldn’t get Polly to come, unfortunately, but it meant a lot that she bothered to head over here by herself. Betty assumes that maybe she headed into the bathroom or something, but when she finds the bathroom unoccupied she begins to search the other rooms of the house.

When she steps into the kitchen she finds Cheryl and Veronica locked into a tearful embrace, much like the one they shared so many weeks ago in the girls’ locker room, and Betty is so taken aback she has to press her hand against the wall for support. Both girls instantly pull away when they notice the blonde; Veronica is quickly swiping at her eyes and Cheryl is back to looking annoyed and defensive.

“Uh,” Betty scrambles for an excuse. “I was just coming to get ice cream. Is everything alright?”

“Yeah.” Veronica sniffles. “I’m just not in a party mood.”

“That makes two of us.” Jughead is here now, heading over to the table to grab the paper plates and plastic utensils. For some reason that rubs Betty the wrong way, and just as he’s about to leave the room she blocks the doorway, preventing him from doing so. “Do you mind?”

“You’re not actually upset that Archie and I threw you a party, are you?” She raises an eyebrow. She knows this is probably going to make things worse but she’s so tired of it. She’s tired of trying to make things better, only for them to fall apart. She’s so tired of trying.

“No,” He sighs, his expression aghast. “It is nice, Betty. I appreciate it - it’s just…I’d be happier if it were just the four of us in a booth at Pop’s.”

She throws her hands up. “But we always do that! Archie and I wanted to do something different, something special.”

“The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.” He says cryptically, and it only sets her off again.

“Why is everything always so doom and gloom with you, Jug?” She laughs humourlessly. “We just wanted to do something nice for you! We - your friends - wanted to show that we care, that we appreciate you, that we like having you around and that you deserve something nice for your birthday. Why can’t it just be normal for once?”

Jughead’s eyes flit past her to stare at Cheryl and Veronica for a split second before leaning in to whisper, “What’s normal for you and Archie isn’t exactly normal for me. This isn’t my version of normal, Betty. Don’t you get that?”

She’s about to fight back when the doorbell rings. Jughead looks like he’s about to faint. “How many more people did you invite to this thing?”

“No one.” She mutters as she follows him into the foyer, along with Cheryl and Veronica. “Inner circle only.”
Archie’s already there, pulling the door open. Betty’s eyes widen when Chuck struts through the door, that stupid smirk back on his face. There is a sizeable amount of people standing behind him - so many, in fact, that Betty can’t count them all. “Did you really think you could throw a house party without inviting me?”

Archie’s drunk and won’t say why. Veronica’s upset and decided to confide in Cheryl first. Jughead hates his birthday party - and just when Betty thought things couldn’t get any worse, Chuck arrives with the entire damn student body and a personal vendetta.

“Archie!” Moose walks in, balancing a giant keg on his shoulder. “Where do you want the kegs?”

The redhead glances at the keg before turning to Betty and Jughead, who are vehemently shaking their heads. When he smirks and tells Moose to set one up in the kitchen and another in the backyard, the blonde groans before losing herself in the crowd of students piling into the house.

There is absolutely no way this can get any worse.

At some point, Dilton comes in with an entire DJ set - turntables, speakers, the works. He sets it up in the living room, turns the music up to max, and now the bass is so loud Betty can feel it ricocheting off the rungs of her ribcage. A bunch of guys from the football team - Archie included - are doing keg stands in the backyard, the woodwind section of the marching band is playing the brass section in beer pong in the kitchen, and she’s pretty sure she just saw Cheryl drunkenly making out with Moose in the dining room.

“Cooper!” Reggie pushes his way through the throng of dancing students, grinning from ear to ear. “Where’s your drink?”

Betty shakes her head. “I’m not in the m-”

“Here, you can have mine.” He shoves the plastic cup into her hand and winks. “Not roofied, I promise.”

“That’s not funny, Reggie.” She rolls her eyes, but he’s already gone. She raises the cup to her nose and shrinks in disgust when she smells the sting of the alcohol, but then she thinks about how everything that could possibly go wrong today actually happened, and then it suddenly hits her - why the fuck do I care so much?

Veronica can confide in Cheryl whenever she wants to; Betty doesn’t have the authority to tell her who she can and can’t talk to. So what if Jughead’s throwing a fit about his party? She did something nice for him and it’s not her fault he’s being a big baby about it. And why does it matter that Archie’s drunk? He’s right - this is a party, you’re supposed to drink and have fun. The whole point of a party is to temporarily forget about the things that are bothering you, right?

Right. So Betty knocks her head back and downs the cup in one gulp.

It only takes a few seconds for that empty cup to be refilled, and she swallows that in one go too. Then she does it a third time. A fourth.

“Damn.” Reggie, who appears out of nowhere for a second time, laughs as he hands her a fifth. “I always thought you’d be a bit of a lightweight.”
She scoffs. “You wish.” The Bulldogs cheer for her, and she smirks before raising her cup in a toast, draining it, crushing it in one hand, tossing it over her shoulder, and stumbling off.

If they don’t care, she doesn’t either.

She heads into the backyard and pushes through more partygoers, not really sure where her legs are taking her. She tries to head a little deeper into the garden, where it’s quieter, but when she hears retching coming from the bushes she does a complete 180 and before she knows it her hand finds the doorknob to the garage, where she stumbles right into Jughead and Archie having an argument. Poor Vegas is sitting by the drum set, his head low and his expression sullen.

“Oh, perfect timing!” Jughead gestures over to her, his laugh bitter. “You guys do know that my dad has a drinking problem, right? What the hell were you thinking, inviting him over here?”

“Oh, is FP here?” Betty asks, her eyes unfocused and her tone dreamy. “I didn’t see him come in.”

“We didn’t know people were gonna be drinking at this thing.” Archie fights back. “Chuck just came here uninvited. This was just supposed to be us, your friends.”

“But all was forgiven when Moose came in with the keg, right?” Jughead laughs again. “Now look, you’re both drunk - and, for the record, you two are my friends. Everyone else - including Kevin, including Veronica - are people that, two months ago, I would’ve actively shunned.”

“But why?” Betty manages to grab onto what’s left of her sobriety at the last minute so she can properly digest what’s going on. “Kevin and Veronica have been nothing but nice to you! They’ve done nothing to deserve any sort of shunning. Maybe if you didn’t hold such unrealistic expectations for people, you’d be easier to get along with.”

Jughead’s eyes widen, and his lips are slightly parted; it’s almost like she slapped him in the face. The thing is, Betty doesn’t feel bad at all - and it’s probably the alcohol talking, but she likes that he’s reacting this way. For once, she isn’t afraid to hurt someone else’s feelings. For once she’s allowing herself to say whatever the hell she wants to say without giving a damn about the consequences. It’s not her fault Jughead doesn’t have any friends. It’s not her fault Jughead is so miserable all the time. Why bother? Why bother trying to do nice things for people she cares about if they’re just going to throw it back in her face? Why does she keep trying? Why does she keep wanting to try, knowing she’s just going to fail over and over again?

“There’s no reason to get upset, Jug.” Archie reluctantly fills in the awkward silence. “It’s just a party.”

Jughead’s initial shock at Betty’s words finally wear off just enough for him to let out a half-hearted scoff. “It’s not just a party, and the both of you know it. It’s the fact that you don’t know, or even care, that this is the last thing I would want.” He jabs a finger in their direction. “You guys did this for yourselves, to prove something.”

“To prove what?” Betty can feel her blood boiling hotter and hotter; her fists are clenched so tight they’re almost shaking.

“That you’re great friends?” He throws his hands up. “I don’t know. Doesn’t it ever occur to you two just how different we are - like, on a cellular, DNA-kind of level? It’s been there ever since we kids, ever since we first met! Betty - you’re a straight-A student, you’re on the student council, you volunteer at the goddamn soup kitchen every Thanksgiving. Archie - there isn’t a single sport you can’t play, there probably isn’t a single instrument you can’t play either, you practically have to swat girls away. You’re both on varsity, for God’s sake! You’re the perfect girl and boy next door.” He
extends his arm, stabbing a finger at the door. “There isn’t a single soul in that backyard - hell, in this entire damn town - who wouldn’t kill to be you.”

Perfect. That dreaded word sticks in her gut like a knife, twisting in deep. For a second, she swears she sees red.

“Jug-” Archie starts, but Betty cuts in.

“That’s not what I meant.” He answers, but his voice is so low Betty and Archie have to lean in to hear him properly.

She takes a couple of menacing steps towards him, and the flames inside of her grow when he begins to step backward. “You really think our lives are so much better than yours because of what they look like on the outside? You know just as well as us that our families aren’t as perfect as they appear to be, and that Archie and I have been struggling through our own problems.” She pauses, taking a deep breath in a shaky attempt to steady herself. “You think you’re so misunderstood, so broken, so damaged and isolated from the rest of the world because it looks like everyone else has it better than you?” It’s her turn to laugh. “If anything, you’re the one who acts like you’re better than everyone else because you’re so-” She makes mocking air quotes with her fingers. “-different.”

“That’s not what I meant.” He answers, but his voice is so low Betty and Archie have to lean in to hear him properly.

“Really? Because that’s what it looks like to me every time I see you skulking the hallways of our school, glaring at anyone in a varsity jacket or a cheerleader uniform with your headphones on.” Her eyes narrow. “You think Archie and I hang out with you because we pity you, or something? Do you think we planned this birthday party because we feel bad that you don’t have a lot of friends, or that your family doesn’t make a big deal out of birthdays? I bet you think that Archie and I are only friends with you because it makes us look better - like we’re these selfish, greedy jerks who do nice things not for the sake of doing something but because there’s some kind of intrinsic benefit for the both of us.”

Betty, Archie says wearily. “Stop it.”

She whips around to glare at him, but when she eyes the defeated expression on his face she decides that maybe it’s best she listened to him. Her hands relax and she can feel the burning on her palms but she keeps them stiff by her thighs so the boys don’t see. Jughead is staring at his shoes, his head hung, so it’s a little hard to see his expression, but the fact that he’s trying to hide it from her says enough.

Not in the mood to hear anything else, she storms out of the garage, only to bump into Veronica. “B.” She grabs the taller girl by the biceps. “I’ve been looking all over for you - I need to talk to you about something.”

Unfortunately for Veronica, Betty’s still riding on her bad mood. “Whatever it is you have to say, you can just say it to Cheryl instead.” She pulls Veronica’s hands off of her and tries to make her way back to the house, but when the brunette moves to stand in her way she groans. “What do you want, Veronica?”

“I want an explanation for what you just said.” She crosses her arms. “What the hell did you mean by that?”

A tiny part of her knows she’s just picking a senseless fight at this point, but the larger, drunker part of her doesn’t care - in fact, all she wants to do is make this harder for herself. And she has no idea why. “Nothing. It’s nothing. Just - can you let me go? Please?”
“Is everything okay?” Her expression softens, and she hates that Veronica can read her so easily. “Did something happen in there? Were you fighting with Archie?”

“I said it was nothing.” She briskly walks around Veronica and tries her best to suppress the urge to bite back, to give into this weird impulse and ruin everything she worked so hard to build with the smaller girl. She wills herself not to look back as she makes her way towards the gate that’ll take her to the front of the house, across the street, and back into the safe silent confines of her own home, but just as she reaches up to undo the latch Chuck appears out of nowhere and slams his hand down, re-locking the gate and keeping her in.

“Whoa, whoa.” He smirks. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Why does it matter to you?” She hisses. The cuts on her palms are screaming; she just wants to go home.

“You can’t leave now.” He insists.

“And why the hell not?” Veronica, ever so persistent, followed Betty across the garden. She moves to stand beside the blonde, her dark eyes narrowing as she eyes Chuck’s form. “She can do whatever she wants.”

She hates that she’s still sticking up for even after she just tried to push her away. She’s supposed to be angry, she’s supposed to be running away from her right now. Why does she keep coming back?

“How about we make a deal?” His grin somehow looks even more sinister than before. “You can leave and do whatever your heart desires, but only after you play a game.”

“Okay, Jigsaw.” Veronica rolls her eyes. “This doesn’t sound cryptic at all.”

“Deal.” Betty blurts, evoking surprise from both Chuck and Veronica. She isn’t exactly sure what caused her to agree - maybe she’s a lot more desperate to go home than she thought, maybe a part of her actually likes the idea of further stirring things up with this supposed game Chuck’s talking about, maybe she’s just drunk out of her mind. Maybe it’s all three.

There’s a huge collective gasp that erupts from somewhere in the backyard, near the keg. The three of them turn to look, but all they see is Archie standing by himself with the front of his shirt soaking wet. The people around him are showing mixed reactions: Some look like they’re trying to hold in a laugh, some look like they’re pitying him, some look either too drunk or too high to process what actually happened.

“I’ll ask Andrews if he wants to join.” Chuck snickers. “Trust me, it’s a game we’ll all enjoy playing. We might even learn something new about each other.”

Betty and Veronica exchange weary looks before Chuck slips in between them so he can announce to the crowd that they’ll be playing a game in the living room. In the distance, Betty can eye Archie and Jughead defeatedly making their way inside.

Okay, maybe things can get worse.

“Do you mind explaining why you’re holding us prisoner, Clayton?” Cheryl is impatiently tapping
the wooden floors with a bright red heel. Chuck managed to corral most of the party inside, but since the living room is too small to accommodate everyone he only lets a select few into the room; the rest have to watch from the hallway or the adjoined dining room. The other ex-Bulldogs who were suspended alongside Chuck are blocking both doorways, preventing anyone from leaving. He pulls out chairs for Cheryl, Veronica, Betty, Jughead, and Archie.

“I thought you’d be more enthusiastic about this, Blossom.” Chuck wrinkles his brow, feigning ignorance. “You were the one who made up the rules to this game, after all.” When Cheryl blinks back in confusion, he shakes his head in amusement. “Does the name Secrets and Sins sound familiar to you?”

Dilton raises an eyebrow. “What the hell is that?”

Chuck gives Cheryl a pointed look, wordlessly expecting her to explain. Defeated, she sighs and crosses her arms. “It’s a variation on Truth or Dare - a game notoriously played at post-game parties exclusive only to Vixens and Bulldogs.”

“They were way more than just parties, if you get what I mean.” Reggie snickers, and the rest of the football team hoots and hollers. Everyone else rolls their eyes.

“Anyways, the point of the game is to own your truth by telling it like it is.” Cheryl continues, her tone tight with aggravation.

“I want to start, if that’s okay.” Dilton steps forward, and Chuck claps him on the shoulder.

“That’s the spirit, Doiley!” He exclaims. “What secrets do you have to reveal to us?”

Dilton pushes up his glasses with an index finger. “I saw Miss Grundy’s car by Sweetwater River the day Jason went missing.” Archie visibly tenses at this, but it only makes Dilton more eager to continue his story. “I told Betty about it, and then Miss Grundy quit her job and left Riverdale, like, two days later.” He pauses for dramatic effect. “And let’s not forget that Archie was also at Sweetwater River that morning.”

It takes a couple of seconds for everyone to put two and two together, and when they finally do the whole room explodes with shocked gasps. Cheryl, always a sucker for hot gossip, leans forward in her chair to gape at the only other redhead in the room. “Oh my God - coloured me shocked, Archie Andrews, but is that why you became a mediocre musician overnight - because you and Miss Four Eyes were pulling a Kay Letourneau?” She shakes her head in disbelief. “Is that why Valerie Brown just publicly broke up with you in your backyard a few minutes ago?”

Another round of gasps revolves around the room, one of them coming from Veronica. Betty’s heart plummets to her stomach and she begins to nervously wring her hands - so that’s why he was standing by himself with beer splashed all over him. She can’t help but feel like it’s her fault somehow.

“Don’t say anything.” Betty says to him, but her voice is faltering. “They’re only trying to get a rise out of you.”

“You’re not helping, Cheryl.” Veronica glares.

“What?” Chuck approaches Archie, his expression incredulous. “Andrews was banging a teacher? Well, damn, I wish I would’ve known. I woulda added you and Miss Grundy to the book of conquests.”

“Classy, Chuck.” Veronica mutters. “As always. Are we just going to ignore the fact that the only
reason why Dilton knows about this was because he was in the middle of the woods firing a gun in the presence of minors?"

“So Doiley’s a psychopath. Everyone knows that.” Moose shrugs his gigantic shoulders. “And don’t act like you don’t have secrets of your own, Lodge. I finally found out who beat me up at the construction site that night.”

The brunette furrows her brow in confusion, but there’s a hint of concern on her features. “Okay?”

“When your dad found out that your mom was having an affair with Archie’s dad, he hired a bunch of goons to trash the site as a warning, and I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Moose pauses to allow the room to gasp for a third time; the colour drains from Veronica’s face, and Betty resists the urge to reach over Jughead’s lap so she can take the smaller girl’s hands in hers.

“What?” Archie twists his upper body so he’s facing Veronica. “Ronnie, is this true?”

Veronica bites her bottom lip as she tries to pick the right words to say. “It is, I’m afraid.” She turns to Jughead, who’s staring back with half-fear and half-confusion on his face. “And while we’re at it, I might as well tell you this myself instead of having you find out from somewhere else later. My father was the one who purchased the Twilight Drive-In, and he did so illegally from his prison cell.”

FP, who’s standing behind one of the ex-Bulldogs blocking the doorway to the hall, looks like the wind was just knocked out of him. Jughead’s eyes are glassy, staring down at the floor. Everyone breaks out into fits of hushed whispering, and it only makes Betty’s anxiety mutate faster. She flattens her palms against her thighs and takes in a few deep breaths, but nothing works.

“I’m sorry, Jughead.” Veronica sighs. “I should have told you sooner.”

Jughead doesn’t respond; instead he shifts his body away from her, which is his own way of saying he isn’t accepting her apology. The brunette groans and slumps slightly in her seat, which is exactly the reaction Chuck was waiting for.

Clearly satisfied with the mess he made, Chuck licks his lips and rubs his hands together. “My turn.”

He half-turns, his smile widening when his eyes land on Betty. “Boy, do I have a twisted secret to reveal - starring Betty Cooper.”

This has to be the absolute lowest possible of worse that this night can get, because she honestly cannot fathom how it can go any lower.

Betty tries not to squirm in her seat, but she can already feel her nails digging into her skin. She can hear Archie telling Chuck to leave her alone, but it falls on deaf ears. She glances up from her seat, straight into Chuck’s eyes. They’re almost gleaming with sick pleasure. “Everybody knows why I got suspended, but what you don’t know is how it happened.” He points at her. “She dressed up like a hooker in a God awful black wig, drugged me, handcuffed me to a jacuzzi, and I almost drowned ’til she got me to say what she wanted to hear - and then, she really lost it.” He pauses and looks around the room, drinking in everyone’s speechless expressions. Betty clamps her eyes shut, mentally counting down the seconds until this is all over. “She actually thought she was Polly!” His booming laugh overpowers the awkward silence in the room. “The apple of Riverdale’s eye - sweet, innocent Betty Cooper is into some weird BDSM, dominatrix shi-”

Chuck never gets to finish his sentence. Archie leaps up from his seat, his eyes flashing with a kind of anger Betty’s never seen from him before. His fist cleanly connects with Chuck’s jaw; the impact is so strong Chuck has to take a few shaky steps backwards to recompose himself. Veronica and
Cheryl gasp, Jughead’s eyes are wider than frisbees, and Betty is still frozen to her chair with her nails halfway into her palms.

Chuck grabs Archie by the front of his shirt, shoving him hard before delivering a punch of his own. Just as Archie stumbles backwards into the coffee table, tripping over it and shattering the glass top, Jughead leaps out of his chair to tackle Chuck into the wall. Chuck easily overtakes him and swings around to punch him in the nose, nearly breaking it, but before things get even worse FP intervenes by stepping in between the boys. He grabs Chuck by the back of his shirt and drags him to the front door, pushing him outside. The entire house follows him, because of course they do.

FP doesn’t let go of Chuck until he descends the front steps and reaches the sidewalk. “Get out.” He hisses, and Chuck rolls his eyes before storming off. When he disappears around the corner, FP swivels around and raises his arms at the bewildered crowd of teenagers. “What’re you lookin’ at? The party’s done. It’s over - go home!”

Betty hasn’t even left her seat. She feels like she’s sitting in a glass box; she can see the house gradually emptying itself, she can hear the hushed conversation carrying on outside, but at the same time she doesn’t feel like she’s a part of any of this. She’s fully aware of her surroundings, she knows there are things happening, but they’re happening around her. She’s not existing with any of these things; she’s merely observing them.

What finally prompts her to get up is the sound of her mother arguing with someone outside. Her curiosity gets the best of her and she unsticks herself from the chair so she can make her way towards the window, and her eyes widen slightly when she spots Alice nearly nose-to-nose with FP. Did she go to the party? Was she here this whole time? The blonde squints a little just as FP appears to utter something; Alice reacts by stepping back, haughtily turning her nose up, and shifting away as FP angrily climbs into his truck and speeds off.

Not wanting to face her mother right now, Betty stumbles out of the living room, sifting through piles of dented plastic cups, crumpled tinsel, and partially-eaten bags of chips. She can still feel the warm haziness of the alcohol swishing around her system, and she thinks very briefly of forcing herself to throw up just so she can get it out of her body, but all traces of that float away when she finds Archie sulking by himself in his family room. He’s sitting on the couch with his feet up on the table and his hand curled around a half-empty bottle of wine. The skin around his eye is blackened and swollen, and a part of his lip is busted open.

“Mind if I join?” She sits next to him and reaches for the wine. “Y’know what they say - misery loves company.”

“Some night this was.” He shakes his head. “How am I ever going to look anyone in the eye ever again?”

She takes a swig from the bottle and gently presses it against his eye, hoping the cool glass will soothe the pain she definitely knows he’s feeling. “Look, what you did with Grundy was pretty bad, but this is also high school. They’re gonna forget by the time Monday comes around - especially since 90 percent of the people who came to this thing got sloshed out of their minds.”

It takes awhile for him to answer. He heaves a deep sigh, furrowing his brow for a moment. “Did I ever tell you why my dad left for Chicago this weekend? He’s there to finalize the divorce.”
Her heart sinks. She had an inkling that this was probably the reason. “Oh, Archie.” She places a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

He gently pries the wine from her hands so he can take a big gulp of it. “I drunk-dialled my dad, Betty. I told him not to sign the divorce papers, but I don’t even know why. It’s not like I want them to get back together, or anything.” He leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs and running his hands through his bright red hair. “Sometimes I feel like there’s this…I dunno, voice, or whatever, inside of me, that tells me to wreck things just for the sake of wrecking them. When things are going the way they’re supposed to, or they’re going too well, I get this urge to stop it…and I have no idea why.”

The blonde can feel the tears forming, hot and plentiful. “That’s exactly how I’ve been feeling lately.”

“Is that what Chuck was talking about?” He asks softly, and her anxiety comes back full force. “All that stuff he said back there, about what you did to him—”

“I should’ve told you about it earlier - you and Jughead.” She wishes she was holding onto the wine because it would give her fingers a distraction; she flattens her palms against her jeans and tries to breathe slowly and evenly. “I don’t…really know how to explain it, Archie. There’s something very, very wrong with me. I don’t know what it is, I don’t know where it came from, and I don’t know how to stop it - and the worst part is I feel like it’s eating away at me, and with every day that passes I lose more and more of myself to it. It scares the hell out of me.” Then, on a whim, she opens her palms and shows him her scars.

She feels like she’s one step closer to having a full blown panic attack - but the way Archie gingerly takes her hands in his, the way he carefully scrutinizes each crescent-shaped mark, the way he gently taps each mark with the tip of his index finger - it also makes her feel like everything’s going to be okay, even though they clearly aren’t. He looks pensive, which can be a good or bad thing.

“Betty…”

She has half a mind to pull away from him, feeling slightly ashamed, but she wills herself not too. “This has been going on for years - but it’s only recently that I started having these…episodes, where I black out and have absolutely no memory of what happened.”

“We can get you help.” He reassures her, but for obvious reasons she has a hard time believing him. “I can help. We’ll find help together.”

“That’s really sweet of you, Arch, but…” She sighs shakily. “It just gets so overwhelming sometimes, and I know I need to get help, but…I don’t know. Sometimes it feels like I’m broken beyond repair.”

“You’re not broken, Betty.” The redhead gives her hands a squeeze. “You’re one of the strongest people I know; if there’s anyone that can get through something like this, it’s you.”

She can feel a small smile teasing at her lips. “I doubt it, but thanks anyway. It’s…nice to talk about it like this, actually. You’re already helping.”

“I try.” He drops her hands and closes his eyes; he looks like he’s trying to steady himself. “Do you ever wonder…what if you did things differently? What if you made different choices?”

While she appreciates the slight shift in subject, he could be referring to anything, and it’s making her pulse pound against her neck. “What do you mean?”
“Every day, I wonder - what if I left Riverdale with my mom?” He shrugs. “Would things be... would I be better off?”

The thought of Archie not being here - in Riverdale, playing his guitar in the music room, throwing a football around the field, just being in her life - is enough to send her teetering on the verge of a panic attack. “Don’t say that, Archie. Things wouldn’t be the same if you left.” She tries to make a pathetic attempt at lightening the mood. “Plus, let’s be honest - you’d be a mess without me.”

He chuckles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “I’m messed up even with you here, Betty. Truth is, I was always a mess.”

“If you’re a mess, then I’m the very definition of a catastrophe.” She smirks. “You were always so good - not just to me, but to your dad, Jughead…this whole damn town. Riverdale would fall apart if you left.” She sucks in a shaky breath and squeezes hand. “I would fall apart.”

His gaze finally shifts to meet hers, and the softness in his stare melts the frenzy happening inside of her. Her heart doesn’t feel like it’s going to explode anymore, but at the same time it’s the relief he’s giving her that makes her want to have another panic attack. She knows that the calming effect Archie gives her is just a thing that happens whenever he’s around, but it shouldn’t be happening now, of all times.

When she feels his lips press against hers, she’s surprised when her eyes flutter to a close - but aside from that, everything feels wrong, so wrong.

A few months ago, she would’ve killed for this. She spent so many years - most of her life so far - dreaming about this very moment, wondering what their first kiss would look like. Maybe after celebrating a big win for the Bulldogs, and she’d dash across the field in her Vixens uniform so he can catch her in those big arms of his. Maybe it would be after one of his concerts; he’d pull her onstage (After watching the whole thing from backstage, of course) and drop a kiss in front of a hoard of screaming, adoring fans. Or maybe it would be something small, something simple - during one of their usual walks home from school, over a shared milkshake in a booth at Pop’s, underneath the bridge at the Sweetwater swimming hole. She would’ve never thought that it would happen on his couch after the worst house party ever, under the heavy influence of alcohol.

Interestingly, he’s the one who pulls away first. His eyes are half-open, but she can see the muted confusion behind them and her ribcage feels like it’s about to split in two.

It’s now or never.

She opens her mouth to finally say everything she needed to say for the past few months, but he speaks first. “I’m sorry.”

There’s a loud throbbing in her chest. “You don’t need to apologize, Arch - this is all my-“

“No, I do.” His shoulders shake with the same sad chuckle from before. “I think I always knew. I shouldn’t have done that…it wasn’t fair to you.”

Maybe Archie isn’t as oblivious as he appears to be. “I was planning on telling you, really… I was. I’m so sorry it took so long.”

“Don’t be.” He attempts a half-smile, but it doesn’t work out. “It makes perfect sense. You and Jughead…you’re good for each other.”

Cue the record scratch again.
“What?” She suddenly feels cold stone sober, as if the absurdity of the situation smacked the drunkenness right out of her.

“What?” Archie raises an eyebrow. “You guys are…together. Right?”

“No!” She exclaims as she flops back against the sofa, throwing up her arms. She laughs and shakes her head, unable to process the fact that her mother and her best friend assumed the exact same thing in the span of a few days. “Jughead and I are not together. Why do people think that we are?”

“Because it’s almost impossible to see one of you without the other.” Archie is fully confused now. “You’re always hanging out, spending so much time together…” His voice falters a bit. “And I only hear about it after the fact.”

The pain in her chest returns full force. “Neither of us meant for you to feel that way, Archie, and I am so sorry it hurt you - but we’re not like that. We never will be.” She wrinkles her nose in disgust. “Have you ever seen him act even just a little affectionate towards anything other than a burger?”

He laughs at this, and Betty starts to feel a little more optimistic even though the worst is yet to come. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Now I feel kinda stupid.”

“Don’t be - you aren’t the only one who thinks we’re a…thing.” She cringes. “Look, the only reason why Jughead and I have been spending so much time together lately is because we’re working on our investigation while trying to breathe life back into the Blue and Gold. That’s it - there’s nothing else. And if it actually were true, don’t you think we’d tell you? You’re our best friend.”

“Well, I dunno.” Archie sheepishly rubs the back of his neck. “I totally get why you wouldn’t. If I were you, I’d be scared it would make things weird between us.”

Betty heaves a sigh. “You have a point, but I think keeping it a secret would make things just as weird - if not weirder.”

“Well, at least I know the truth now…” Archie cants his head. “But if you weren’t talking about you and Jughead, what were you planning to tell me, exactly?”

Right. That. Betty sucks in a deep breath before leaning forward, resting her elbows on her thigs, and burying her face in her hands. Here we go. “Remember that night before school started, when we hung out at Pop’s?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“I was trying to tell you something.” Her voice is slightly muffled as she talks into her palms. “Something super important.”

He scoots a little closer to her, probably because he’s unable to hear her properly. “What is it, Betty? You can tell me.”

“I…” Her heart is repeatedly ramming itself against her bones. She knows she has to do it now, she has no choice…but what if this doesn’t work out? What if he doesn’t accept it? What if he doesn’t love her anymore after this? “This past summer, when I was in California, I met someone - Brad.”

Archie’s expression is hard to read. “Oh.” His tone is flat - not exactly disappointed or surprised. She isn’t sure what to make of it, and it’s making her even more anxious.

“Brad…” She breathes in again, holding it for a few seconds before slowly exhaling. She straightens
up, turning towards him so she can meet his gaze. “Was a girl.”

His jaw drops. Never mind, he is as oblivious as he appears to be. “What? Really?” His voice is hoarse, which only adds to the humour of it all, and when he reaches for the wine she’s finally able to squeeze out a strained giggle.

“Yeah, really.” She watches him take a big gulp, laughing again when he coughs. “I, uh, was going to tell you that night but…um.” Her sentence comes to a halt when she feels the heat on her face.

It takes him a few seconds to recall exactly why she hesitated at that very moment. He knits his thick eyebrows together, his face screwed up in concentration - Betty can’t help but laugh at this - and when it finally comes to him his brown eyes go wide and his mouth curves in a perfect O-shape. “Veronica.” He concludes for her, and she shoves her face into her hands again. “Wow. It all makes sense now.” A pause. “So, uh…you and her…?”

She groans. “No, we’re not.” When she eyes the shocked look on his face she groans even louder. “But before I get into that - Archie, I know I’ve been hurting you, and I hate it. I knew I’d keep hurting you by holding off from telling the truth, but I just couldn’t bring it in myself to say anything yet. I…I didn’t know how, to be honest. I was afraid you’d stop wanting to be around me.” She flattens her palms against her jeans and bites her bottom lip - feeble attempts to prevent the tears from flowing. “I was afraid you’d…you wouldn’t want me anymore.”

Silence. Archie is staring at the ground, his lips pressed tight together. Her eyes run all over him, from the way his hair sticks up at the back to the rhythmic bouncing of his right knee - a habit he falls into whenever he’s nervous or thinking really hard. She internally braces herself for the impending agreement, the You’re right, I don’t want you anymore, the This is wrong, the I don’t ever want to see you again - but when he raises his head and opens his arms to her, everything gives out and she collapses against him.

She sobs into his shoulder as he rubs circles on her back. “I’m sorry, Archie. I’m sorry things didn’t turn out the way you wanted. I’m so sorry.” She sniffs. “I loved you. I really did. I didn’t mean for things to change.”

It takes awhile for him to answer. “I knew you did. I was just too stupid to realize that I loved you too. It wasn’t until after I got into the whole mess with Grundy that I realized this wasn’t what I wanted. What I really wanted was to be with you, and no one else.”

She's suddenly reminded of the incident in his backyard. "Wait - weren't things with you and Val really good? I thought you guys were happy together."

“We were - or, well, I thought we were.” He frowns.“I guess she kind of suspected I've always had eyes for you. She told me that I wasn't...always present when we were together, that every time I looked at her, it felt like I was trying to picture someone else's face instead of hers. It didn't really make much sense to me at first, but I think I get what she was trying to say now. I guess it got to the point where she felt like she just couldn't compete with you, even though I was never with you to begin with.” He sighs. “I feel really bad about it. It wasn't fair to her. I could've treated her better - a thousand times better.”

“I should’ve never gone to LA. Everything would’ve been so much better if I stayed in Riverdale. Polly would still be living with us, Jason wouldn’t have needed to run away, you and I could’ve…” She trails off, unsure of how to finish. Could've what? What exactly could they have done?

“No. It was good you went.” She presses an ear against his chest and closes her eyes, listening to the soft quake of his voice reverberating between the rungs of his ribcage. “You discovered a part of
yourself that you never knew existed, and I don’t think you would’ve been able to do that if you stayed here. You would’ve been miserable if you didn’t go, and you and I both know it.” She can feel his fingers gently pulling through her ponytail. “And if we…well, if we tried, I don’t think it would’ve lasted long anyway. We would’ve been living a lie, and it would’ve been unfair to the both of us.”

His shirt is thoroughly soaked with her tears by this point, and she feels even dumber than she did before. “I would’ve still tried.”

He chuckles. “I know you would have, and that’s why I’m glad we never did.” His hand lowers from her hair to her back, which he begins to rub soothingly. “This is much better, anyway. Now we can chase girls together - speaking of which, do you need any tips? I’ve got a bunch of ’em.”

She snorts through her tears and playfully hits him on the shoulder. “No offence, Arch, but with your track record I think I’m better off figuring it out on my own.”

“Hey!” He protests, but when she laughs again he rolls his eyes. “So you and Veronica…if you’re not together, what exactly are you? Because, now that I think about it, the way you guys act around each other…it’s definitely not how Jughead and I act when we’re together.”

“Nobody acts like you two doofuses when you’re together.” She counters with a smirk, but she sighs. “But, to be honest, I don’t really know. We’re not a thing, but it’s obvious that the both of us want it to be a thing.” She temporarily unlatches herself from him so she can throw up her arms. “I don’t know if she’s waiting for me to make a move, or what - I don’t really know how this works.”

“Well, if it’s clear the both of you want to be together, but no one’s made a move yet…then yeah, I’d say that she’s waiting for you to make a move.” He frowns. “It just doesn’t sound like a…Veronica thing to do, though. Does that make any sense?”

“It makes perfect sense!” She shakes her head incredulously. “Waiting for someone else to make the first move definitely isn’t a Veronica thing, and I think that’s why I find this so confusing. Veronica’s always been more of a strike first-kind of girl, so what exactly is she waiting for?”

“Does she know you’re into girls?”

“Er,” The blonde stutters. “Well, I never explicitly said I was into girls, but I mean…my actions kind of speak for it, doesn’t it?”

“But wouldn’t just acting it and not actually talking about it send mixed messages?” He scratches his head. “Maybe she’s confused about what you want from her, which might be why she’s waiting for you to make the first move.”

Okay, that actually makes a lot of sense. “So…how does one go about making this hypothetical first move?”

“Hypothetical?” Archie raises an eyebrow. “So you’re not even gonna do it?”

“Well…uh, well, I-” She frantically reaches for the wine and takes another swig to settle her nerves. “Of course I am. I just…er, I’ve never done this before. Brad was the one who kissed me first.”

Archie laughs. “You just answered your own question. Kiss her.”

The thought of kissing Veronica again is giving her a bigger head rush than the alcohol. “Arch, you know me. If you look up awkward in the dictionary you’ll just find my name and my fourth grade class picture.”
“I kind of miss the pigtails and the braces.” He smirks. “I get it, Betts - it’s scary as hell, but if you’re never gonna try, it’s never gonna happen. You just have to look for the right place and time, and bam - things will happen on their own.”

“I don’t even know when the right place and time will even be.” Betty groans. “I sort of acted like a jerk to her tonight for no reason other than I was drunk and still angry from arguing with Jughead - whom I still haven’t talked or apologized to, by the way. I messed things up with everyone tonight.”

“You and Jughead will get past this.” He reassures her, curling an arm around her shoulders and pulling her in for a sideways hug. “As for Veronica, you’ll figure it out. You always do - and I’ll be here to help if you need it.”

She sighs into his shoulder and squeezes his waist. “I’m literally going to be spending the rest of my life wondering what I ever did to deserve you, Archie Andrews.”

He chuckles, and it rumbles comfortingly against her ear. “I love you, Betty. I always will. It’s nice to finally know that we love each other the right way now.”

She can’t help but smile at this. “I love you too - and I totally agree.”

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Betty wakes up at nearly noon the next day in her bed with a pounding headache and the driest throat in the universe - but her mood instantly skyrockets when she finds a water bottle sitting on her nightstand with a note taped to it:

> Thought you’d make good use of this. - Arch

She legitimately doesn’t deserve him, she thinks to herself as she cracks the seal and drains half of the bottle in one gulp. Despite having the mother of all hangovers, she still has a pretty good grasp on the events that transpired last night - from Jughead’s ruined surprise party, right up to her and Archie’s heartfelt one-to-one. She feels oddly invigorated now, ready to tackle everything she has on her mental to-do list: Mend things with Jughead, apologize to Veronica, solve her great-grandfather’s murder…

Alice marches straight into her room with a hot mug of tea and a bottle of aspirin, both of which she accepts gratefully. “I’m not even going to ask how you’re feeling because I already know the answer.” She pauses just long enough for Betty to roll her eyes. “So I saw that you invited Jughead’s dad to your little soirée last night.”

“It was Archie who invited him, not me.”

“Did you notice him speaking to a long-haired delinquent in a leather jacket?” Alice inquires, which prompts Betty to raise an eyebrow. “Do you know him?”

Betty takes a few seconds to try to match her mother’s description to anyone she knows, but only one comes to mind. “Are you talking about Joaquin?”

Alice’s eyes widen slightly. “Is that his name?”

“FP and Joaquin are in the Serpents together, so it’s safe to assume that they know each other.” Betty pauses to take a couple of aspirin. “Why?”
“How do you know this boy?” Alice continues to pry, which is sort of getting on Betty’s nerves; all she wants to do is hop out of bed and get right to that mental to-do list.

“Through Kevin.” She answers briskly. “They’re dating.”

“What?” Alice’s eyes go even wider. “A Southside Serpent dating the sheriff’s son…this is a small town but it’s not that small.”

Now that Betty thinks about it, it is a little uncanny. “So you think Joaquin’s dating Kevin only because it gives the Serpents some kind of edge?”

“It gives them an indirect connection to the local law enforcement, yes.” Alice agrees. “But what reason would the Serpents have for wanting to keep an eye on Sheriff Keller?”

“Maybe Clifford’s telling them to keep a look out for anything suspicious.” Betty suggests. “He’s probably making sure all of his tracks are covered, that there’s absolutely no way he can be linked to Jason if he ever…” She doesn’t want to finish the sentence, but thankfully Alice understands and she nods in understanding.

“It won’t get to that point.” She reassures her daughter as she rises to her feet, dusting off her sweater. “By the way, I looked into that interesting inquiry you had regarding the Lodges.”

She almost forgot about that. “What did you find?”

“The Lodges come from old money, much like the Blossoms, but they aren’t native to Riverdale. They came here shortly before the Merriweathers did, which means they were around when your great-grandfather was murdered.”

“So there’s a chance the payments the Blossoms have been making to the Lodges all these years might have something to do with keeping Great-Grandpappy Cooper’s death a secret?” Betty blinks.

“I wouldn’t go so far as making that assumption yet, but it’s a possibility…even if the chances might be small.” Her mother shrugs. “The timing is definitely suspicious, but I’ll have to dig deeper. There has to be some sort of evidence that provides context behind these payments; I might have to pester Hermione into letting me snoop around that basement of hers.” She wrinkles her nose in disgust.

“I don’t know why you’re so determined to hold grudges on literally every person in Riverdale.” Betty mutters before taking another sip of her tea. “Hiram Lodge may be a thief and a fraud but Veronica and Mrs. Lodge have been super nice to me since they moved here. They deserve to be judged for who they are as individual people, not for what Hiram did.”

“Trust me, Betty,” Alice’s tone is unmistakably bitter as she makes her way towards the door. “When you’ve known Hermione Lodge as well and long as I have, you wouldn’t be saying those things.” She places a hand on the doorknob. “Rest up. Drink plenty of fluids.”

And just like that, she’s gone.
Interlude: Nightcap

Veronica often wonders what her former social circle in New York would say if they saw her now.

“You mean there isn’t a bar that doesn’t have last call at 4AM?”

“The Pembrooke is smaller than my walk-in closet!”

“Does Pop’s have vegan milkshakes?”

The great Veronica Lodge, who once needed people to book time three months in advance if they wanted to hang out with her, is now shuffling into a tiny run-down diner by the train tracks at God-knows-how-late-it-is with her Ted Baker dress all wrinkled and her hair looking like she just walked out of a hurricane (Thank God for waterproof mascara, though). The bright neon lights bring a strange sense of calmness to her nerves, like the feeling you get when you finally come home from a long trip. It’s a weird feeling of familiarity, even though she hasn’t been in Riverdale long enough for Pop’s to feel familiar.

The door chimes as she walks in, sighing in relief when she feels the warm air melting away every last bit of the cold that clung to her from the walk from Archie’s house. After everything that happened in the past few hours, all she really wants is to collapse face-first into her bed and sleep for the remainder of the year, but the rising tension with her mother dissuaded her from going home. As much as she’d like to hibernate, home hasn’t been feeling like home lately - and suddenly Veronica feels like she’s back where she started: Lost. Utterly lost.

Because wasn’t this the point of moving to Riverdale in the first place - to start fresh, to pile the remnants of the wreck that was her former life together and try to fashion something new out of it? That’s what she thought was going to happen when she first stepped foot in this depressingly simple town, but it turns out that her family has more secrets here than they had back in New York. Now she knows it’s way more than fraud and embezzlement; it’s gang connections, it’s driving your investors to sell their house and ruin their marriage and nearly kill themselves, it’s looping in your wife and only child into your corruption without asking them, it’s-

“Are you just going to stand there all day?” That apathetic drawl is too irritating to ignore. “You’re making me nervous.”

Veronica rolls her eyes and makes her way over to Jughead, who’s sitting at his usual booth by the window. She plops down on the seat across from him, unceremoniously dumping her purse next to her. “Happy now?”

“I didn’t say you could sit here specifically.” He gestures around the nearly empty diner. “In case you haven’t noticed, there’s plenty of space.”

She rolls her eyes again and reaches for her purse. “Fine. I’m not in the mood for your barbed wit, anyway.” She gets up and begins to make her way for a booth on the complete opposite side of the room, but she freezes when she hears him heave a dramatic, almost defeated sigh.

“Wait.” She turns to look at him and notices that his beanie is off, clutched in one fist; his left eye is red and puffy, and there’s a small cut on his cheek. “Hold on. I need to talk…about something.”

She raises an eyebrow as she slowly lowers herself back into her seat. “And you’re choosing to talk to me about this something?”
He begins to fiddle with his beanie, his finger tracing the edges of the red and white pins. “I’m not exactly on speaking terms with Betty and Archie right now, and seeing as you’re the only other person in this diner… I figured why not?”

“Thanks - I feel so honoured being your last resort.” Veronica scoffs. “So, what is it?”

He sighs again. “Look, what you guys did for me, the party and everything, it was nice - like, really nice. So nice, in fact, that it freaked me out a little.”

She crosses her arms, still kind of annoyed but also intrigued. “Is that why you were acting like such a brat?”

“It’s just that…” He leans forward, resting his elbows on the table and running his free hand through his thick dark hair. “When people do nice things for me, I short-circuit.” He lowers his voice a little. “Maybe I’m not used to it. Maybe I’m scared. I don’t know. It was a knee-jerk reaction and I’m sure Freud would love to figure out why - but a part of me knows it’s because of this stupid fear that I have that people will reject me for being myself… and that I’ll get hurt because of it.”

She hates herself for feeling a twinge in her chest, for relating to his words, but her expression softens slightly when she realizes he’s probably having an incredibly hard time talking about this - to someone he doesn’t consider a friend, for that matter. “Jughead, if Betty and Archie hated you and didn’t like you for being you, you wouldn’t have been friends all these years. I’m sure they had only the best intentions for you when they threw this party - and, for the record, I objected to the idea because I knew it’d make you uncomfortable - but they should’ve asked you what you wanted first.”

“Yeah, I know. There’s nothing I can really do about it now, though.” He shrugs. “Some night this turned out to be, huh?”

She leans back against the overstuffed faux-leather seat and groans. “Don’t even get me started.” She mentally flips through one terrible memory after another. “Betty totally flipped out on me for no reason whatsoever, and that’s just the first of many things that went wrong today.”

“What happened?” Pop swings by and refills his coffee before asking for a second cup - which Veronica takes gratefully.

“I honestly don’t know. I was looking for her because I had something to tell her.”

Jughead nods slowly. “Am I allowed to ask what you wanted to talk to her about?”

She opens her mouth to reply, but then she quickly closes it when she remembers that she wanted to tell Betty not just about how her father low-key threatened her to testify, but also that the Southside Serpent her mother was doing shady back alley deals with was none other than FP Jones, aka the father of the boy she’s currently sitting in an empty restaurant with in the middle of the night. “Well, part of it was to talk to her about the Southside Serpents working with my dad, and how my mom was acting on his behalf.”

“Don’t think I’ve forgiven you about that, by the way.” He mutters before taking a sip of coffee. “It would’ve been nice to know.”

“I didn’t find out until after the deal was made.” Veronica protests. “If I knew you were living out of the drive-in, I would’ve done something about it - and, to be fair, it would’ve been nice to know that the Serpent who’s been in cahoots with my dad this whole time is your dad.”

“Fair point.” He grimaces. “Okay, so you look for Betty so you can tell her all about it, then she blows you off?”
“Yeah.” The brunette frowns. “I don’t really know where it came from.”

“Where were you when this happened?”

“Uh, outside, I think. It was right before Chuck made us play that stupid game.” Veronica’s brow furrows slightly. “Why?”

Jughead’s expression is sheepish. “We got into an argument. I was acting like a grade-A jerk and Betty kind of tore me a new one…which put her in a bad mood. I guess it was my fault.”

“That’s…actually relieving to hear.” Veronica visibly relaxes, no longer burdened by the possibility that she may or may not have screwed things up with Betty again. “At least I know I didn’t do anything wrong…or at least that’s what I’d like to think.”

“I sincerely doubt you could do anything wrong in Betty’s eyes.” Jughead smirks, and when he eyes Veronica’s flustered expression he can’t help but chuckle. “Don’t make me say it.”

“You don’t have to.” Veronica grumbles before taking another sip of her coffee. “I’ll be honest - the way I feel about Betty isn’t like anything I’ve ever felt for any other person, and I know it’s probably a little too early to say this now but it feels like I won’t ever feel this way about anyone else.” Her eyes drift to the ceiling and she sighs. “She kind of just…completes me, you know? I look at her and I can see the rest of my life in her eyes.”

“I’m going to assume this is a good thing.” Jughead raises an eyebrow.

“It is a good thing. I just wish I can figure her out.” She absently traces the lip of her cup with an index finger. “Sometimes things are great, and it feels like she’s ready to move forward with our relationship - but then something like this happens, and it flips things upside down and I feel like I’m back at square one with her. She can be a little unpredictable sometimes.”

As if on cue, the jukebox tucked away in the corner of the restaurant starts to play Teenager In Love. She knows Jughead is thinking what she’s thinking because there’s a big, stupid smirk stretched across his lips. “Really? Because I find her pathetically predictable.” He laughs. “I’m not an expert on this whatsoever so don’t take me too seriously, but I think you just have to give it some time. Betty…she’s been through a lot, most of which I’m sure she’s already talked to you about, but there are a few things she’s still trying to figure out for herself. The best thing you can do for her is to just be there to support her when she needs it.”

She thinks about those dreaded red marks on the blonde’s hands. Those little crescents always look like they’re laughing at her, reminding her every single time that she failed, that she keeps failing, that she isn’t doing what she promised Betty she’d do and is instead only dragging her further downward. She thinks about the countless times she’s witnessed Betty clench her fists, the way her jaw tightens ever so slightly when her nails push through her skin, how bright streams of blood would ooze through the cracks between her fingers and drip onto the floor.

“And I have been, as best as I can.” Veronica insists, though her tone is wavering. “It just feels like it isn’t enough. I have a feeling she has a lot more going on with her than she wants anyone to know.”

She can’t help but think of that night in the pool house: The black wig, the lace, the way her hips swung as she sauntered across the room, the shame that took over her when she couldn’t help but admit that she was attracted to this, knowing that this isn’t Betty - her Betty - and that the person in those stilettos handcuffing Chuck Clayton to the hot tub is nothing but a stranger.

“So, what Chuck was saying…” The fact that Jughead can read her so easily makes her slightly
uncomfortable. “Did all of it really happen?”

There’s no use in hiding it now. “Yes.” She bows her head in shame. “I still have nightmares about it. There was so much I could’ve done, so much I could’ve prevented… but I didn’t. I just… stood there, frozen in place, like some kind of idiot. And even after all was said and done and Chuck was gone, I still couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t get through to her, I couldn’t get her to snap out of whatever it was that was controlling her.” She pauses to wipe the tears from her eyes. “Why couldn’t I help, Jughead? I know I could’ve. I know I could’ve done something.”

“Don’t say that.” His voice is kinder, more comforting, and it’s so out of place that Veronica leans in a little bit to make sure she’s hearing him correctly. “What more could you do, anyway? She was having an episode and you had no idea any of that was going to happen. I’m sure I wouldn’t have been much better, or even Archie.” He sips his coffee. “You can’t beat yourself up over things you can’t control.”

“I guess you’re right.” She heaves a watery sigh. “She doesn’t have to tell me everything, but it would just be nice if she didn’t push me away every time I try to help.”

“It’s a defence mechanism - I would know.” Jughead shrugs. “Again, just give it time. As long as she knows you’re there for her no matter what, she’ll eventually warm up to you… though, it already looks like you’re cozy enough as it is.”

“Look, as friendly as we are with each other, it can only go so far. If I just knew what Betty wants out of this, I’d be able to figure out where to go from here.”

Jughead looks genuinely offended. “You’re kidding, right? Because it’s painstakingly clear what she wants and it’s actually kind of surprising that you aren’t officially a…thing-” He wrinkles his nose in disgust. “-yet.” He pauses for a second, then, adds in a deadpanned tone, “Wait, no. I totally get why you guys aren’t a thing yet.”

She quirks a brow. “What, pray tell?

“Because you’re both thinking the exact same thing: You know what you want, but you’re unsure if the other person wants it, so you wait in the hopes they’ll make the first move, which traps you in this pre-relationship purgatory riddled with mixed messages.” He raises his cup to his face, blowing on his coffee.

She scoffs, even though that’s exactly what the problem is. “I’m not sure if I can make my intentions any clearer.”

“Of course you can.” Jughead rolls his eyes. “You can make it clearer by taking initiative and making that first move. She’s probably counting on you to do it, just like you’re counting on her.” He ruffles the back of his hair. “Look, I’ve never... loved-” He visibly shrinks in disgust, “-anyone in the romantic sense before, and I have absolutely no intention of ever feeling that way towards anyone in the foreseeable future, but I know when it’s running rampant between two people. Betty… she really cares about you. The mere mention of your name ignites this light in her that I’ve never seen in all the years I’ve known her - and this includes when she thought she was destined to be with Archie.”

She forces herself to avoid his gaze so he won’t see the tears glossing over her eyes, but she knows she isn’t doing a good job. “Jughead…”

“No, I’m serious.” He pushes his coffee cup aside. “Veronica, you just told me a few minutes ago that when you look at her, you can see the rest of your life. You don’t just look at anybody and feel
that way. I’m not a big believer in destiny or any sort of pre-determined outcome, but even I can’t deny that that’s something you just can’t ignore. Take that chance and just go for it! If you don’t, you’re gonna spend the rest of your life wondering what could’ve happened if you did, and it’ll make you miserable.”

“Okay, okay.” She sighs in defeat. The only thing she hates more than losing is losing to Jughead Jones. “I’m going to have to sleep on this - figuratively and literally. I’m exhausted.”

“Yet you decided to come here and tell me all about it.”

“Shut up, you enjoyed this conversation - and you were the one who wanted to talk in the first place.” Veronica’s expression falters at the slightest. “Plus, home…hasn’t really felt like home lately, if you know what I mean.”

His blue eyes soften as they lock with hers, wordlessly telling her he knows exactly what she means. For a brief moment she feels like she’s actually connecting with him - something she thought would never, ever happen. She doesn’t know him well, but the more she thinks about it, the more they actually have in common: Their complicated relationships with their parents, feeling like they don’t really belong, their affinity for making references to really old or obscure pieces of pop culture…just to name a few. She might actually have more in common with him than Archie or Betty, and she’s unsure if she’s supposed to find that alarming or not. Nevertheless, it’s nice to have finally found a kindred spirit in this town, even if it ended up being the most unlikely person.

He reaches into his jacket’s inside pocket and tosses a few bills on the table. When he spots the brunette’s confusion he rolls his eyes. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Do my eyes deceive me?” She laughs, picking up her purse. “Forsythe Pendleton Jones the Third…paying for someone else?”

He sighs as he watches Veronica slide out of the booth. “Don’t make me regret this.” He follows her out of the restaurant, quickly buttoning up his jacket as the bitter cold quickly returns to ensnare the both of them. “The Pembrooke’s that way, right?”

Her brow crinkles slightly as she stares at him, incredulous. “Yes…why?”

He shrugs, careful not to meet eyes with her. “What does it look like? I’m walking you back.”

She quirks an eyebrow. “Does this make us friends now?”

Jughead smirks. “Don’t confuse chivalry with camaraderie.”

Veronica finds herself laughing as they walk out of the parking lot together. “Don’t ruin the moment.”
Despite the both of them being pissed drunk that night, Betty’s conversation with Archie after that nightmarish house party re-ignited her resolve, so when the weekend ends and school starts back up again she becomes determined to mend things with Veronica and tell her how she feels. She spends all of Sunday brainstorming ways to do this, and it gets her so fired up she’s barely able to sleep later that night.

“Today’s the day, Arch.” She puffs out her chest as they walk to school that frosty Monday morning. “It’s gonna happen. I’m gonna make it happen.”

“I know you will.” He chuckles, shouldering his bag. “You don’t mind if I hide behind you the entire day, do you? I could use a bit of your courage.”

She rolls her eyes. “Nobody’s gonna care about what happened at the party, Archie. Like I said, most of them were hammered out of their minds. The hangover that ensured the morning after wiped all traces of that stupid game Chuck made us play from the recesses of everyone’s memory.”

He doesn’t look convinced, but he nods anyway. “I guess.” He nervously glances up at the steps to their school. “Well, here goes nothing. Are you ready?”

Her grin is so wide it almost hurts. “Let’s do this.”

She waves Archie goodbye when she pulls away from him to head over to her locker, expecting Veronica to be there as usual - but when she gets there and finds no trace of the brunette, her ego deflates a little. Maybe she’s running late, or maybe she already gathered her things and was already waiting in class. She opens her bag and reaches into her locker for her textbooks, glancing around the hall every few seconds to check if Veronica’s around, but she never shows up. She can feel the beginnings of doubt seeping their way in, but her phone buzzes and she can feel her confidence surging back with vigour when she eyes the smaller girl’s name blinking on her screen.

Are you in school yet? Meet me at the Blue and Gold.

She wants to meet somewhere private. This is a good sign. The blonde stuffs her phone into her pocket and hastily squeezes through the pack of students, muttering apologies all the way through. When she finally makes it to the Blue and Gold, she takes a moment to steady herself, mentally running through the prepared speech she rehearsed a billion times yesterday before placing her hand on the door handle and pushing the door open.

But when she finds Veronica and her mother standing by her desk, her ego pretty much disintegrates.

“Oh, good - you’re finally here.” Alice beckons her daughter over. “It’s about time we take our investigation to the next level.”

Betty distinctly remembers her mom sitting by the kitchen table back at home in her robe, casually flipping through her notes, before leaving to go to school. Now she’s fully dressed, makeup and hair done, standing behind her desk. How is this even possible? “Did you find something?”
“I bumped into your mom on my way in, and she told me about how my family came to Riverdale after those Merriweather people.” Veronica is speaking to her but she isn’t making eye contact; instead, she’s looking straight at Alice, which makes Betty’s heart sink a few inches lower. “So there’s a chance they know something about what happened to your great-grandfather; they might even be connected to it somehow.”

“And there’s one other thing I found completely by accident this morning, which is why I had to race over here. I was so caught up in the moment that I completely forgot to call you, Betty.” Alice grabs a single sheet of paper from Betty’s desk and stretches out her arm. “See for yourselves.”

Betty glances over at Veronica from the corner of her eye, but she isn’t making a move, so she decides to take the paper instead. She takes a second to read it - it’s one of the invoices Veronica found in the Pembrooke’s basement, but she doesn’t see what Alice wants her to look at. “Uh, I’m assuming ten thousand dollars was a lot of money back then.”

“That’s not what’s so peculiar about this invoice.” Alice crosses her arms. “Take a closer look.”

She scans the invoice once more, and her eyes widen a little bit when she spots something on the upper left corner, right below the address of Lodge Industries. “Invoice 001. This is the very first payment.” Her gaze instinctively moves towards the upper right corner of the page, and she lets out a small gasp.

“What is it, B?” Veronica’s voice is soft, almost hesitant, like she isn’t sure if she’s allowed to speak up or not.

“The date.” Betty flips the paper around so Veronica can see, and for the first time that day they’re able to look at each other. The brunette looks a little paler than usual, and even though she did a remarkable job with her makeup there’s still a trace of those dark half-circles underneath her eyes. She looks like she didn’t sleep all weekend.

Veronica leans in a little to squint at the date. “What’s so significant about it?”

“This invoice was processed just three days after the newspaper announced Charles’ death.” Betty turns to face her mother, who’s nodding in agreement. “The Blossoms made a payment of ten thousand dollars to Lodge Industries almost immediately after my great-grandfather died.”

“This doesn’t confirm anything, but it’s a sign we’re heading in the right direction.” Alice confirms. “The timing can’t be a coincidence.”

“So what are the next steps?” Veronica’s tone has a little more energy now, though she’s back to looking at Alice and acting like Betty isn’t standing right next to her. “If this is true and my family coerced the Blossoms into paying them to keep their mouths shut, this puts things into an entirely new perspective. Maybe the Blossoms felt like enough time has passed and they no longer needed to pay up, so they implicated my dad. Then, as revenge, my dad…” Her voice falters for a moment. “He went after Jason.”

“So it was a race.” Alice nods. “Clifford somehow knew Hiram was looking for his son, so he might’ve conducted his own search. Whatever secret Jason is keeping, both Hiram and Clifford want it.”

“Exactly.” Veronica nods. “And whoever catches Jason first will get what they want - Daddy could use him as blackmail to get the Blossoms to get him out of jail and expose whatever secret he’s hiding. If Clifford got to him first, he could’ve used him to get out of paying that fee and keeping his family’s reputation intact.” Her brow furrows. “Daddy might’ve hired those same thugs from
Montreal to hunt Jason down.”

“Or he could’ve recruited the Serpents.” Betty quietly adds. “He could’ve recruited FP.”

“Jughead’s dad?” Veronica turns to face her for the second time that day, her tired eyes wide with disbelief. “You don’t actually believe that, do you?”

Her sudden defensiveness around FP Jones is a little unexpected. If FP is in cahoots with Hiram, she figured Veronica would support investigating this, so it’s rubbing her the wrong way. “Your dad paid FP to trash the drive-in. Maybe he paid him to–”

“Commit murder.” Alice finishes for her. “Or, well, at least tried to. We still don’t know where Jason is, or if he’s even alive at this point. Nevertheless, we are running out of time.”

“So what do you want us to do?” Veronica raises an eyebrow. “We can’t just run around telling everyone the Serpents are guilty without any evidence to show for it.”

“This is where your friend Kevin may come in handy.” Alice shrugs. “That gay greaser Serpent boyfriend of his might be an accomplice, for all we know.” The way she says gay, with such contempt, such disgust, makes Betty extremely uneasy. She tries to rationalize at first - maybe she’s just looking down at Joaquin because of his possible involvement, not because of his sexual orientation - but she can’t be too sure. After all, this is her mother, Alice Cooper - the same woman who wanted to dump her oldest daughter at a group home because she got pregnant by the son of her family’s arch-nemesis. Anything’s fair game.

“And what exactly are you basing this off of?” Veronica’s tone sharpens, and Betty only grows more confused.

“I saw FP talking to that boy last night at the party.” Her mother explains rather indignantly. “They were having more than just a casual conversation, Veronica. They were definitely conspiring.”

“Conspiring about what?” The brunette presses again, and Betty feels like she’s stuck. For one thing, her mother has a valid point; it is very possible Hiram hired the Serpents to look for Jason. For all they knew, they could be combing through the country right now…but Veronica isn’t wrong either. It’s unfair to assume FP had any involvement in this. He may have done a few shady things in the past but she doesn’t think he’s capable of sinking to Hiram and Clifford’s level. “If you saw FP and Joaquin last night that obviously means they aren’t gallivanting around looking for Jason Blossom.”

“Those snakes slither out a lot farther than you think. Their origins lie in Riverdale but they have a few smaller chapters throughout the east coast.” Alice sighs. “I thought you believed your father was involved.”

“I do!” Veronica protests. “But I refuse to believe that FP Jones has any part of this - or I’m going to at least give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“You’re a lot closer to this than I thought you were.” It’s Alice’s turn to cock an eyebrow. She turns to Betty, who’s still struck dumb by Veronica’s seemingly unwavering determination to protect the Jones family. “Betty, you have to get to the Serpents somehow - whether it’s through Jughead, Kevin, or maybe even FP directly. You have to do it without raising suspicion.”

“Uh-” The blonde barely has time to think of a reply when Veronica haughtily shoulders her purse. “Count me out.” She huffs before spinning with a flourish and marching straight out of the room. Betty half-turns to gape at the door for a second before her mother’s voice reels her back in.
“What about you, Betty? Are you suddenly swearing allegiance to those slippery Serpents as well?”

Does she turn her back on one of her closest friends? Does she break what’s left of him after the angry, drunken tirade she threw at him during his birthday party? Or does she play it safe to earn some brownie points with the girl she’s certain she’s fallen head over heels for?

She already knows what her answer is, and she hates herself for it. At the end of the day, she’s a journalist, and she knows what she has to do. Betty sucks in a breath, takes two steps forward, and flattens both palms on her desk.

“I’m in.”

There’s been so much going on the past few days that Betty completely forgot she’s in charge of preparing for the homecoming dance, which is coming up this weekend. If it weren’t for Cheryl dashing over to her after homeroom, she probably would’ve never remembered.

“Sorry.” The blonde groans and reaches upwards to rub her temples. “It completely slipped my mind. Of course I’ll help out after school.”

“Great.” The redhead smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. Her fingers curl around Betty’s elbow and she gently begins to tug her towards an empty classroom. “Can we talk?”

This automatically raises a billion red flags, but Betty nods anyway and allows herself to be pulled into the room. She watches Cheryl quickly scamper around the classroom, checking if the coast is clear, before heading back to the door and closing it. “What’s going on, Cheryl?”

“Betty.” Cheryl turns to face her, and the blonde’s eyes widen when she sees tears clinging to the redhead’s dark eyelashes. “Something terrible has happened.”

She blurts out the first thing that comes to mind. “Is Polly okay? The twins, are they-”

“Daddy’s back.” Cheryl tearfully utters, and Betty’s heart stops.

Clifford’s back.

Clifford Blossom has returned to Riverdale.

Which means-

“Jason.” Betty whispers, her gaze unfocused. Her throat is closing in and she can feel her own tears stinging her eyes. “Is he with him?” When Cheryl shakes her head, she lets out a short puff of breath in disbelief. “No. No…he can’t be. He can’t be-”

“I don’t know if Jay-Jay’s alive, but he’s definitely close by.” Cheryl bites her bottom lip. “Daddy wouldn’t have come back if he didn’t have Jason with him either way.”

She’s right, but it does little to quell their fears. “So we have to find out where he is. We have to find out where he’s keeping him. For all we know, he’s being held prisoner somewhere.” If anything, this gives her more of a reason to follow what Alice said and find a way to get the Serpents to talk. If anyone knows where Jason is, it’s them. “I think I have an idea.”
A bit of light returns to Cheryl’s expression. “What is it, pray tell?”

“My mom told me that she saw FP Jones and Joaquin talking to each other at the party. She thinks they’re involved with Jason’s disappearance.” She frowns in thought. “She thinks the Serpents were involved in tracking Jason down. If she’s right, then they would know where Clifford’s keeping him.”

Cheryl’s eyes widen. “So how do we go about getting them to talk?”

“We can’t.” Betty shakes her head. “Jughead tried. The Serpents have a strict code and they stand by it. We have to take matters into our own hands - we need to sneak into their den and find the truth for ourselves.” She begins to pace the room with her arms crossed. “I talked this over with my mom; I was thinking we head over to FP’s trailer during the homecoming dance. Everyone will be at school, so it’s unlikely we’ll get caught. My mom will keep FP distracted at the dance while we go and look for clues.”

“Tempting.” The fiery waves of Cheryl’s hair shimmers against the pale sunlight streaming through the windows. “But what about Forsythe? He’d be a valuable asset to this caper.”

“No.” Betty swiftly shuts her down. “We can’t get him involved in this. He won’t be thrilled if we told him we suspect his dad. Plus, I’m already on thin ice with him as it is - I still haven’t talked to him since his birthday party.”

Cheryl rolls her eyes. “Don’t know, don’t care. All I want is to get to the bottom of this. So let’s say we go through with this plan and find something. What do we do next?”

“I don’t know. I doubt Sheriff Keller and the rest of the police department would know what to do with that kind of evidence. After the baby shower incident, everyone knows that Jason’s funeral is a big fat lie, and look what they’ve done about it - absolutely nothing.” The blonde shrugs, mostly because she doesn’t know what else to do. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there, I guess.”

“Does Veronica know anything about this?”

The mention of the brunette forces Betty’s chest to nearly collapse inwards. “No.” Her voice is hoarse; she clears her throat and shakes her head. “She’s super against this, actually, and I have no idea why. You’d think she’d be all for it, seeing as it’s very possible Hiram Lodge hired the Serpents to look for Jason for his own sinister reasons, but she firmly believes FP’s out of the picture.”

“Interesting.” Cheryl hums. “So we’ll need to distract Veronica as well - that shouldn’t be too hard. You can get her tangled up with something homecoming-related to keep her mind off things.”

“That’s…” Betty blinks. “Actually not a bad idea, but how…” Her eyes light up. “I got it.”

Cheryl raises an eyebrow. “Are you going to tell me what you just came up with?”

The blonde smirks. “After school, meet me in the gym. We have a homecoming dance to plan.”

“Wait, are you serious?” Archie blinks rapidly, trying to process everything. “You want me and Veronica to perform at the homecoming dance?”
“I mean, this can make up for the duet we were supposed to have at the variety show.” The brunette smirks. “This is a great idea, B.”

Betty notices how Veronica hasn’t attempted to make eye contact during their entire conversation. “I figured it would be a great idea - I mean, as long as you guys do something upbeat, to suit the theme.”

“The Blast From the Past.” Jughead marches into the gym carrying a cardboard box stuffed with string lights. “So original.”

The blonde’s palms begin to sweat; she knows this is wrong, she knows going behind both Jughead and Veronica’s backs isn’t going to help with her efforts in fixing her relationships with them, but what else can she do? Clifford has Jason hidden away somewhere and who knows how much time she has to find out where he is; if there were any other way, she’d do it in a heartbeat. “Hey, it’s what the people voted for. Don’t roast me for it.”

“Archie, your music is great and all, but it’s not what I’d listen to if I wanted to break it down at a school dance.” Jughead smirks.

Veronica rolls her eyes. “Which is why Archie and I will work on happy songs for our repertoire. Don’t worry, we’re going to knock your socks off.” She throws Jughead a wink before grabbing Archie by the elbow and pulling him away, possibly to discuss which songs to sing.

“Betts?” The blonde turns towards her beanie-clad friend. “Uh, about the party—”

“Jug, I just want to tell you that I’m really sorry about what happened.” She sighs. “I should’ve asked you if you wanted a party in the first place, and I definitely shouldn’t have told you off like that. I’m sorry you had the worst birthday ever.” And I’m sorry I’m going behind your back to check whether or not your dad is involved in Jason’s disappearance.

“It’s fine, really. To be honest, I got what was coming to me.” He sets the box aside. “You’re right - I was a jerk. A very ungrateful one. You were trying to do something nice and I flipped out on you because I don’t know how to react when people actually go out of their way to show how much they care.” He slips a hand underneath his beanie to scratch his head. “No hard feelings?”

She hates this so much. She hates herself so much. “No hard feelings.” She forces herself to make eye contact with him in order to look more convincing, and it takes a herculean effort not to cry. She’s sure he believes her, though, because he sighs in relief and grins.

“Great.” He sets the box aside. “So were you gonna tell me about the dinner after we became friends again, or…?”

“Dinner?” She blinks in confusion as she quickly wracks her brain for context. When she doesn’t answer, Jughead’s brow furrows. “Did you not know about it?”

“No!” Betty immediately shakes her head, though she still doesn’t know what the hell he’s talking about. “I mean, no, of course I did. I just…I have so many things going on, and now this homecoming dance is here, and everything kinda feels like it’s spinning out of control.” She laughs nervously, and she mentally curses herself for sounding so idiotic. Jughead isn’t stupid, and he has a knack for reading people. There’s no way he won’t be able to see through this.

“I saw your mom in the hall earlier.” He explains; there isn’t a trace of doubt in his expression or tone, which implies that he hasn’t seen through Betty’s ruse yet. “She told me all about it. Said she was inviting the whole gang - the Andrews’, the Lodges, the Kellers, even the McCoys. Since the
dance’s theme is a play on nostalgia she figured it would be a good idea to get everyone back together to talk about old times before heading to homecoming as a group. I never thought your mom would be the sentimental type.”

“Oh.” She blinks again and quickly whips up something to make it look like she knew about this all along. “I knew she was inviting Archie and his dad, but I thought she hated Veronica’s mom.” Alice is a genius for inviting all of the families over; this means everyone will be distracted, which gives her and Cheryl a clean break for FP’s trailer.

But wait…how can she sneak around the trailer if she’s expected to be at the dinner?

“That’s what I figured, but maybe she’s trying to let bygones be bygones or something, y’know?” He shrugs. “She hates my dad too, and look what happened - he was the first one she asked.”

“How…is your dad, by the way?” Betty distractedly rummages through the box Jughead was holding earlier for the sake of occupying her hands.

“He’s doing great.” Her friend’s brightened expression is painful to look at. “He cleaned up the trailer, he hasn’t had a drink in weeks, and he even shaved.” Jughead chuckles. “It’s a little weird, but it’s a good kind of weird. I think things are finally gonna be okay, at least for now.”

Damn it, damn it, damn it. “That’s really good to hear, Jug.” Her fist closes around a bundle of string lights, and she swallows hard. Is she really going to do this? Is she really going to break into his father’s home in the hopes of finding evidence that he might be involved in Jason’s disappearance? Is she really going to betray one of her best friends?

She glances up at him and gives him a strained smile. “I think things are going to be okay too.”

“So how exactly am I supposed to sneak into FP’s trailer if I’m also supposed to be at this dinner thing?” Betty asks her mother later that evening over dinner.

Alice nonchalantly takes a sip of red wine before cutting into her pot roast. “Well, initially I was planning to have you make an appearance and then make some excuse about having to leave early to help set up for the dance, but now that you mention Cheryl’s in on this too I don’t think you have to sneak out at all.”

Betty raises an eyebrow. “So you’re gonna make her do all the dirty work? That’s a little unfair, especially when her brother’s life may or may not be on the line.”

“We don’t even know if there is a line, Betty. His corpse could be stuffed into a tree trunk for all we know.” Her mother is being irritably casual about the possibility that Jason might be dead. “This is her investigation just as much as ours; her family is involved in this too. If she wants to trapeze into FP’s trailer and search for evidence, all the power to her. Besides, if Jason really is dead, don’t you think she should be the one to find out first?”

“I guess, but still.” The blonde stubbornly crosses her arms. “I don’t like the idea of going behind Jughead’s back, but I feel like I have no choice. He’s not going to press his dad any further, now that he’s back on the wagon.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Alice scoffs. “This isn’t the first time FP Jones fooled his family into thinking
he’s clean for good.”

Betty picks up her plate and heads over to the sink to rinse it. “I know he hasn’t been the best dad, but I think he really wants to try this time. Mrs. Jones never moved out before; I think having her and Jellybean out of the picture really put things in perspective for him.”

“You don’t know the Jones family like I do, Betty.” Alice takes another swig from her glass. “And you definitely don’t know Gladys as well as I do, either. She’s just as bad as he is, if not worse. I pity their poor children; I don’t know how they managed to put up with those two living under the same roof for so many years.”

Betty knows she shouldn’t pry, but Jughead never talks about his family so this is all new to her, and she can’t help but be intrigued. “How do you know so much about them, anyway?”

“That dumpster fire that you call the Joneses isn’t a well-kept secret. Everyone in town knows they’ve always been up to no good.” She rises from her seat and joins her daughter by the sink. “Look, Betty - I know you care for Jughead, and I know your relationship is important to you-”

“We’re not in a relationship.” Betty whines, but it falls under deaf ears.

“But we have to do what’s right for the greater good.” Alice plows on as if Betty didn’t speak up in the first place. “Even if there’s just a sliver of a chance that Jason’s alive, wouldn’t it be worth it to take that risk?”

“I’d be moved if I wasn’t aware of the fact that you vehemently hated the Blossoms up until very recently.” Betty retorts as she rinses her mom’s plate.

Alice picks up a dish towel and begins to dry everything Betty washed. “You used to hate them too. We were all wrong at one point, Betty. You can’t move forward if you don’t have anything to learn and grow from.”

She got her there. Betty huffs before whirling around and making her way out of the kitchen. “Jughead is not my boyfriend. I don’t know how many times I have to say it in order for you to believe me, but if I have to repeat it for the rest of my life then so be it.”

She can practically hear Alice rolling her eyes, and she huffs again as she heads up the stairs to her room. Today has been exhausting, to say the least, and all she really wants to do is buckle down and finish the rest of her homework before calling it an early night.

But, of course, Betty Cooper’s life is never easy as she wants it to be, so when her phone starts to vibrate and she sees Polly’s name on her screen, her heart leaps to her throat. She nearly trips over her schoolbag when she stumbles into her room. “Polly? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.” Her voice is quiet, bleak. “Clifford’s back. Did Cheryl tell you?”

Betty can feel the blood in her veins running cold. As much as she missed talking to her sister, she’s deathly afraid of what the topic of conversation is. “She did. I…I don’t know what to say, Polly. I’m so sorry.”

“I can’t lose hope yet.” There’s a little more resolve in Polly’s tone, but it’s wavering. “There isn’t any proof that Jason’s…you know, but the Blossoms are definitely hiding something and I’m going to find out what it is.”

“But I don’t want you putting yourself in danger.” The younger Cooper frowns. “When are you coming home, Polly? Mom is worried about you.”
“I won’t be able to live with myself if I don’t find out what happened to Jason.” A pause; it sounds like Polly’s shuffling around somewhere, or she’s moving things. “I just have to get into their bedroom. They protect it obsessively.” She gasps, and Betty’s heart stops. “Oh, Betty - I gotta go. I’m sorry.”

The line goes flat; Polly just hung up on her. Betty gawks at her phone for a second as she tries to process what just happened. What would the Blossoms be hiding in their bedroom? It could literally be anything - another clue to Charles Cooper’s murder, evidence that they’ve indeed been paying the Lodges to keep quiet about said murder…hell, they might be keeping Jason somewhere in there. What if he’s locked up in some secret room? Thornhill is a giant, old, creepy mansion; it’s imperative for it to have to have creepy crawslspaces and little-known nooks and crannies.

So now she has her great-grandfather’s murder, Jason’s disappearance, Cheryl sneaking into FP’s trailer, potentially destroying what’s left of her relationships with Jughead and Veronica, Polly risking her and her twins’ safety so she can sneak into the Blossom’s bedroom, and keeping her sexuality a secret from her mom. What more can be added to her list of problems?

“I still can’t get over my dad shaving.” Jughead chuckles the next evening. “That’s the equivalent of tectonic plates shifting.” He and Betty are hanging out with Archie in his bedroom. Betty just beat the redhead in a fifth round of Mortal Kombat.

“It’s not as weird as seeing my parents together in one room without arguing.” Archie shrugs, but his eyes are still trained on the TV. His mother is visiting from Chicago, supposedly to watch him perform at homecoming, but he thinks there’s an ulterior motive. “That would’ve been Little Archie’s pipe dream a few years back, but…I don’t know. Parents get divorced because they’re better when they’re apart.” When Betty beats him yet again, he drops his controller to run his hands through his hair. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to make the conversation about me. I’m happy your dad is showing progress, Jug.”

“IT’s okay, Arch.” Jughead glances up from his copy of Animal Farm to address him. “I dunno, I was thinking that maybe it’s time I go back and live with him again. He hasn’t missed a day of work, and he quit drinking. This is huge.”

Betty is starting to feel an uneasy shifting in her stomach. She also drops her controller. “And that’s great, Jughead, but maybe you should wait just a little bit longer.”

“Yeah.” Archie agrees; he looks just as uncertain as she does. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to tell him about her and Cheryl’s plan; he might be useful. “Just to make sure it sticks.”

Jughead pulls off his beanie and shakes his head, his dark wayward tresses swaying everywhere. “No, I’m telling you guys - something has shifted. He even read through my work - the essays, articles, all of my notes about the Cooper/Blossom feud.”

This sets off an array of alarms in Betty’s head. “Wait, you showed him our investigation?”

He laughs. “Yeah, and he even engaged with it - asked me all these questions, how I got all this information.”

Archie’s eyes flit over to Betty, and they make uneasy eye contact for a split second before returning their attention to their friend. “What kinds of questions?” The redhead tentatively asks.
Betty is astounded that Jughead is lacking so much foresight with this, but she also has to remind herself that he’s enamoured by FP’s recovery, which is most likely blinding him to his biases. “He asked me if I really think Charles was murdered, and who I think did it.”

The blonde blinks, totally incredulous. “He asked you about my great-grandfather’s murder?”

Jughead doesn’t look impressed. “You guys repeating everything I’m saying is getting really annoying.”

Archie and Betty exchange nervous glances for a second, but they change the subject and their evening continues unscathed. Later, when Betty’s back home in her room, she calls Archie to talk about what happened.

“No, I totally agree.” Archie moved to the kitchen to speak with her in private while Jughead slept upstairs. “There’s something weird about this.”

“Why does FP care about whether or not my great-grandfather was murdered? ” Betty rubs her cheek with the eraser end of her pencil; she’s hunched over a pile of homework. “There’s a difference between genuine curiosity and prying with a purpose.” She pauses for a second. “Can I tell you something? But you have to promise not to tell anyone - especially Jughead and Veronica.”

Archie sounds a little worried. “Yeah, sure. What is it?”

“You know about the dinner my mom’s throwing for all of our parents before the dance?” Archie says yes, and she continues. “It’s actually a distraction so Cheryl can sneak into FP’s trailer. We think he’s hiding something, something related to Jason’s disappearance.” She chews on her bottom lip. “We can’t let Jughead know for obvious reasons, but when my mom and I brought it up to Veronica she was really against it for some reason.”

“She and Jughead had a really random bonding session after the party,” Archie explains. “He told me all about it.”

Betty swears her heart stopped beating. “What?”

“They had a heart-to-heart at Pop’s, and then they talked some more when he walked her home. Turns out I was right about them having a lot in common.” Archie can’t help but chuckle. “But yeah, that might be why she’s against your plan - which I fully support, by the way. I want to help you.”

What did Jughead and Veronica bond over, exactly? Did they talk about her at all? Is that why Veronica has been avoiding her? “Jughead’s been hurt and let down by his dad so many times. This sliver of hope means everything to him, which is why he can never know. Veronica, on the other hand…”

“I think she sees a bit of herself in him,” Archie continues for her. “They have complicated relationships with their parents, and as much as they hate their dads sometimes there’s always gonna be a part of them that believes they’re capable of doing good things. We all want to see the good in the people we care about.”

That’s remarkably insightful of him. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I can see why Veronica would take his side.” Betty sighs. “Okay, so you know how I suggested that you and Veronica perform at the dance? That’s part of the distraction - you keep her busy with homecoming so Cheryl can head over to FP’s trailer undetected.”

“I can do that.” Betty can hear Vegas whining in the background. “Betty, I gotta go. Keep me updated, okay?”
She can’t help but feel a little guilty for roping Archie into this, but she also knows that this needs to be done. Like her mother said, it’s for the greater good. “I will, Arch. Goodnight.” She hangs up and gently places her phone on the table, glancing out her window. Archie’s bedroom window is dark, but she knows Jughead is in there, probably dreaming of the day he, his mother, and his sister move back with FP. Her heart drops to her stomach and she pulls her gaze away, forcing herself to concentrate on her homework, but the tears blurring her vision is making it impossible.

On the day of homecoming, Cheryl pulls Betty into the girls’ change room after class to tell her that she and Polly snuck into her parents’ room at Thornhill and found her grandmother’s ring sitting amongst their belongings. Before telling Polly to leave Montreal, Jason took the ring from her, explaining that he had to keep it safe - which means that Clifford took the ring from him at some point, which strongly implies that Jason is around here somewhere, dead or alive.

“We’re running out of time.” Cheryl’s frantic. “Jay-Jay’s being held hostage by our own father and who knows what he’s been doing to him.”

“I know, Cheryl, but we can’t panic just yet.” Betty reassures her. “Are you sure you can handle going to FP’s trailer on your own? I’ll go with you, I can-”

“No.” The redhead’s tone is defiant. “I can do this, Betty. You have to keep up appearances at the dinner. We all have our own part to play.”

She’s right. “Okay, but please contact me if you run into any problems.”

Betty heads straight home afterward to run over the plan with her mother one more time as they set up for dinner. The guests show up at six, right on the dot - Hermione and Veronica, FP and Jughead, Tom and Kevin, Sierra and Josie, and Fred and Mary with Archie. The kids are all dressed up for the dance, and the parents fawn over how great they look and spend at least half an hour taking too many pictures before Alice calls everyone to dinner.

“How’s Cheryl?” Archie mumbles to her as they shuffle into the kitchen together.

Betty anxiously checks her phone, but there’s nothing. “I don’t know. Haven’t heard from her yet.”

“Don’t worry.” Kevin winks; Betty and Archie gave him a quick rundown of the plan when their parents weren’t looking. “It’s gonna take a lot to bring Cheryl Bombshell down.”

“S’been a long time since I ate somethin’ that didn’t come in a combo meal or a snack pack.” FP grins at the spread set out before them. Jughead rolls his eyes while the rest of the table laughs quietly.

“So, FP.” Alice takes a sip of wine. “Betty tells me you’re working for Fred again. How do you balance that with your other responsibilities?”

“Mom.” Betty chides. This dinner is supposed to be a distraction, not an interrogation.

“Like being a father?” FP raises an eyebrow.

“And being a part of the Southside community.” Alice casually adds, and FP smirks in response.
“You can say Southside Serpent, Alice - I’m not ashamed.” He makes an emphasis on ashamed, locking eyes with her. Alice clears her throat and her eyes drop to her plate, and Betty and Jughead exchange confused glances. “And it’s not just me - there’s a bunch of Serpents workin’ on Fred’s site.”

“And they’re great guys.” Fred chimes in. “Hardworking and incredibly talented. This has to be my best crew yet.” FP claps him on the back, and they smile.

“So I hope you don’t mind me asking,” Alice presses on despite looking a little perturbed from what FP said earlier about not being ashamed of being a Southside Serpent. “What did you do before that?”

“Scraped by.” FP shrugs before taking a bite of asparagus. “Odd jobs here an’ there. Had to do what I could to support my family.”

Alice reaches out to pat Jughead on the shoulder. “I know you worked at the drive-in before it was bought out, Jughead.” She glances over to Hermione, who looks like she’s trying very hard not to give Alice a nasty glare. “Did you find work there too, FP?”

Josie and her mother are nervously glancing around the room, unsure of where all of this tension is coming from. Tom Keller is keeping his gaze focused on his meal. Kevin is trying to hold in his laughter. Archie looks nervous. Jughead looks confused. Veronica’s brow is furrowed; she’s trying to figure out what’s going on. Betty’s been so caught up in the plan that she didn’t even realize how stunning the brunette looks: Her black dress is accented with something shimmery, so when the light catches it the dress looks like it’s sparkling with stars. Her wavy black hair cascades just past her shoulders, teasing the new pearl necklace splayed out across her collarbone.

“I hung out a bit.” FP’s voice breaks her trance, and Betty blushes furiously before nervously shovelling a spoonful of mashed potatoes into her mouth. Hermione is practically inhaling her glass of wine, and even Sierra is looking a little uncomfortable. “What can I say? I’m a movie buff.”

“So were you upset when you found out Hiram Lodge bought out the drive-in?” Alice presses on, and the room falls deathly silent.

“Alice-” Hermione starts, but FP shakes his head.

“It’s okay.” His expression is cool, calm, collected. He’s actually kind of hard to read. “Stuff happens. You gotta do what you gotta do.”

“Let me rephrase that question.” Alice leans forward in her seat, and Betty drops her utensils to grip her skirt so she doesn’t give into her self-destructive habit. She can feel Veronica’s eyes on her, which makes her even more anxious. “Were you surprised?”

Just as FP is about to answer, the doorbell rings, and Alice quickly excuses herself to answer it. Betty’s phone vibrates, and she hastily takes it under the table.

I found the shoebox.

So FP was the one who stole all of their notes? What reason would he have for it? What exactly does he plan to do with the box?

Betty raises her head to find Archie staring directly at her, and she gives him a reassuring nod as Hal awkwardly walks into the kitchen and takes the seat next to her. "Sorry for being late." He mutters. There’s a noticeable tension between him and FP; they keep stealing glances at each other, but neither of them look happy to be in the same room together.
“Remember our homecoming?” Tom pipes up in a desperate attempt to lighten the mood. “Man, what was the theme again?”

“Castle in the Clouds.” Sierra laughs. “Whose terrible idea was it? All I remember is that Hal and Alice were king and queen.”

“Yeah,” FP laughs bitterly. “Of Hell.” When Jughead casts him a pleading look he places a comforting hand on his shoulder. “No, this is a fun story, I promise. Fred and me-” He glances at Archie’s father, who now looks extremely uncomfortable, “-we were all set to play at the dance. I was backstage droppin’ off our gear when I heard these voices.”

Alice looks like she’s withering, and Hal looks about ready to punch FP square in the nose. “FP-” he starts, but the Southside Serpent plows on, looking smugger and smugger. Betty’s fingernails are eating their way into her palms now, and she grimaces at the stinging pain. Her eyes make their way over to Veronica, who looks like she’s on the verge of tears. She wants to leap over the table and take her hands in hers, to stop the self-mutilation, to make it better somehow. Betty knows this because she gives her that exact same look every time she knows she’s hurting herself.

“It was your mom and dad.” FP swivels around to face Betty, and she swallows hard. “They were fighting about-”

“Shut up, FP.” Hal cuts in, but it only makes FP’s smirk grow wider.

“Happy to oblige if you are.” His expression is dark. “I don’t care what any of you think of me, especially your wife - but none of you have the right to try an’ humiliate me in front of my son.” He leans back in his seat, clearly pleased with himself as he glances over to Alice. “Glad to give you a taste of your own medicine, though.”

Tom, Sierra, Fred, Mary, and Hermione all look guilty; their eyes are downcast, suddenly interested in their laps. They know something their kids don’t know. Kevin, Josie, Archie, Veronica, and Jughead are at a total loss for words, but Betty…all Betty wants to do is lock herself in her room and never come out ever again. She wants to melt into her mattress, becoming one with the fabric and foam, to disappear from this world and cease to exist. She’s beginning to think that this stupid dinner wasn’t supposed to be a distraction in the first place, and that all of her hopes of rebuilding a genuine relationship with her mother are farfetched dreams. Maybe her mother isn’t capable of redemption. Maybe this was all for nothing.

“I think it’s about time we head to the dance.” Sierra quickly gets up, tossing her napkin on the table. “Dinner was lovely, Alice. The peach pie was sublime.”

Everyone hastily agrees, so they get up, help clear the table, and head to their respective cars. Betty has half a mind to ask her parents just what the hell all of that was back there, but she knows she won’t get an answer - so instead she types a reply to Cheryl.

Did you grab it? Please tell me you’re back at school now.

Their station wagon rolls into the school parking lot. As the parents - except for FP and Tom - hurry inside to beat the cold, the kids hang back a little to discuss what happened.

“So, did anyone else want to sink into the floor, or was that just me?” Jughead mutters, shoving his hands into his pockets. He’s wearing the same red suit from the weekend he spent with the Blossoms.

“That was so weird.” Josie agrees, shaking her head as she ascends the front steps. “I got the
impression that everyone knew what your dad was talking about, but they were too afraid to speak up.”

The group reaches the school’s foyer. Josie separates to find the other two Pussycats, and Archie’s just about to pull Veronica away so they can set up for their performance, but the brunette promises to catch up with him in a bit.

“B…” She reaches for Betty’s hands and she frowns at the fresh cuts. “I-”

Betty’s wrought with guilt. Veronica shouldn’t be the one to apologize first. “I’m sorry, V. I’m sorry about what happened at the party. I’m an idiot, and I hate that I lashed out at you when you were only trying to be a good friend.” She thinks about what she’s doing to her, how she’s going behind her back, and the mounting guilt wraps itself around her lungs, constricting her airways. “There’s just so much tension happening with my mom, and the investigation, and-”

“No more stupid fights, okay?” The brunette gives her a small smile and raises a hand to place it on Betty’s cheek. “From now on, we’re open and honest with each other. If there’s anything that disastrous dinner taught me, it’s that secrets don’t fare well.” She brushes the skin underneath Betty’s eye with her thumb. “I know it’s unreasonable to clear out all of the skeletons in our closets, but I want to be as transparent with you as possible. I want…” Her eyes momentarily drop, but she steels herself and regains eye contact. “I want us to be the one ship that stays afloat in this crazy storm.”

Ship can mean a lot of things, and Betty tries not to think about it too much. All of this talk about being honest with each other is going to give her a heart attack, seeing as she’s doing the exact opposite of what Veronica wants. “I know.” She sucks in a shaky breath and gently pulls Veronica’s hand away, feeling like she doesn’t deserve her affection. “I want that too, Veronica, but-”

“Ronnie!” Archie calls from somewhere down the hall. “We gotta go!”

Betty gives her an apologetic smile. “Go. We’ll have all the time in the world to talk later.” I hope.

“Okay.” Veronica returns the smile and kisses her on the cheek before scampering off to join Archie. The blonde sighs in defeat, but when she turns around and sees Kevin and Jughead pompously sneering back at her she rolls her eyes.

“One word out of either of you and I’m burying you six feet under.” She groans as she steps in between them. The boys laugh the whole way towards the gymnasium, and they’re still laughing by the time they approach the stage.

“Is Polly coming?” Kevin asks; he’s searching the crowd, presumably for her.

“I don’t know.” Betty shrugs. “I haven’t really spoken to her since she moved in with the Blossoms.” She recalls the brief conversation they had, and how Cheryl and Polly found Rose’s ring in Penelope and Clifford’s room. “I hope she’s okay.”

She reaches into her purse for her phone, but is disappointed when she finds nothing from Cheryl. She doesn’t seem to be at the dance, which only prompts her to worry more. Why is she taking so long?

Joaquin shows up, looking a little out of breath. “Sorry.” He throws Kevin a smile just as Archie and Veronica head onstage. “Bike broke down on the way here.”

“That explains why you reek of motor oil.” Kevin scrunches his nose in disgust. Archie tunes his guitar, and Sierra McCoy takes the stage to introduce him and Veronica. The music starts, and at first everything’s great; they’re doing an upbeat cover of Kids and America and everyone in the
gymnasium is dancing. Betty jumps around with Kevin, Joaquin, and Jughead, and for a second it feels like there isn’t a conspiracy behind her great-grandfather’s death, that Jason isn’t missing, that Cheryl isn’t snooping around FP’s trailer for clues. For that brief moment, she feels like a normal teenager dancing with her friends at homecoming, and she thinks about everyone else in the room - how they’re living this exact moment under a different set of circumstances. There are other kids in this room, kids that she shares classes with, that are here simply because there’s a dance, and they’re having fun with no strings attached. There are other teenagers at this dance who are living normal lives, and the thought of that blows her mind.

Once Archie and Veronica’s performance is over, Dilton hops over to the DJ table and plays a few slower songs. Betty rushes out of the gym and finds Archie hauling his guitar gear. “Where’s Veronica?”

“She went to find you guys.” He glances around to make sure the coast is clear. “What did Cheryl tell you?”

“She found the shoebox - the one that her grandmother gave me and Jughead at Jason’s memorial.” She answers him in a hushed but hurried tone. “The one with all of the clues pointing to Charles’ murder - it had the real autopsy report in there.”

“Why would FP have it?” Archie tilts his head, confused.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Betty shrugs. “But she hasn’t updated me since dinner. I don’t know if she’s still there, or if something happened to her. It’s driving me nuts.”

“Maybe we should head over.” The redhead suggests. “To check up on her, see if she’s okay.”

She glances over her shoulder towards the doors to the gym. “But what about Veronica?”

“Kevin will distract her.” He pulls out his phone to send Kevin a quick text. “C’mon. We won’t take long.”

They take Fred’s truck to Sunnyside, but when Archie pulls up to the trailer they’re surprised to find a squad of police cars parked next to it. Betty can feel her pulse thrumming; what if Cheryl’s in danger?

Archie reverses and parks the truck a little farther away so they don’t look suspicious. They lay low, keeping their eyes trained on the trailer, and when the door opens and FP walks out in handcuffs the both of them stifle a gasp. Tom Keller hurriedly makes his way to his car and speeds off, and the rest of the officers guide FP over to one of the other cars - but there’s no sign of Cheryl.

“Maybe she’s hiding somewhere.” Archie tries to sound optimistic, but she can hear the hint of hopelessness in his voice.

“Why is FP getting arrested?” Betty shakes her head in disbelief. Someone must’ve called into the sheriff’s office and tipped them off…but who?

The rest of the police cars eventually leave the trailer, but Betty and Archie wait a few more minutes to see if Cheryl will pop up. Ten minutes pass and there’s still no sign of her. Betty sends her another text but it goes unanswered.

“We gotta go back, Betty.” Archie turns the engine back on and circles out of the trailer park. He goes twenty over the speed limit and makes it back to school in record time, but when they spot the police car parked by the front steps Betty’s insides turn cold.
They rush back into school, where they find Jughead and Veronica arguing with Kevin. “What the hell are you talking about?” Jughead steps closer towards Kevin; Joaquin gives him a menacing look but it doesn’t shake him.

“My dad just spoke to Mayor McCoy.” Kevin explains exasperatingly. “Your dad just got arrested, Jughead. I’m sorry.”

When Betty and Archie are close enough, Jughead turns to glare at them. “Where have you been? It’s kind of convenient that you stepped out of the picture just as my dad gets arrested for something he didn’t even do.”

“Jug, just listen.” Archie implores. He gives Betty a defeated look, and the tears spring to her eyes. She knows what he’s about to do, and there’s nothing she can do to stop him because they don’t have any other choice. “While we were at dinner, Cheryl went into your dad’s trailer to look for clues.”

The blue in Jughead’s eyes burn with anger. “What? You knew about this? You let her do this?”

Veronica gapes at Betty. “So you went through with it.”

Jughead’s in hysterics. “Went through with what?”

“M-my mom,” Betty chokes through her tears, “She had this theory that the Southside Serpents may have something to do with Jason’s disappearance, so she asked me and Veronica to help. Veronica said no, but I agreed. I told Cheryl about it, and she offered to sneak into your dad’s trailer while we were at dinner.”

Jughead lets out a humourless laugh and steps away from them, shaking his head and clasping a hand over his mouth. “So that’s why your mom invited everyone over to dinner - so Cheryl can break into his trailer while your mom interrogates my dad? And you let this happen?” He shoots a venomous glare in Archie’s direction. “You - all of you - you went behind my back. You knew my dad was making an effort to be a better person for me and my family and you didn’t believe any of it.”

Veronica shakes her head. “Jughead, I'm so sorry. If I knew, I-”

“It’s not you I’m pissed at. You believed me when no one else did, Veronica, and for that I’m grateful.” Jughead’s eyes narrow as he flits back and forth between Archie, Betty, and Kevin. “If anything, they hung you up to dry like they did me.” His gaze stops on Betty, whose tears are freely streaming down her pallid cheeks. “Out of everyone in this town, I thought you’d be the one who’d believe me. You were the last person I expected to pull something like this.”

“You were just so excited, Jughead.” She sobs. Veronica’s avoiding eye contact with her, and Jughead looks like he just got punched in the stomach. “I didn’t want to disappoint you. I knew you’d be against suspecting your dad so Archie and I felt like we couldn’t say anything. Please, don’t blame him, Kevin, or Cheryl - it’s all my fault. I dragged everyone into this. This was my doing.”

“So you thought lying and playing along was a better idea?” Jughead shakes his head again. “You and Archie - the two people I trust most - lied to me?” He steps back even farther, shaking his head a third time before breaking out into a jog and running out of the school.

“Jughead!” Archie sprints after him, and Betty has half a mind to do the same but she’s interrupted by the sound of the gym doors bursting open; Fred, Alice, Mary, Sierra, and Hermione are rushing
down the hallway to join them. “Betty,” Alice sighs with relief. “Thank God you’re okay.”

“Did you tip off Sheriff Keller, Mom?” She spits back. “Were you the one who got FP arrested?”

“I was here the whole time, Betty.” Her mother retorts. “I had no idea any of this was happening until just a few moments ago.”

“What was he arrested for, exactly?” Veronica asks.

“We received an anonymous tip regarding FP and the Serpents’ involvement with Jason Blossom.” Tom explains. “We were given a search warrant for the trailer, and we found two things: A gun… and a cell phone belonging to Cheryl Blossom.”

Betty’s heart stops beating. “Cheryl’s phone?”

“It was stashed in a lockbox in the closet along with the gun.” Tom frowns. “It was turned on when we found it.”

“That’s it?” Kevin asks tentatively, and his father nods. So there wasn’t a shoebox, even though Cheryl told her she found it - which must means someone must have taken the box and replaced it with the gun to frame FP. But where is Cheryl, and why was her phone in the closet with the gun?

Tom tells everyone to go home and to remain indoors for now, but home is the last place Betty wants to be. She wants to tell Archie about the gun, but he’s out somewhere chasing Jughead. At the end of the day, choosing to snoop around FP’s trailer was a good idea because now they know for sure he’s being framed for a crime he didn’t commit, but at the same time it came with a heavy price. Jughead thinks everyone betrayed him, and she doesn’t even want to think about Veronica - but at the same time, there’s no one else she wants to talk to.

After changing out of her dress, Betty musters up the courage to dial Veronica’s number. The least she can do is explain everything - that is, if the brunette is willing to listen. Her phone rings eight times before she finally answers. “Betty, you are the last person I want to speak to right now. We literally spoke about being more honest with each other like an hour ago - so not only did you lie to Jughead, but you lied to me too.”

“I know,” Betty shoves her free hand into the pocket of her jeans in a desperate attempt to prevent her nails from cutting into her palms. “And if you don’t want to be friends anymore after everything is said and done, I’ll respect that and I’ll be out of your life forever,” There’s a painful twinge in her chest when she says this, but she takes in a deep breath and ignores it. “But you have to listen to me this one time. Cheryl texted me during dinner and told me that she found the box that had all of the evidence to my great-grandfather’s murder. I have no idea why he has it, but she didn’t mention anything about a gun, and I’m sure she would’ve said something if she found it.”

Veronica doesn’t sound convinced. “So what are you trying to say?”

The fact that she doesn’t address no longer being friends sends another hurtful pang to Betty’s chest, but she presses on. “There’s a very good chance FP’s being framed. Someone planted the gun, and they may have taken Cheryl and left her phone with the gun to make it look like FP took her or something.”

“And let me guess - you want to find her.”

“Both Blossom twins are in danger, Veronica. We all know Sheriff Keller’s not going to do the job right. Someone has to do it.”
“And you’re going to do it because you think you’re more capable? You’re a teenager, Betty. Sheriff Keller is a grown man with a team of trained, certified adults. Leave them to do their job.” Veronica sighs. “Isn’t it about time you stopped meddling in other people’s affairs?”

That stung. “Veronica, I’m sorry for going behind your back. Really, I am - but lives are at stake here. Archie and I did what we had to do.”

“If FP confesses, he might implicate my dad.” Veronica’s tone is a little quieter. “If everything’s true and my dad is partially responsible…he’s dead to me. I’m cutting ties with him.”

“If you want the truth about your dad, don't you think it's fair to help Jughead find the truth about his? Help me find Cheryl, Veronica.” Betty pleads. “Help me find her, and then we can go our separate ways. I promise I’ll never cross your path again, if you don’t want me to.”

There’s a long pause. Betty knows it’s implausible, but a part of her hopes that Veronica will somehow change her mind and tell her that she doesn’t want to sever ties. Even if they end up as friends and nothing more, Betty would take it. She’d take if even if they were just acquaintances who only waved at each other whenever they passed in the hallways. There is no Betty without Veronica, but if she has to remove herself from the brunette’s life in order to make her happy, she’ll do it.

“Fine.” Veronica finally answers. “Meet me at Pop’s in ten.” She abruptly hangs up, and Betty can feel a piece of her being forcefully ripped away.

Chapter End Notes

Song title is taken from "Looking Too Closely" by Fink.
Wishing Only Makes It Worse

Chapter Summary

Song title is taken from "Saturday Nights" by Khalid.

Betty grabs her varsity jacket and races down the stairs, only to find her mother sitting on the bottom step with her head in one hand and a wine glass in the other. She promised Veronica she'd be at Pop’s in ten minutes, and she definitely doesn’t want to disappoint her again, but her mother’s despondent body language is impossible to ignore. “Mom?”

Alice barely looks up from her half-empty wine glass. “Sheriff Keller gave us strict orders to stay indoors.” Her voice is weary.

“I’m going to look for Cheryl.” Betty begins to snap the buttons of her jacket together. “Someone took her and it’s our fault. She’s in danger and I don’t know how much time we have.”

“Let the police do their job.” Alice’s voice isn’t the shrill, demanding shriek Betty’s so accustomed to hearing. In fact, it doesn’t even sound like she’s trying to convince Betty to stay home.

“I have to go.” Betty heads over to the door, but not without glancing over her shoulder to look at her mother one last time. She’s still sulking by the stairs, and a part of her wants to ask her what the hell is going on, but she has no time. It’ll have to wait until later.

The blonde plucks the car keys from the bowl sitting on the table next to the front door, and she manages to make it to Pop’s in five minutes flat. Veronica’s sitting by herself at the same booth where they met for the very first time, still decked out in her homecoming dress, and Betty can’t help but think about the effects of foreshadowing as she tentatively approaches her.

“So,” The brunette lifts her head as Betty takes the seat across from her. “What’s the plan?”

“Can we talk for a second?” Betty clears her throat. “About…us. I know I-”

“I accepted your first offer, Cooper.” Veronica’s eyes are steely, and they stab into her like icicles. “We find Cheryl, and that’s it. Nothing else.”

The taller of the two sighs. Well, that’s the end of that. “If Cheryl really was taken, there’d have to be a clue lying around somewhere that’ll let us know where she is, or who took her.”

“There’s her phone,” Veronica suggests. “But that’s been confiscated by Sheriff Keller. We can’t just waltz into the police station and ask for it.”

“If Cheryl knew she was in danger she would’ve left something behind for us to find. I know she would.” Betty wracks her brain for an answer. “Where is one place Cheryl knows we would check if something went wrong?”

“Maybe we should head back to the trailer.” Veronica suggests. “There could be something that Sheriff Keller missed. There’s a small chance, but it’s all we got.”

Betty nods and rises from her seat. She mentally notes the thin, fur-collared shawl the shorter girl is
wearing, and she’s certain that isn’t enough to protect her from the biting cold, but she knows she’ll refuse her if she offers up her own jacket. At least the car will keep them warm.

It’s an extremely silent, awkward drive over to Sunnyside. Veronica spends the entirety of the ride staring out the window, and Betty has to force herself to keep her eyes on the road because she knows if she lets up any restraint she’ll just keep stealing glances. When she pulls up by FP’s trailer, she notices the strings of yellow police tape flapping in the wind; someone ripped them off, which means someone’s been inside after the police raided it.

“What if someone’s still in there?” Veronica whispers anxiously, ducking low behind the dashboard.

The possibility of someone waiting inside the trailer makes Betty’s heart rate go awry, but she tries to keep it together. “I’ll go in first and let you know if it’s safe.”

“No way.” The brunette hisses as Betty leans over the console to open the glove compartment, where there’s a can of bear mace. “I’m going in with you.”

“I’m not jeopardizing your safety.” Betty hisses back. “I’ll give you a signal-”

“Can you stop with the chivalry?” Veronica growls. “I can fend for myself.”

The blonde is officially in no mood to argue with anyone anymore, so she rolls her eyes and quietly opens her door. The pair tiptoe closer towards the trailer, careful to avoid tripping over anything that’ll make too much noise. It’s deathly silent, so if there’s anyone in there, they’re probably doing a bit of snooping themselves. Betty creeps up the front steps towards the door, heart hammering in her chest as she reaches for the knob. She slowly opens the door; once it’s wide enough to squeeze inside, Betty steps in, cringing at the creaking of the door hinges.

It’s dark in here - so dark, in fact, that she can’t even find the light switch. She can hear Veronica creeping in after her, but other than that there’s no other sound. She clutches the mace as tightly as she can, taking a few more cautious steps forward. She swallows in an attempt to keep her heart from leaping to her throat.

A huge thump emits from somewhere to her left; out of panic Betty screams and raises the bear mace, pushing her finger down on the release and spraying whatever’s in front of her. Veronica screams and there’s the sound of objects clattering to the floor; she must’ve bumped into something. Someone else screams, and then another person screams, and for a few frantic seconds everyone is screaming and running into things.

Someone finally gets the lights, and when Betty’s eyes adjust she finds Veronica on the floor with a pile of jackets on her; she ran into the coat rack. Jughead is pressed up against the far wall next to the couch, his eyes wide and chest heaving with panic. Archie is in the kitchen, still yelling as he frantically swings the broomstick he’s holding. Fortunately, no one was in Betty’s spraying range, so her bear mace didn’t affect anyone.

Veronica, who was closest to the light switch and was the most likely person to turn the lights on, rises to her feet and shakes the jackets off of her. “What the hell, guys?” She bellows as she throws FP’s Serpent jacket in Jughead’s face. “We thought someone was going to kill us!”

“Kill you?” Jughead jabs a finger in Betty’s direction. “You were spraying an entire can of bear mace! Who’s trying to kill who here?”

“Maybe I wouldn’t have felt like I needed to use this if you didn’t pounce on us like that!” Betty yells back, shoving the mace into her jacket pocket.
“No one pounced on anyone.” Archie rests the broomstick against the wall and heads into the main sitting area. He bashfully rubs the back of his neck. “Uh, so I found Jughead.”

Betty’s so caught up in the stupidity of their current situation that she completely forgot Jughead was missing. She pulls both him and Archie into a bone-crushing hug, sighing with relief. So many things have gone wrong tonight, but at the very least she has her boys back safe. “Don’t ever scare me like that again.” She scolds them as she pulls away, and when her eyes land on Jughead they begin welling up with tears. “Jug…”

He shakes his head and holds up one hand. “Don’t.” He chuckles ruefully. “I get it, Betts. It’s definitely not cool, but I get it. You did what you had to do.” He pauses for a moment. “I probably would’ve done the same.”

She sniffs and tries to recompose herself, but as she speaks her voice begins to crack. “Is that your way of saying you forgive me?”

Jughead smirks. “It’ll take some time, but we’ll get there.”

She gives him a small smile. “So…do you want to explain why you were sneaking around your dad’s trailer in the dark?”

“I came back here after, uh…” He gulps, knowing the blonde isn’t going to like what he’s going to say. “Well, first I went to the bus station. I was gonna go to Toledo to live with my mom.”

Betty’s eyes widen. “So you were just gonna run away from all of this without even trying to vouch for your dad’s innocence?”

“I was angry, okay?” Jughead groans. “What would you do if your dad, who promised you time and time again over the course of your life that he’d get his act together, let you down yet again, and gets himself arrested too? I felt like that was my only option!”

The blonde softens just a bit. “Yeah, I guess I can see your point.”

“My mom didn’t want me coming to Toledo after all, so I had nowhere else to go.” He shrugs. “I came back here thinking I’d find an answer, or a next step, or whatever - and that’s when Archie found me. I didn’t know about Cheryl disappearing, or the gun that was planted in the closet. He explained everything.”

“Well, you would’ve found out if you just stayed.” Betty mutters under her breath, and Jughead looks like he’s about to bite back when Veronica steps in between them.

“Now’s not the time to bicker like children.” Her tone is stern. “We have to work together, and we have to work fast if we want to find Cheryl safe and sound. So we all had the same idea to come back to the scene of the crime - Jughead, Archie, did you find anything?”

“No.” Jughead shakes his head and pulls off his beanie in frustration. He runs his fingers through his hair before turning on his heel to look at the destruction the police left behind: The closet is ripped open with all of the clothes inside splayed out on the floor, the coffee table is overturned, and the couch cushions are scattered around the room. “They didn’t even bother to tidy up after they were done. It’s disgusting.”

“We searched everywhere.” Archie throws his hands up in defeat. “I don’t know where else to look.”

“What if we went to Sheriff Keller directly and told him about what Cheryl said she saw?” Jughead
gestures towards the door. “Betty, you still have her text. It’s evidence she was here, and that the gun wasn’t around initially. We can tell him everything - Jason’s fake death, the Blossom’s payments to Lodge Industries, your great-grandfather’s murder. We still have your mom’s copies of the notes; it can all check out.”

Betty hastily opens the door and leads the other three towards her car. She speeds over to the sheriff station and they all pile out, rushing through the front doors together and bombarding the poor administrative assistant. “Excuse me, sir, but we need to see Sheriff Keller right now.”

“There’s been a huge mistake.” Archie leans over her shoulder to speak through the glass wall.

“You kids wanna talk?” Everyone whirls around; Tom is walking towards them, adjusting his belt.

“We need to talk to you about FP Jones.” Veronica implores. “He’s been framed - Betty, show him your phone.”

The blonde fishes her phone out of her pocket and quickly scrolls to Cheryl’s text message. “When we were having dinner at my place, Cheryl broke into FP’s trailer so she could find any evidence of him possibly being involved in Jason’s disappearance. You see, Jason’s not really dead, and he-”

“Hold your horses.” Tom holds up his hands, gesturing for them to slow down. “I’m aware of the fake memorial, but what’s this about FP being involved in Jason’s disappearance?”

“It’s part of this whole plan concocted by Clifford Blossom, and he may have dragged my dad into it. Betty and I can show you all of our notes; we’ve been investigating for months.” Jughead steps forward. “That gun you found, it was a mistake. Someone put it there. When Cheryl texted Betty she didn’t make any indication of a gun.”

Tom Keller raises an eyebrow. “So if your father is as innocent as you say he is, why did he just confess to Jason Blossom’s murder, and why did he just disclose the location of his body?”

The room falls deathly silent. The four teenagers exchange looks of incredulity, each of them at a complete loss for words. There’s the sound of a pair of doors forcefully opening; two officers are guiding FP down the hall, his hands cuffed behind him. He briefly locks eyes with his son before being led to another wing of the building, most likely where the cells are.

“What?” Betty hears Jughead whisper to himself in disbelief. He vehemently shakes his head. “No, this isn’t right. He’s not a murderer. My dad didn’t kill Jason Blossom!” He moves forward to follow this dad, but Archie holds him back.

“Dude,” He mumbles as Jughead struggles against his grasp. “We can’t do anything for him now.”

“But-” Jughead tries to untangle himself from Archie’s arms, and tears well up in Betty’s eyes as she watches him. “He’s not- I can-”

“Archie’s right.” She croaks. “C’mon. Let’s go home.”

Jughead stops struggling, and instead crumples against Archie, his shoulders shuddering with sobs. Betty encloses her arms around her boys, and when she feels Veronica move in to hug all three of them she feels like the whole world is collapsing around her.
The authorities are allowing Jughead to stay with the Andrews’ until Child Protective Services figures out what to do with him. They tried contacting Gladys in Toledo but she never answered any of their calls, so they have no choice but to find a foster home. Archie and Fred are trying to convince CPS to keep him at their place, but unfortunately there’s not much they can do. Depending on where he ends up, he may not even be returning to Riverdale High.

It turns out FP’s confession had merit to it; he told them Jason’s body was hidden in a remote part of Sweetwater River, miles away from civilization. Once he told the police its exact location, they headed over to the spot, and lo and behold there was Jason’s corpse. The water was so cold that his body was partially frozen, which implies that he’s been there for awhile. He was found at the very bottom of the river with his ankles chained to a cinder block. There was a single bullet hole in the centre of his forehead, and a grotesque exit wound at the back of his head.

This only makes Betty more determined to figure out where Cheryl is. Kevin told her that FP didn't disclose Cheryl's whereabouts during his confession, which must mean she's still alive. The Serpents are holding her hostage somewhere and she needs to find out her location before it's too late.

"So this is what happened, according to FP." Kevin, Veronica, Archie, and Betty are gathered in the student lounge during a spare period; Jughead’s at the sheriff’s office so he could answer some questions and see his dad. "Jason Blossom approached the Serpents and asked if he could help them with a drug run in exchange for a cut of the profit. Jason already had a getaway car, so all he needed were the drugs and some cash to get him out of the country."

"Okay." Betty frowns and scribbles down a few notes. "Then what happened?"

Kevin takes a sip of his coffee. "Before agreeing to the deal FP told Jason to 'fess up and tell him why he needed money in the first place, and Jason told him about running away with his pregnant girlfriend and his plan to stage his death on July Fourth so his parents wouldn't go looking for for him. FP cooked up this idea of kidnapping Jason while he was on the run so he can hold him for ransom. We all know the Blossoms are filthy rich so he was sure he'd be able to exchange Jason for a lot of money. On July Fourth, when Jason faked his death and emerged from the other side of Sweetwater River, FP went after him."

"But Dilton already confessed to the gunshot." Betty chews on the end of her pencil, and Kevin nods.

"FP is a lot smarter than people think. He went in stealth, no firearms - just a rag and a bottle of chloroform. That was supposedly his first attempt at grabbing him, but Jason managed to get away and went up to Montreal with Polly." Kevin pauses to take another sip from his drink. "Angry that the Serpents were going back on their deal, Jason didn't wire their cut of the profit and kept all of it for himself, and this obviously pissed FP off so he sent some Serpents to search for him. They found him in Montreal and dragged him all the way back to Riverdale, where they kept him prisoner in the basement of the White Wyrm."

"Your dad told you all of this?" Veronica raises an eyebrow. "Isn't all of this information confidential?"

Kevin throws her a rueful grin. "I may or may not have snooped around his case files while he was out on patrol. Anyways, they were ready to contact the Blossoms, but on the day they were planning to do it, Jason somehow escaped the White Wyrm."

"So that's why FP killed him?" Archie scratches his head. "He didn't want him exposing the Serpents, so he silenced him...permanently?"
"That's what he confessed, yeah." Kevin nods. "The bullet lodged in Jason's head matched the gun that was found in FP's closet, but it doesn't make any sense. If the gun was planted, then FP didn't fire it. It's possible he's making up the entire thing."

"But what reason would he have for faking a confession?" Betty frowns. "What's in it for him if he takes the fall for the person who actually did it?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Kevin shrugs. "The police searched the White Wyrm but there was no sign of Cheryl, and FP isn't giving up her location for some reason - so I'm thinking that he doesn't have a clue where she is. He's definitely covering for someone." He tosses his empty paper cup into the trash. "The confession had no mention of your dad, though, Ronnie. So I guess that's good."

"Yeah, but what if my dad is the person FP's covering for?" Veronica sighs. "It would make perfect sense - Daddy could've compensated the Serpents with all the money they lost from Jason's drug deal on the condition that he's left out of it if they ever get caught. Remember, Jason has a secret that both my family and Cheryl's family want for themselves."

That's a good point, but Betty's too afraid to vocalize her agreement. She can't even face Veronica right now; just thinking about it makes her heart ache. Luckily, Archie speaks up instead. "Didn't Betty's mom say she saw FP and Joaquin talking about something at the party?"

Kevin looks rather annoyed. "So my boyfriend has to be dragged into this now?"

"Kevin, it's possible that Joaquin may have helped FP somehow - even if it's just to help him fabricate a story." Veronica looks apologetic. "We have to consider all possibilities here."

He knows she's right, and Betty knows that he knows because he's deflating in defeat and running his hands through her hair. "Okay, so what do we do now?"

A few students rush out of the lounge to stare at something in the hallway, and the group exchange nervous glances before reluctantly rising from their seats to follow the crowd. Betty can feel a lump forming in her throat; she already knows what everyone's gawking at.

Jughead just arrived, his hands stuffed in his pockets and his eyes looking even more tired than they usually do. His beanie is lopsided, and the collar of his denim sherpa jacket is slipping off his shoulder. The student body point and whisper as he walks past them, but he's acting like he's the only one in the hallway. He casually brushes past Archie, but the redhead grabs him by the shoulders and holds him in place. "Dude, what are you doing here? I thought you-

"Weatherbee wants to interrogate me too. Do you think he'll be a dick like Sheriff Keller, or worse?" Jughead's voice is hoarse. He casually brushes Archie off before continuing his walk to the principal's office, but Betty rushes up to him and steps in his way.

"Jughead," Betty can feel everyone's eyes on them and the back of her neck begins to grow uncomfortably warm. "You know that your dad is innocent, right? He didn't kill anyone. You know he was framed! We just need to prove it."

"Who killed him, then?" His eyes narrow. "Tell me, Betty - if it wasn't my dad, who killed Jason Blossom?"


Jughead quickly steps over to Archie, surprising everyone. The redhead backs up against the lockers and nervously glances up at him as the taller boy growls, "I've been waiting my whole life for that
man to do the right thing, and I'm done. You should be too."

He swiftly steps away from Archie and shoves his way past the throng of students, disappearing into the chaos. Archie sucks in a deep breath; he looks a little shaken up. Veronica comfortingly places a hand on his bicep, while Betty and Kevin look onward with concern.

Since Jughead is too emotionally invested in the case, Betty and Archie feel like they have to step up and take this investigation on their own. Veronica and Kevin are keen to help out too, which means Betty will be unable to avoid the brunette. She knows that she has at least a few days left with her; they haven't found Cheryl yet, and the deal was to remain in contact with each other until she's found, so she should be happy to have her in her life for just a little bit longer, but every time the brunette is around her, her brain combusted and she forgets how to function. She isn't sure if it's because she knows her time with her is running out, or if it's because she's still crazy about her (Let's be real; it's most likely a mix of both), but either way, it's incredibly difficult to concentrate when she's around.

Today was exhausting, to say the least. Betty had softball practice after class (In the snow, months before the first game of the season, because she's pretty sure their coach is a sociopath), which helped take out some of her frustration, but it sapped away the last of her energy, so now all she wants to do is flop into bed and sleep for ten years. She trudges up the stairs to her house, dragging her gym bag behind her; she pushes the door open, only to find her parents waiting for her in their kitchen.

"Mom?" She approaches with caution, noting the piles of notes strewn around the kitchen table. "Dad? Uh, what's going on?"

"It's a good thing I forgot my phone at home this morning, because if I didn't come back to get it, I would've never caught your father snooping around the house for my notes." Alice defiantly crosses her arms, and Hal rolls his eyes. She appears to be back to her usual self, the complete opposite of the sad woman sitting at the foot of their staircase cradling a glass of wine.

"I know your mom keeps a stupid thumb drive of all her work around here somewhere." He mutters. "I was trying to get my hands on it."

"Wait." Betty takes the seat across from her father. "You wanted to steal our notes on Great-Grandpappy Cooper's murder?"

Hal gestures to the small mountain of files sitting by his arm. "I tried snooping around Sheriff Keller's files at first, but like I expected there was nothing of importance. Once I heard you and Jughead were conducting an investigation of your own, I knew where to look next - but then someone else apparently stole your notes before I could."

Betty thinks back to Cheryl's text, and she gulps. "Why were you trying to look for our notes?"

"Because I want to know who my grandfather's murderer is, Betty." Hal's eyes harden. "Do you realize how many years the Coopers have spent suffering because of this? How our reputation crumbled to ruins because no one wanted to take Shirley seriously? If we have any evidence that can prove Jasper Blossom murdered Charles, all of this would be over, and we can finally expose the Blossoms for the liars, thieves, and murderers that they really are."
"Is that it?" Alice counters. "You're willing to go through all of this trouble to settle a blood feud that happened decades before you were born? How petty can you be, Hal?"

"I know there's another reason why you're investigating this." He fights back. "You think this is connected to Jason's murder." Alice and Betty fall silent, which prompts Hal to continue. "Jason didn't just die because of a botched hostage takeover."

"So you don't think FP killed him either?" Betty asks as she nervously wrings her hands atop the table.

"He's lying." Hal nods. "He may have been involved in searching for Jason but he definitely didn't kill him. Money isn't the underlying motive here; there's something else, and that's what I'm trying to figure out." He reaches for Alice's notes. "So I'm seeing here that you went to the Sisters of Quiet Mercy, but what I don't understand is this autopsy report. The Sisters wouldn't have this kind of information on file, so where did you get this from?"

Betty doesn't know if she should answer him honestly, but when Alice gives her a nod of approval she hesitantly presses on. "On the day of Jason's fake memorial, Jughead and I went upstairs to Jason's room. We wanted to find more clues, but we came up empty. That's when Rose Blossom came to us and gave me a box full of stuff, and it included the real autopsy report."

"She had the real report this entire time?" Hal's eyes are wide with disbelief. "See, I told you the Blossoms were hiding something. I told you they were murderers!"

"This doesn't mean anything yet." Alice shakes her head. "Okay, so the Blossoms kept the real report a secret, but that wasn't the only thing you found in the box, right Betty?"

"No." The youngest Cooper's tone is teetering towards irritated. "There were photographs of him, Jasper, and this girl Shirley - who, by the way, is my great-grandmother, thanks for telling me. And there were these weird letters. They looked like secret love letters. One of them sort of confessed to the murder with love as a motive, but it doesn't directly address anyone. The only name on the letter is Jasper's - he was the one who wrote it."

Alice rifles through her notes, and when she finds the photocopy of the letter she hands it over to Hal. He takes a few seconds to read it, and the lower his eyes drop on the paper, the redder his face gets, and the more distorted his face becomes. When he's done, he gets up so quickly that he knocks his chair over, and starts to make his way towards the front door.

"Hal!" Alice calls after him, hastily getting up and following him out of the house. "Where do you think you're going?"

Betty scampers to keep up with her parents; Hal is halfway into the car. "I'm ending this right now. I'm taking Polly out of that goddamn house."

"What?" Betty is still trying to process everything as her mother pulls her to the car and gently pushes her inside. "What?" She asks again as Hal peels out of their driveway and skids down the street, flecks of slush and snow flying in every possible direction. Betty’s knuckles are white as she grips onto the edge of her seat, and Alice is yelling at Hal to slow down, but he isn’t listening. He floors the gas pedal and the tires screech as the station wagon nearly tips over while turning a corner.

"Hal, what the hell are you doing?" Alice has one palm pressed against the ceiling of the car and another holding onto the door handle. "You’re going to get us all killed!"

The car comes to an abrupt halt in front of the Blossom’s place, and Betty would’ve been thrown out
of the windshield if she didn’t have her seatbelt on. Hal storms out of the car, slamming the door so hard the window quakes, and kicks the iron gates to ‘Thornhill wide open. His wife and daughter frantically follow behind, exchanging incredulous looks before stopping by the front steps. Hal is beating his fist against the tall wooden doors, demanding that someone open up.

“Clifford!” The skin on his knuckles is starting to redden as he continuously pounds on the door. “Penelope! I know you’re in there - open this door right now!”

Just as Hal’s fist descends upon the aged wood for the billionth time, the door swings open, and Clifford is standing there in a red silk robe. “Hal Cooper?” He blinks. “What the hell is going on here?”

Betty takes one look at Clifford’s face and she suddenly feels weeks’ worth of rage boiling beneath her skin. She thinks back to all of the anxiety over not knowing where Polly and Jason are, the countless late nights she and Jughead spent poring over pages of notes, Cheryl’s anguished expression when she told her that her father is back in Riverdale - her hands curl into fists, and they’re clenched so tightly they begin to shake.

“Oh, sorry to disrupt the witching hour at Thornhill.” Hal scoffs, shouldering Clifford as he forces his way inside. Betty and Alice wordlessly follow behind him; Polly is at the top of the grand staircase dressed in her pyjamas, with Penelope not too far behind her. “Polly, honey, come down. You’re coming home with us.”

“What?” Polly mouths, her eyes dropping to Betty. The youngest Cooper helplessly shrugs her shoulders.

“Polly,” Alice makes her way to the stairs and goes up a couple of steps. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Polly answers slowly. “Why?”

“I thought you were going to the homecoming dance.” Alice frowns. “Why didn’t we see you there?”

“I…” Polly furrows her brow, as if trying to recall a memory. “I was supposed to go, wasn’t I? I remember getting ready…” Her face screws up in concentration. “But the next thing I knew, I woke up and it was morning and-”

“What the hell did you do to my daughter?” Hal takes a few steps towards Clifford, who anxiously steps back. “Did you drug her so that she couldn’t go to the dance? Does she even know what’s been happening here lately?”

Polly looks worried now. “What do you mean, Dad? What’s going on?”

“Nothing, Polly.” Penelope gives her a small smile and reaches for her hand. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

“She doesn’t know about FP’s arrest?” Alice raises an eyebrow. “Or what happened to Jason?”

“Jason?” Polly’s eyes are wide. “Is he here? Where is he? Can I speak to him?”

Penelope choked out a sob and clamps a hand to her mouth. Clifford curses under his breath and glares at the floor. Polly rushes down the stairs as fast as an extremely pregnant girl can, grabbing Clifford by the sleeve and tugging hard. “Where is Jason? Do you know where he is?”

The foyer falls silent. No one is looking at each other. Polly is darting back and forth between her
parents, her sister, and Clifford. “Why isn’t anyone telling me where he is? Where is Jason? Someone here knows, and someone is going to tell me!”

“He’s dead, child.” Everyone’s heads snap up to the top of the stairs, where Penelope is leaning against the banister. Her hand moved from her mouth to her forehead, and her eyes are clamped shut. Tears are squeezing out, trickling down her sharp cheekbones. “They found him at the bottom of Sweetwater River. Forsythe Pendleton Jones Junior confessed to the crime.”

“It’s true.” Clifford pipes up. “I was there soon after they arrested him. I looked my son’s killer in the eye, Polly.” He looks rather smug with himself, which only makes Betty and Hal angrier. “It’s unfortunate - I hoped I’d have both of you back in Riverdale alive and safe, but I’m afraid we can’t always get what we want.” He’s awfully calm, considering how his son was found frozen with a hole in his head less than 24 hours ago.

“Jason’s…” Polly looks like she’s about to faint. “Dead?” She stumbles backward, and Alice and Betty rush to take her by the arms. “No, no. He can’t be.” She laughs bitterly as tears streak down her face. “That’s impossible. He said he was going to find me. He said everything was going to be okay.”

“Pol…” Betty can feel her throat closing up with her own tears. She stretches an arm across her sister’s shoulders, and she sucks in a shaky breath when Polly presses herself against her and sobs openly into her jacket. She tries her best to be strong, but her knees feel like they’re dissolving and she leans against the banister of the staircase so she can support both her and Polly’s weight. “I’m so sorry.”

“Now, why are you people marching up to my doorstep and harassing my family on a weeknight?” Clifford crosses his arms, suspiciously and abruptly changing the subject.

Betty was so caught up in the heat of the moment that she forgot that she has no idea why she’s here in the first place, but apparently Alice does now. “For one thing, FP’s confession has a few gaping holes in it. We have every right to believe he’s being used by someone with a crazy motive.”

Clifford rolls his eyes. “And what exactly does this have to do with me and my wife? We barely had enough time to grieve!”

“FP doesn’t have a reason to kill Jason.” Betty glares at him. “There’s no personal gain in killing him, so he’s obviously being coerced into ‘fessing up for someone else. The only person in this town who would have a reason for murdering Jason Blossom is you!”

Penelope’s hand drops to her chest. “How dare you! You think we killed our son, our own flesh and blood? What could we possibly gain from doing such a thing?”

“You were disgusted that Jason and Polly were dating,” Hal reaches into his pocket and pulls out a crumpled piece of paper. “Because they reminded you of what could have been.”

Clifford snatches the paper from Hal’s hand and quickly skims through it. His face gradually gets paler as he reads through the photocopied letter, and when he finishes his eyes slowly rise to meet Hal’s. “Where did you get this?” His voice is barely audible.

“What is that?” Penelope makes her way down the stairs and peeks over her husband’s shoulder to read the note, and she gasps. “That’s Great-Grandfather Blossom’s writing.” She begins to read it out loud - the exact same excerpt Cheryl read a lifetime ago. “I can only ask that the Lord Almighty find it in Himself to forgive me for the heinous crime I am about to commit, only because I am
committing it for the noblest of causes, which is love.” She blinks slowly, as if she’s having trouble deciphering what she just read.

“Jasper Blossom loved Shirley Merriweather, but she chose Charles Cooper instead.” Hal crosses his arms. “So he killed my grandfather in cold blood and staged it as an accident so he can get away with it. He probably thought killing him would get Shirley to fall for him instead, but Shirley never loved him that way, did she?” His stare hardens. “Yet, in the end, your family still got the upper hand. You kept the farm, you kept the fame and fortune that came with it - while Shirley died never knowing what really happened to her husband. While Jasper Blossom thrived in the maple syrup business my grandmother was ridiculed and ostracized!”

“And Jason knew.” Alice’s eyes widen as she finally begins to fit the pieces together. “He knew about the murder, which is why he ran away. That’s why you recruited the Serpents to chase after him. You were afraid he was going to come out with the truth, so you silenced him before he could say anything. You were willing to murder your own son for the sake of your reputation.”

“And the Lodges.” Betty adds. “The Lodges also knew about the murder, but you got them to keep their mouths shut by agreeing to pay them. I bet Jason knew about that too, and it’s another reason why you wanted him dead.”

Clifford surprises everyone by throwing his head back and letting out a bellowing roar of a laugh that echoes throughout Thornhill’s ancient hallways. Even Penelope looks a little disturbed. “So that’s what you came up with? You think Jason died because of a silly love affair that happened between our ancestors?” He snorts. “If you’re going to make such a wild accusation, at least get the facts right.”

Betty, who’s still cradling her grieving sister, knits her eyebrows together in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

Clifford shakes his head and takes his wife by the elbow. The pair make their way back towards the stairs, but as they pass Polly Clifford pauses briefly to place a hand on her shoulder. “I am sorry for your loss.”

“What the hell?” Hal calls after them as they make their way up the stairs. “Is that it? You’re not even going to elaborate?” But Clifford ignores him, and they disappear into the west wing of the house. Hal grits his teeth and begins to follow the Blossoms up the stairs, but Polly weakly calls out to him, and he glances over his shoulder to address her.

“No more.” She pleads tearfully. “Dad, please. No more. Can we go home now?”

Hal’s eyes shift over to Alice, and the both of them warily glance over to Betty, as if they expect her to have the answer. She shakes her head and shrugs, wordlessly telling them she doesn’t know where to go from here, and her parents respond by making their way over and throwing their arms around both of their children. Polly begins to cry louder and harder as she’s guided out of Thornhill, and her shoulders continue to shake violently with sobs as Hal starts the engine and drives the whole family back to the house.

Alice allows Hal to stay the night, but he’s confined to sleeping on the living room couch. Betty doesn’t want to leave her sister alone, so she takes her to her room and she nestles against her in her bed with her arms wrapped around her swollen belly. She spends the entire night listening to her cry, and by the time morning comes her pillows are soaked with both of their tears.

Betty slowly rises to a sitting position, careful not to wake her sister, who somehow ended up falling asleep at some point in the night despite all of the crying. Bleary-eyed, she stumbles over to her
closet to find fresh clothes to wear. She takes a quick cold shower to wake herself up, and when she’s back in her room towelling her hair her phone buzzes with a text from Jughead.

*Blue and Gold. ASAP.*

Her eyes widen as they dart over to Archie’s window. It’s dark, so she’s not even sure if Jughead’s there, but her instinct is telling her to get to school as quickly as possible. She checks on Polly one last time before donning her varsity jacket and quietly exiting the house.

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It’s barely eight in the morning when Betty arrives at the Blue and Gold. Jughead, Veronica, and Archie are waiting for her by her desk. “What is it?”

“My mom talked to FP to see if she could help him out, legally speaking.” Archie explains. “He’s sticking to his story but she noticed that out of all the people he could’ve used for his one phone call, it ended up being Joaquin. You’d think he’d call Jughead.”

Betty raises an eyebrow. “Joaquin, as in Kevin’s Joaquin?”

“He’s the only Joaquin I know of.” Jughead crosses his arms and leans against the front of Betty’s desk. “My dad’s been lying to me his whole life but he’s never been any good at it. I saw it in his eyes when I went with Mrs. Andrews to the station again last night. He definitely didn’t do it.”

“But why lie?” Betty shakes her head. “Who is he protecting?”

“That’s where Joaquin comes in.” Veronica pipes up. “We already told Kevin, who’s going to arrange a meeting with him today after school. We’re going to get him to talk whether he likes it or not.”

Betty suddenly feels uneasy. “Look, if the Serpents really are involved in this, we could be getting ourselves into real trouble. We’re dealing with a gang of thugs, guys.”

“They’re not all thugs.” Jughead protests. “My dad’s a little rough around the edges but he always has a reason for doing things, no matter how shady they are. The Serpents are fiercely protective of their own so it’s possible another Serpent is responsible for Jason’s murder.”

“Which means that my dad is still a possible culprit.” Veronica frowns. “He would never do the dirty work on his own; he’d definitely hire someone to do it for him - and for all we know, he could be ordering the Serpents to hold Cheryl hostage.”

“Speaking of the Blossoms…” Betty sighs before barrelling into her explanation of what happened last night at Thornhill. By the time she’s done, her friends’ eyes are bulging out of their skulls.

“I have a feeling Clifford may have been the one who broke into FP’s trailer after Cheryl.” Betty frowns. “When my mom asked Polly why she wasn’t at homecoming, she wasn’t able to give her an answer. She passed out at some point during the night and didn’t wake until next day. No one told her about the arrest or Jason’s death.”

“The timing’s really convenient.” Jughead agrees. “Out of all the nights for her to suddenly forget about what she was doing, it had to be the most eventful one. She was definitely subdued for a reason.” He begins to pace back while thoughtfully rubbing his chin. “Okay, so here’s what I think is
going on: Once upon a time, Charles Cooper, Jasper Blossom, and Shirley Merriweather got swept up in an affair that ended in tragedy. The Lodges find out about what really happened and they make a deal with the Blossoms to keep silent so long as they pay them every month. Years later, Jason discovers the truth behind his family’s business and its ties with Charles Cooper’s murder. This ultimately leads to his death in one way or another."

“But is a love affair between Charles, Jasper, and Shirley worth getting killed over?” Veronica wonders. “Yeah, sure, the Coopers got screwed over in the end and it changed them forever, but it still doesn’t add up. Affairs happen all the time; there has to be another reason why the Blossoms are so adamant on protecting their reputation. What if Jason found out more than one secret about his family? What if there’s more to Charles’ murder than just a simple love triangle?”

“Despite what Sheriff Keller thinks, the investigation is clearly still very wide open, but we won’t find out the truth until later.” Archie frowns and checks his phone for the time. “We’ll regroup at my house after school and see what Kevin has to say.”

Archie leaves to attend his morning football practice, and Jughead was given the rest of the week off so he heads back to the trailer to look through some more notes. This leaves Betty and Veronica awkwardly standing next to each other in the Blue and Gold.

“How’s your sister holding up?” Veronica’s voice is slow, cautious. “I can’t even begin to imagine what she’s going through right now.”

“Cried the whole night.” Betty shrugs as she moves to sit at her desk. She pretends to go through a few folders in an attempt to distract herself. “But she was sleeping when I left her this morning, so I’m hoping she can get the chance to rest for a little while.”

There’s a long pause. Veronica shifts over so that she’s sitting on the edge of the desk. “I’m sorry, Betty.” Her hand begins to move from her lap towards the blonde, but she stops halfway and draws back.

Betty catches her movements out of the corner of her eye and she swallows hard, trying not to dwell on it. "Can I ask you a question?"

"What is it?"

"Why were you so bent on protecting FP?" Betty wills herself to glance up at her, but all she can see is Veronica’s back. "You were right in the end, but I just want to know where you got this sudden soft spot for the Joneses."

“Jughead and I finally sat down and had a decent conversation.” The shorter girl crosses her arms. "He's the only one around here who knows what it's like to have a parent who constantly lets you down all the time, who promises things but never follows through. The only difference between he and I is that he knew his dad was lying to him his entire life, whereas I only found out recently." She lets out a shaky sigh. "I know what it's like to be the black sheep, to be the one family that's constantly gawked at for all the wrong reasons."

Betty wants to mention that she relate with her mom, but that's probably not a good idea. FP constantly jeopardized his family's safety with his drinking and association with the Serpents. Hiram scammed a bunch of people out of thousands of dollars and left his wife and child with nothing to their name. Alice may have been cruel to Betty and her sister her entire life, but not once did she ever leave them. She never wanted Polly to have an abortion, and she never wanted Polly to run away. She did a lot of terrible things that'll probably take a lifetime of therapy to work through, but at the end of the day Alice was still there - and their family was never outcasted like the Lodges or the
Joneses. They were always the benchmark, the one family other families need to model themselves after. Betty’s situation is different from Veronica’s and Jughead’s once she really squints at it.

“I don’t know if this is any good now, but I just want you to know that I’m sorry.” The blonde begins to fidget with the sleeve of her flannel shirt. “For what happened at the party, for lying to you, for everything. From the moment we met you’ve been nothing but good to me, and I’m never going to forgive myself for what I did to you. You make me want to be a better version of myself, and for awhile I thought I was doing just that, but of course I screw it up, just like with everything else in my life. I know I don’t express it often but you really do make my days a little brighter, and at the risk of sounding overdramatic you changed my life for the better. Out of all the crappy things that have been happening to me lately, you were the one good thing, and I took that for granted.” She helplessly shrugs her shoulders. “I just… I just wanted you to know that.”

The silence is thick, looming over their heads like an invisible fog. Veronica’s sitting on the opposite end of Betty’s desk with her back turned to her so the blonde can’t see her expression, but judging by her body language - her arms are still crossed and her shoulders are rather tense - she isn’t having any of it. She sighs and rises to her feet, adjusting her Saint Laurent bag. “I’ll see you in class, Betty.” Her Louboutins punctuate her steps with sharp ticks as she makes her way out of the room, and she softly closes the door behind her.

Betty responds to this by groaning and leaning forward to rest her head on top of her arms.

“No one uses their one phone call to tell someone to lay low.” Veronica raises an eyebrow; it’s after school and everyone’s huddled around Joaquin in Archie’s garage. Kevin brought him here under the impression that Archie was planning on starting a band and was looking for a drummer, but things took a sharp downhill turn once the Serpent stepped inside and immediately deduced that this wasn’t an audition session.

“Joaquin.” Kevin takes a step towards him. “Do you know something about Jason’s murder? I’m not talking to you as your boyfriend; I’m talking to you as the sheriff’s son.”

Joaquin scoffs, leaning back in his seat and running a hand through his slick dark hair. “Any of you guys aware that the Southside Serpents have a code? We don’t snitch on our own.”

“Screw your stupid code.” Jughead narrows her eyes. “My dad’s life might be at stake here. Isn’t he your leader? Don’t you care about what happens to him?”

The pale blue of Joaquin’s eyes appear to darken a bit; he leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs and clasping his hands together under his chin. “I don’t know if your dad did it, Jughead, but I know he was involved somehow.”

“What happened?” Betty asks.

Joaquin is silent for a beat. He glances up, staring directly into Betty’s face; his eyes are the frothiest shade of blue she’s ever seen, and it chills her to the bone. “A couple weeks back, FP called me in the middle of the night and asked if I was free to help him out with a cleanup job at the White Wyrm. I knew what he meant by cleanup, and I thought I was prepared for it…” He pauses again, and his expression gradually shifts into something a lot less comfortable.

“Cleanup job?” Kevin’s voice is cracking slightly, and his eyes begin to shimmer with the tears he’s
holding back. Betty reaches towards him and wraps her fingers around his bicep, partially for support and partially so her hands are kept from hurting themselves. “What job?”

“The White Wyrm’s basement is off limits to everyone, so when FP told me to meet him down there I knew this was something really serious.” Joaquin clears his throat, and Betty swears he’s gotten paler. “He was in the storage closet, grabbing a bunch of stuff and telling me to load his truck with them. There were mops, jugs of bleach, rolls of plastic tarp, zip ties, chains…” He swallows hard. “And a cinderblock. He was in a hurry; he kept telling me to pick up the pace, that we have to do this as quickly as possible.”

“Didn’t my dad say that he kept Jason in the basement?” Jughead seems unperturbed by all of this.

Joaquin shakes his head. “When Mustang - he’s the guy you got in a fight with, Archie - and the guys found him in Montreal, they kept him here, alive, for a little while - maybe a day or two, but then they moved him someplace else. I didn’t know what that place was until that night FP called me.”

“So he wasn’t killed here?” Betty blinks, and her hands tighten around Kevin’s arm.

“Not that I know of.” Joaquin shrugs. “Anyways, FP takes us out to the countryside, towards the maple tree farm.”

“Blossom Maple Farms?” Archie gapes, and Joaquin nods.

“They have an old barn where they stash all the barrels of syrup. FP takes me there, and…” He feebly gestures with his hands before swallowing hard. “There was blood everywhere, and Jason was just…lying in the middle of all of it. I don’t know if FP was the one who shot him - I was too afraid to ask. I cleaned up the place and got rid of any evidence while FP wrapped him in plastic and threw him on the truck bed. We drove out for another few hours, to a really deep part of the forest.” He presses his hands against his mouth for a moment, breathing in deep and shaking his head. “FP told me to chain up his ankles. It was heavy as hell.”

Kevin backs up, appalled. “You’re a criminal. You tampered with evidence and you were an accessory to a murder.”

“You said that Jason was moved from the White Wyrm to the barn.” Jughead presses further. “Was that part of the plan?”

“I don’t think so.” Joaquin shakes his head. “I remember hearing Mustang and your dad arguing about it awhile back, saying something about some rich guy. FP wanted to keep Jason at the Wyrm, but Mustang ended up going behind his back and he shipped him over to the Blossoms.”

Veronica’s eyes widen. “Is it possible that my father was the one who hired the Serpents to search for Jason in the first place?”

“It could be. I’m not really sure.” Joaquin shrugs. “The only people who’d know are FP and Mustang.”

“Where can we find this Mustang guy?” Veronica immediately asks, and Betty raises her head to gawk at her.

“No.” Joaquin finally leans back in his seat. “Trust me, you do not want to find him. He’s been exiled for going against FP and he’s not in the mood to talk.”

Veronica lets out a humourless laugh. “Uh, yes I do, and you’re gonna take us or-”
Kevin steps in. “Or I’m gonna tell my dad about your little cleanup job.”

Before Betty knows it, she’s squashed in the back of Archie’s truck with Veronica and Kevin. Jughead is riding shotgun while Joaquin leads the way on his bike. He takes them to a shady, run-down motel on the edge of town with a broken down car in the parking lot. Crushed beer cans line the hallways, and Kevin almost trips on a discarded shirt that’s stained with something dark as the group ascends the stairs.

“He should be in here.” Joaquin stops at a door near the end of the hallway on the second floor. Betty can smell something foul, but she can’t exactly figure out what it is. “Mustang?” He knocks on the door twice before jiggling the doorknob, and his eyes widen when he discovers it’s unlocked. “You in here?”

The door opens with a slow groaning of the hinges, and Betty’s heart leaps to her throat when she feels Veronica’s hand reaching for her wrist. Once the door opens, the smell becomes unbearable; Jughead and Archie gag before pulling up their shirts to their noses, Kevin presses his sleeve to his face, Betty’s eyes water and she begins to cough, and Veronica presses her nose into the blonde’s back.

“Ugh, God.” Joaquin plucks a bandana out of his pocket and ties it around the bottom half of his face as he steps over a pile of empty liquor bottles. The bedsheets have been ripped away, piled up in the corner of the room. There’s liquor and drug paraphernalia littered everywhere, covering every nightstand, table, and shelf. The door to the bathroom is ajar; Betty can see a toilet with its lid closed. There’s a black duffel bag sitting on top of it.

“Wait…” Veronica blinks through the stale stench. "Look.” She pulls herself away from Betty and begins to approach the bathroom, but the blonde quickly catches up to her.

“Hold on, V.” She warns. “It could be dangerous.”

It doesn’t look like Veronica heard, because she’s making a beeline for the bag. Betty barely reaches the doorway when Veronica picks it up; she eyes the shock on the brunette’s face, and she frowns. “What?” The rancid smell has gotten even stronger now that she’s by the bathroom, and she has to pull her collar up to her nose in order to bear with it.

The shorter girl plugs her nose as she raises the bag; there’s a gold tag on the front that has the initials HL engraved on it. Betty’s jaw drops. “HL - Hiram Lodge.”

Jughead peers over her shoulder to take a closer look, but he locks eyes with something else; he yelps and stumbles backward, startling both girls. “Holy shit!”

Veronica tears her eyes away from the bag and takes a glance at the bathtub; her eyes widen again and she screams, bumping into Betty out of panic. The blonde catches her, and she peers over the top of her head to see Mustang lying in the bathtub, his lifeless eyes staring up at the ceiling and his arms mottled with infected needle pricks. There’s a rubber hose wrapped around his left arm as a tourniquet, and his right hand is listlessly holding onto a dirty syringe. His skin is grey and his eyes are milky; he’s been lying here for awhile.

“Oh my God.” Archie raises a hand to his mouth as Joaquin heads into the bathroom to investigate. Kevin looks like he’s going to throw up.

“I can’t be here.” Joaquin shakes his head and pulls his bandana down, stepping backward out of the bathroom and nearly tripping over an empty bottle of whisky. “None of us can be here. Out - now.”
“But we have to tell someone.” Kevin implores as they scamper out of the room. “We need to call my dad.”

“Call him when we’re outta here.” Joaquin hops down the stairs two steps at a time and jogs over to his bike. He eyes Veronica, who’s still holding her father’s bag. “What the hell are you doing with that?”

“This is proof you were hired by the Serpents to look for Jason.” She glares at him as she pulls the zipper on the bag. Everyone leans in to see what’s inside, and their eyes collectively widen when Veronica pulls out a Riverdale varsity jacket. The breast and part of the sleeves are splattered with a dark brownish stain. “No way.” She nearly drops it out of shock.

“Veronica.” Archie’s eyes are glued to the jacket; he gingerly takes it from her, careful not to touch the stained parts, and traces his finger over Jason’s embroidered name on the breast. “You need to put that back. We can’t tamper with evidence.”

“Why does Mustang have Jason’s jacket?” Jughead shakes his head. “He must’ve been the one who shot him.”

“I don’t care what you guys do with it.” Joaquin is hastily strapping on his helmet. “Just leave me out of everything.” He throws one leg over his bike and fumbles with the ignition.

“Wait, Joaquin-” Kevin scrambles over to him. “Where are you going?”

“Away.” He yells over the roar of the engine; he locks eyes with Kevin for a moment. “Far away from here. You guys should scramble too. Go!”

“Hey!” Kevin calls out to him as the bike veers out of the parking lot. He chases him all the way to the curb. “Joaquin!”

Joaquin stops the bike momentarily and steps off; Betty’s too far away to hear them, but she knows they’re saying their goodbyes. They talk for a few minutes, and then Kevin grabs Joaquin’s head and pulls him in for a kiss. When they pull apart, Joaquin pats him on the shoulder and utters his last words before hopping back on his bike and cruising away. He’s heading in the opposite direction, away from Riverdale.

Betty feels terrible for thinking this, but she wishes Veronica would do something similar. Maybe she can move back to New York and they’ll go back to the way they were, where neither of them knows of the other’s existence and they continue to live their lives in blissful ignorance. If she can’t speak to Veronica anymore, if she isn’t allowed to have Veronica in her life, then she’d rather have her physically out of it. It would make things a lot easier.

“Kevin.” Betty jogs up to him and places a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

He stands there in stunned silence for a few moments, but he eventually shakes his head. “I didn’t really know him, did I?” He laughs a little sadly to himself. “Is it weird to say that even after all of this - which I’m still trying to process, by the way - I’m gonna miss him?”

“No.” Betty frowns. “Of course not. You still cared for him, and he obviously cared for you. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Guys.” Jughead calls them back; when they’re back with the rest of the group he reaches into the duffel bag and pulls out a couple of very thick stacks of cash. Some of the bills have flecks of the same dark brown stain as Jason’s jacket.
“My dad…” Veronica’s eyes are glazed over with tears. “Oh my God.” She drops the bag on the pavement and steps back, holding her hands to her mouth as she tries to digest everything. Archie pulls out his phone to call the police while Jughead continues to investigate the bag. Kevin’s head is turned back towards the road, almost like he’s expecting Joaquin to come back. Betty is standing awkwardly amidst all of this, trying to figure out where she fits in.

Tom Keller arrives minutes later with two other squad cars. An investigative unit heads inside the room while Tom hangs back with the kids to ask them a few questions. He calls Hermione, Fred, and Alice, and they surprisingly all come together in Alice’s station wagon.

“Elizabeth Ann Cooper,” Alice marches menacingly across the parking lot with her arms swinging by her sides. “You better have an explanation for this and you better give it now.” Betty groans in response.

“Your middle name is Ann?” Jughead blinks.

“Mija,” Hermione is aghast. “How many times have I told you to stop looking into this?”

“Mom.” Veronica glares at her, pointing to the bag that’s now sitting on top of the trunk of Tom’s car. “That’s blatant evidence Daddy was involved in Jason’s murder.”

“We can’t jump to conclusions just yet.” Tom tips his hat. “Mustang likely died of an overdose; we’ll have to wait for the toxicology results but as of right now that’s what it looks like. As for Hiram Lodge, it’s tough to say, since we know for sure he didn’t do it directly. He’s still sitting in a jail cell in Yonkers for fraud.”

“But Jason’s blood soaked jacket was in a bag with his initials on it, along with a mountain of cash.” Alice counters. “Isn’t that proof enough? He obviously hired Mustang to kidnap and kill Jason for him.”

“Hiram hired the Serpents for plenty of things. Murder may be one of them but we can’t be so sure yet.” Tom gestures to the bag. “How did you know Mustang was here?”

The kids awkwardly exchange nervous glances with each other for a moment before Jughead speaks up. “I know the Serpents have safe houses scattered around the Southside. We had plans to investigate a few and we got lucky on the first try.”

“You said Mustang was exiled from the Serpents.” Tom raises an eyebrow. “If he was exiled for going against your father, why would your father cover for him?”

No one can come up with a good enough answer for that. Tom adjusts his belt and sighs. “Go home, and stay home. No more meddling, alright?” He gestures to Archie, who’s still holding onto Jason’s jacket. “C’mon, Red. Hand it over.”

“Go on, son.” Fred places a hand on Archie’s shoulder, and the redhead nods before reluctantly stretching out his arm towards Tom. As he raises his hand holding the jacket, something small and shiny tumbles out of one of the pockets, clattering to the floor.

Jughead immediately bends over to pick it up. “It’s a USB key.”

It’s almost like someone picked up a remote and pressed Mute. It’s so quiet that Betty doesn’t even hear a breeze. Her eyes are stuck on that tiny little piece of plastic Jughead’s holding in between his fingers. Her mind races as it runs over the numerous possibilities; what if it has the truth to Charles’ murder? What if it has the real reason for the perpetuity fee? What if it holds the identity to Jason’s killer and Cheryl’s kidnapper?
Tom breaks the silence by outstretching his arm and opening his hand. “That’s evidence, Jughead. We’ll need to—”

“If that thumb drive has proof that FP killed Jason, don’t you think Jughead has the right to see it for himself?” Alice crosses her arms.

“I’m not gonna make Jughead go through it alone.” Archie moves to stand beside his friend.

“Me neither.” Betty joins him, and Veronica and Kevin move in afterward. Veronica’s arm brushes against the blonde’s, and she knows it’s unintentional but she can feel goosebumps rippling up her bicep anyway, even under her jacket.

Tom, clearly frustrated, places his hands on his hips and sighs. “You’re doing this at the station under supervision. Take it or leave it.”

“Should I get some popcorn?” Jughead snickers as Tom ushers them into an empty interrogation room. “What about Milk Duds?”

“C’mon, dude.” Archie takes a seat as another officer places a laptop on the table. Once everything is set up Tom and the officer move to the doorway so that they can keep an eye on the kids and the computer.

“I have a feeling we’d just toss it back up anyway.” Kevin gulps as Jughead plugs the thumb drive into the computer. Jughead’s sitting directly in front of the screen with Archie on his left. Kevin’s too nervous to sit, so he’s standing behind them. Veronica’s sitting to Jughead’s right, and Betty’s standing directly behind her. Just as Jughead leans forward, Veronica turns her head so she can find Betty’s hand. She reaches for it and places it on her shoulder; Betty feels a lump in her throat, but she isn’t sure if it’s there because of her, or if it’s because she’s dreading what she’s just about to see.

The computer recognizes the thumb drive and a window pops up on the screen, showing its contents. There are two video files in the folder, labeled ONE and TWO. Jughead moves the cursor over the ONE file, but he hesitates. His hand hovers over the laptop’s trackpad, and Betty can see that it’s shaking.

Veronica moves to place her hand on his wrist, and Archie reaches over to place hand on top of hers. Kevin presses a hand on his shoulder, and Betty uses her free hand to gently grasp his other shoulder. She hears Jughead inhale slowly, deeply, and nods before clicking on the file.

The video opens with a shot of Jason tied to a chair, gagged with a white scarf. His face is puffy and purple with bruises. He’s wearing his varsity jacket, with no visible traces of stains. There’s a single light shining high above his head somewhere; the video quality is poor so it’s hard to make out any details of his surroundings. It looks like the video was recorded on an old cell phone.

“You think you’re so slick.” A male voice, grainy and rough, can be heard but their face can’t be seen. “You really thought you could get away, eh?”

Jason garbles something through his gag, and the voice laughs. A hand reaches out from somewhere behind the camera to tauntingly shove the boy’s shoulder. “Well, hate to break it to ya but this is gonna bite you in the ass. Hard.”
There’s the sound of shoes clopping against wooden floors. Someone steps into frame, completely blocking Jason from view, but their back is turned to the camera and the light shining in front of them casts an indecipherable silhouette over them. “You didn’t disappoint, Mustang.”

Everyone gasps when they hear the second mystery person speak; they know that voice. “I never do,” Betty can hear the smirk in Mustang’s tone. “He’s all yours now.”

“Does Hiram know?” Clifford’s back is still turned towards the camera. At the mention of her father’s name, Veronica twitches slightly. Betty squeezes her shoulder.

“Not yet.” Mustang pauses to spit on the floor. “FP ain’t gonna let me get away with it, that’s for sure.” There’s the sound of a hand rustling through something, but it never comes into frame. “Hiram ain’t gonna be happy.”

“You’ll be far from Riverdale by the time he finds out. You kept your word, and for that I’ll ensure you get out of this safely.” Clifford lets out a sinister chuckle and reaches into his pocket. Mustang finally moves so that he has a clear view of Clifford and Jason; the light briefly catches on something in the distance and even though the video’s is incredibly pixelated Betty immediately recognizes the rough outline of barrels stacked up against each other. Her heart begins to pound when she realizes they’re inside the barn. It’s exactly like how Joaquin said.

“Now, what to do with you?” He pulls his hand out of his pocket; it’s a little hard to see, but he’s holding Rose’s engagement ring. “I should’ve known you wouldn’t have the stomach to handle the truth. Cheryl makes a much better heir than you.” He makes a fist, sticks the ring in between the knuckles of his index and middle fingers, and in one swift movement he decks his own son square in the face. Veronica gasps and her hand automatically rises to grasp Betty’s, which is still sitting on her shoulder.

The ring slices into Jason’s cheek; fresh blood drips off his jawline and onto the breast of his varsity jacket. “What made you think you were getting off scot-free?” Clifford crouches so that his nose is inches away from his son’s. “Did you really think I was going to let you tarnish our reputation, to let you ruin our family legacy?” He laughs in Jason’s face before winding his arm back to punch him again. The ring makes a smaller cut right under his right eye. “And then you get yourself involved with that Cooper girl. How many times have I told you to stay away from them?” Another punch; this time, the ring scrapes some skin off the bridge of Jason’s nose. “They’re tainted blood. They ruin everything they touch.”

Betty lifts her hand from Veronica’s shoulder.

“Charles Cooper infected your great-grandfather. He passed his family’s curse onto ours, and my grandfather, father, and I have been working tirelessly to remove it from our family tree. We just about had everything clean and pure again, but you had the audacity to curse us a second time!” Clifford takes a giant step back. He pockets the ring, and when he pulls out his hand the group gasps; he’s holding a revolver. There’s a click as he cocks the hammer; Jason’s tears are flowing freely down his cheeks and his eyes are wide and pleading.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God…” Kevin’s muttering to himself over and over again. Archie swallows hard, his Adam’s apple visibly bobbing up and down. Jughead has his hands folded and pressed against his mouth. Veronica’s already crying. Betty can feel herself melting away, just like the night at Ethel’s pool house, just like the night Alice confronted Grundy.

“You made me do this, son.” There’s a clear sign of conflict on Clifford’s expression, but the barrel of his gun is pointed straight toward’s Jason’s forehead. “You left me no choice. There is no other way. I’m sorry.”
The flash comes first, and then it’s followed by an ear-splitting bang. Jason’s is thrown backwards by the impact; the chair tumbles to the floor and his lifeless body goes down with it. Mustang points the camera downward and there’s a clear shot of Jason’s body, still strapped to the chair, blood quickly pooling around him. His eyes are still open, but they’re staring at nothing.

The group, including Tom and the officer, jerk in surprise. Betty can feel a lone tear streaking down her cheek but other than that there’s a strange hollowness echoing inside of her. She wants to feel sad. She wants to feel scared - but all she can think about is the Cooper Curse and how she’s sure it exists.

They’re tainted blood. They ruin everything they touch.

Betty’s fingers curl inward, but she can’t feel the wounds in her palms. She can’t feel much of anything, really.

“Tell FP.” Clifford’s off camera now.

“What?” Mustang is in disbelief. “What about our deal? If he finds out I took him from the Wyrm he’ll-”

“Now.” Clifford demands. The camera focuses on Jason’s body for a few more seconds before it cuts to black.

A stunned silence sweeps over the room. There is no conceivable way to recover from what they just saw. Veronica reaches upward for Betty, and when she realizes she isn’t there anymore she glances behind her to see the blonde stepping backwards, not stopping until she’s pressed up against the wall. Her palms are oozing red, her chest is heaving, her eyes are shiny with tears, and her mouth is slightly agape; she’s having an episode.

“B?” Betty can vaguely make Veronica’s outline through her blurred vision. “Betty, hey.” Veronica is by her side now, but she can barely feel her hands gently framing her face. “I’m right here. Look at me.”

She blinks her tears away, and she can see the brunette glancing up at her with worry etched all over her features. Jughead, Archie, and Kevin are not too far behind, looking on with concern. “Look at me.” She repeats, and Betty forces herself to make eye contact. She knows there’s something very, very wrong, but her brain isn’t reacting the way it should.

“Veronica.” Her voice is disconnected, broken. She suddenly remembers Clifford and his disdain for her family’s curse, and she shakes herself out of the shorter girl’s grasp. “D-don’t. Don’t touch me.”

“Betty.” Archie moves towards her, but she shrinks away. “What’s the matter?”

Jughead’s staring at her hands. “She’s bleeding, Sheriff Keller. She needs medical attention.”

Tom reaches for the door. “Betty, why don’t you come with me and-”

“No.” She shakes her head, surprising everyone. She raises one bloody hand and points to the laptop. “There’s still one video left.”

“Yeah,” Veronica frowns. “But you’re in no condition to watch it.” Her large eyes somehow get even larger as she pleads with the blonde. “Please, Betty, let us help you.”

A part of her wants to run out of this building, out of this town, into the forest, and throw herself into Sweetwater River. She wants to drop to the bottom and feel the icy current fill her lungs to the brim.
She wants to watch the fading sun stream through the water as she sinks lower and lower. She hopes the river will sweep her away and rinse off the curse that’s plagued her family for generations.

“Betty.” Veronica speaks up again. “I know what you’re thinking, and it’s not true. Don’t believe what Clifford says. You are not cursed. You do not ruin everything you touch.” She takes a cautious step forward. “You’re an amazing friend, and despite what your mom made you feel about yourself over the years you are smart, talented…” Another step. “The most beautiful person I’ve ever had the fortune to meet. You are one of a kind, Betty Cooper, and I’m sure I’m not the only one in this room who feels this way.” She gestures to Archie, Kevin, and Jughead. “I know you’re hurting, but don’t think you have to go through this alone. We’re all here for you, and we want to help.” She closes the distance between them and raises her hands to Betty’s face again, tenderly brushing the tears away. Her voice lowers to a tone only Betty can hear. “I’m not going anywhere, I promise.”

The warmth of Veronica’s touch spreads to Betty’s cheeks, and she can slowly but surely feel herself coming back to life. She lets out a gasp, almost like she’s been holding in her breath this entire time, and more tears fall - but Veronica’s there to wipe them away, and Archie’s rushing out of the room with Tom to fetch a first aid kit, and Jughead is sighing out of relief, and Kevin’s shaking his head before exclaiming, “There she is!”, and she can feel the warmth inflating in her gut, filling every inch of her, and suddenly she can feel the ground beneath her feet again. She can smell the blood seeping out of her cuts. She can hear Veronica laughing shakily, relieved she actually got through to the taller girl, and she can see Archie coming back with a bottle of rubbing alcohol, a couple of cotton balls, and a roll of clean gauze. She can also hear Alice protesting somewhere in the distance, but she can’t see her, and maybe that’s a good thing.

Archie swabs her wounds, and Betty almost wants to laugh when she feels the burning pain scorching her palms. This is the first time she can actually feel her cuts getting disinfected; the last few times this happened, she was disassociating so hard she didn’t even notice her wounds were being tended to. Jughead wraps the gauze around her palms, and Kevin pats her reassuringly on the shoulder when it’s over. “That’s my girl.” Veronica smiles as she gently strokes the bandages with the tips of her fingers.

It’s kind of embarrassing that it took her all this time to realize that she isn’t alone, and that she’s loved by so many people. Betty’s cheeks flush a subtle pink, suddenly aware of all the attention she’s being given. “Um, so now that’s over, can we watch the second video now?”

Jughead can’t help but chuckle. “That’s the Betty we all know and love.”

Veronica still looks concerned. “Are you sure you’re ready?” Her grip on Betty’s injured hands are feather-light, but the blonde squeezes back as much as she can without it hurting too much.

“I am.” She smiles at everyone in the room. Jughead lets her take his seat, and everyone settles in for the next video. Betty clicks on the file; the video opens to a shot that looks almost exactly like the first one, but instead of Jason strapped to the chair, it’s Cheryl. She’s wearing a dress, which Betty presumes is the outfit she was planning to wear to homecoming.

Clifford steps into frame again, and he’s yelling at her but there’s no sound. Betty fiddles with the computer’s volume but it does nothing. Cheryl visibly shrinks in fear as Clifford continues to scream directly into her face; he temporarily goes out of frame and comes back with something cradled in his arms. The video’s shoddy quality makes it difficult to see, but from the looks of it they appear to be sheets of folded paper, or maybe envelopes. Clifford begins to berate his daughter again; he plucks a couple of sheets from the pile and chucks it at her, and Betty’s eyes widen as the paper collides against her, unfurling as they float to the floor. Clifford continues this until there isn’t any paper left, then he slaps her so hard across the face that it knocks her out. He undoes her bindings and points to
the camera, uttering something to someone Betty presumes is Mustang before stepping out of frame for the final time. The camera jerks around a bit; Mustang, or whoever’s holding it, sets it on a nearby barrel. At the corner of the screen, Betty catches a glimpse of a figure hoisting Cheryl’s body up and over their shoulder. The camera goes blurry as the figure picks it up, and there’s a brief flash of Mustang’s face before it goes black.

They all exchange anxious glances with each other for a split second before they simultaneously scramble to the door, with Tom leading the pack. Alice, Fred, and Hermione rise from their seats in the waiting room, asking what the hell is going on as they follow Tom and the kids to the parking lot. The parents file into Alice’s station wagon, the kids clamber into Fred’s truck, and Tom hops into his squad car; he leads the way, speeding through town as fast as he can. The trees and buildings blur past them as the three cars zip down the one lane country road, and when Betty sees the old barn gradually getting larger over the horizon she forces a lump down her throat.

*Please be okay, Cheryl. Please…*

They skid to a stop in front of the barn and everyone gets out, dragging their feet through the snow as they make their way towards the doors. Jughead and Archie pull the door open as Tom brandishes his pistol.

“Cheryl!” Betty whizzes past him and nearly trips over herself as she heads into the barn. She can hear Tom yelling her name behind her, but she doesn’t care; she can see the barrels lining the walls, stacked up as far as the eye can see, and she can see the chair in the middle where Cheryl sat, and she can see the yellowed pieces of paper strewn about the floor, but Cheryl isn’t there.

“She’s not here?” Kevin’s glancing around the room; he approaches a barrel by the chair, which is probably the one Mustang used as a temporary rest for the camera. He pushes the lid aside and peeks in, only to pull away immediately. “Dad, over here.”

*Oh no.* Betty prepares for the worst, but when Tom reaches into the barrel and pulls out a rectangular shaped package her brow furrows in confusion.

“What the hell is going-” Alice finally steps into the barn; her eyes shoot to the package in Tom’s hand and she gasps. “Is that…”

“Cocaine.” Tom finishes for her. He tosses the package to the floor and pulls out three more just like it from the barrel. “This barn is probably full of it.”

Veronica steps closer towards Betty, her hand instinctively searching for her forearm. Archie shakes his head and watches Jughead crouch to the floor so he can pick up the discarded leaves of paper. “What are those?” The redhead asks.

Jughead takes a moment to read through one of them, and his eyes widen. He sticks his hand out towards Betty, offering her the letter. “You’ll want to read this.” He says, his tone grave.

She can feel Veronica’s hand tighten around her arm as she takes the letter from him. She barely gets through the second sentence when she raises her head to gape at him.

“Oh my God.”

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