Gaslight

by casket4mytears

Summary

He'd left Riverdale behind 15 months ago, following his mom to Toledo. He'd left HER behind. Now, Jughead Jones is home, and he's finding that nothing—and no one—is the same in the wake of Jason Blossom's unsolved murder. The deeper he digs into the crime, the clearer the danger to Betty. But will she see the truth & find her way back to the light? Season one AU, eventual Bughead.

Notes

Welcome to Riverdale, with a few twists.

A combination of a song that intrigued me for Bughead, coupled with a theory about Mr. Jones, led to this tale. Theory: Jughead is a critical lynch-pin for the core four, even more so for the core trio of long-term friends. So, what if he had gone to Toledo with Gladys and
Jellybean? What if Riverdale's Truman Capote had not been around when Jason was found dead? How would it shift the dynamics between Betty, Archie and Veronica? How would it change the progress of the murder investigation?

The murder investigation-specifically, whodunnit-will remain true to canon. The rest? We'll see what happens.

This story is rated T primarily for swearing and a little PG-13 action. Eventual canon couples as established by end of season one. Story contains elements of domestic abuse. Please read with care.

Every chapter is named after a song, and for extra insight into the vibe of events, I recommend hunting those tracks down. Expected posting schedule is once every week or two, with the exception of this week - chapter one is coming later this week.

Disclaimer: I own nothing - consider me disclaimed.
Song: This Cold Escape - Amos The Transparent
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Prologue: This Cold Escape

"I don't feel that much these days
I've grown up tired and a little afraid...
I've gained nothing from this cold escape."
This Cold Escape - Amos The Transparent

You can't go home again, the cliché claims. There's a lot of so-called sage advice trotted out in turns of phrase, lessons learned by the men and women who came before us. Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it, they insist with a shake of a finger. That one amuses me, because we clearly haven't forgotten the Civil War, and yet, it rages on in the streets of Ferguson, St. Louis, Chicago. But that isn't the tired trope I'm currently embodying on a weathered Greyhound bus, fingers flying in the face of my laptop’s 12% battery remaining. And while the twenty-mile warning sign for Riverdale calls bullshit on the notion, there is a bitter kernel of truth to be found.

The Riverdale I called home is dead.

Its death knell sounded through Southside and Riverdale proper with the murder of Jason Blossom, beloved son of Clifford and Penelope Blossom. You may know them as the name on your maple syrup on Sunday mornings, their elegant floral logo greeting you as you drizzle your pancakes. It had seemed a tragic accident at first—certainly enough to shake sleepy Riverdale to its core—but the tearful tale told by Jason's twin sister tattered and frayed once Jason's corpse washed up on the
Sweetwater River shoreline. Bullets generally don’t leap out of the water like salmon and shoot young boys as they drown.

It has been one year and three days precisely since the Sherriff’s son stumbled onto his dead classmate. One year and three days of whispered accusations, dividing lines drawn in proverbial sand as neighbours blamed neighbours. And within his grand mausoleum, Jason waits for justice, the one thing not even Daddy’s money can buy.

And what of Cheryl Blossom, the crimson-haired Queen Bee of Riverdale High? Some whisper that a piece of her died with Jason. Others draw their coats tighter in the chill of her presence, certain she pulled the trigger. Me? I only care about who crafted the lie that fell from her painted mouth that morning. Cheryl? Her parents? Jason himself? Was her later confession of Jason’s secret plan just another pretty song from her gilded cage?

I remember Jason Blossom, from the years before Toledo twisters and twisted men with tempers and whiskey-soaked lies. He doted on Cheryl and greedily devoured the adoration of all. The Golden Boy, quintessential Riverdale. As American as apple pie.

That cliché, by the way, holds little weight. Apple pie is but one more European settler in this country. In that, you could say it really is a symbol of America. And while the people of Riverdale dabbed their breakfast delights in the pure maple of its trees and enjoyed Pop Tate’s a la mode treats, darkness came to their small town. Or rather, it crept into the light, strutted proudly in the horrified faces of not in my town disbelievers.

The Southside has always known the shadows. But it, too, was taken aback by the murder of the football star. The dream of escaping the literal wrong side of the tracks came crashing down on Riverdale’s less beloved, shattering the hungry, hand-to-mouth hopes that sustain them.

For one man, it was a wake-up call. Or so I’ve been told.

It’s eight thirty-seven on a Saturday morning, and he is alert and smiling as this sardine can reeking of body odour and clogged septic tank pulls into the bus station. Forsythe Pendleton Jones II—“FP” to many, “Serpent trash” to many more—is leaning against a pick-up truck that’s seen better days. The black leather jacket he wears is a symbol of power, but also pain. Dancing with the devil drove him to drink; the drink drove his fists through walls, and my mother, sister and I to Toledo.

The death of Jason Blossom—the loss of a son so close in age to his estranged blood—flipped a switch in ol’ FP. It could have been you, or Jellybean, he whispered three weeks ago. You never know what time you’ve got.

This, I do believe. And it’s why after fifteen months, I’ve come back to my home that isn’t my home, to a father who insists he’s a new man. Time is finite and stops for no one. These clichés fall easily from my fingertips. An editor will mar my pages someday, staining them red like Jason Blossom’s water-logged clothing. A murder of another kind.

FP waves and I return it cautiously. I could have arrived at two in the afternoon, but I needed evidence, a reason not to get back on board and return to Toledo. The old FP never rose before noon, perpetually hungover and hateful. But he’s here, waiting for me with a smile I haven’t seen in years. It means something, I’m sure. I just don’t know what.

7% battery remains. Lucky number seven? I’ll take what I can get. That’s the Southside way.

Welcome home, Jughead Jones.
One: The Suburbs

Chapter Notes

And now, we get into the story proper. Jughead is home, but has FP changed? Who will cross his path first? Our first flashback is coming...

Disclaimer: Still don't own Riverdale. I just play in this sandbox to avoid querying my novel.
Song: The Suburbs - Arcade Fire

One: The Suburbs

"In a suburban war
Your part of town against mine
I saw you standing on the opposite shore

But by the time the first bombs fell
We were already bored
We were already, already bored

Sometimes I can't believe it
I'm movin' past the feeling..."
The Suburbs - Arcade Fire

Jughead tossed his backpack over his left shoulder and made his way down the aisle of the bus. His steps were measured, heavy with the reality he'd been avoiding throughout the night.

He was back in Riverdale. His hometown.

He'd told himself that it didn't matter if his father had finally gotten his shit together, that the allure of becoming the next Capote was worth the trip. Aside from his frenetic sister Jellybean, the scenery would be no worse: a drunken asshole and broken glass glittering with broken promises. His mother had a type, no question. But stepping out of the stale, recycled air of the Greyhound into the small town sunshine of Riverdale, he knew it had always mattered. His chest ached at the sight of FP: the fidgety hands; that beaming smile from the ethers of childhood memory; and the warm chocolate eyes of sobriety. Fuck, he barely remembered this FP.

"Jughead," FP murmured happily. "Welcome home."

Maybe it was an illusion. Maybe tomorrow, it would all go to hell. Jughead fell into his father's outstretched arms, all the same.

"Hi, Dad." No stink of whiskey or pot, Jughead noted in his embrace.

FP pulled back, jerking his head towards the bus. "You got more bags, I hope?"

"Uh, yeah. Just one. I got it."
Jughead rounded the bus, nodding to the driver leaning against the side. His trusty duffel bag was intact and no worse for wear—impressive, given the long journey and number of stops. He didn't have much, but his threadbare clothes and broken-in shoes were comfortable, and that was all he cared about. He slung the duffel over his right shoulder, wincing as a familiar pain rippled through his arm. His least favourite souvenir from Toledo.

"Hey, let me help," FP offered.

"It's cool, I can handle it."

His father's hand seized the shoulder strap, tugging firmly. "I know you can handle it, Jug. You don't have to, though. That's the point."

It clearly meant something to his father to step up, like it meant something that FP could make it here first thing in the morning. Jughead nodded, relenting with a half-smile. They were testing each other, two peacocks in full plume. *I am strong. I am not going to fail.*

His duffel landed with a soft *plop* in the bed of the truck. Turning around, his father smiled nervously.

"You catch some sleep on the bus?"

Jughead shrugged. "An hour or two. The road to Riverdale is paved in potholes."

He watched his father thrust his hands deep inside the pockets of his leather jacket. Another tell. *He's anxious and wants to hide it, desperately.* His lips parted slightly, but FP remained silent.

"I'm not that tired. I mean, if you had something you needed to do before we go. Home," he added hurriedly.

The word left a metallic taste on his tongue. *Home.* What did that even mean, anymore?

His father's hands fell free of their pocket snares, but his eyes skirted the gravel beneath them. "I was just… Well, I thought, being as we're up at the asscrack of dawn, that we could take advantage and grab breakfast at Pop's."

*He's trying. He's trying hard.*

Jughead chuckled softly. "Come on, Dad. You know I'm never too *anything* to eat."

FP's loud peal of laughter startled the bus driver. "Alright, then! Get in, son, before Pop runs out of those perfect hash browns of his."

Stepping through the doors of Pop's Chock'lit Shoppe, Jughead's breath hitched.

A staple of Riverdale life, the twenty-four hour diner was a time warp to a less troubled time, when the Bobby soxers twisted the night away. Comfortable booths lined the walls and dotted the centre aisle, while the owner, Pop Tate, helmed his kitchen with pride. A jukebox glimmered in the corner, highlighted in a crimson hue by sunlight streaking through cherry-red blind slats.

It was where Jughead and his friends spent their afternoons, downing milkshakes until their bellies ached and splitting an order of fries when their allowances ran lean. It was the one place where Jughead had refused to celebrate a birthday with his dysfunctional family, lest it be tainted. It was *his place.*
"Booth in that corner okay, Jug?"

He shook himself slightly, rubbing his bleary eyes. "Yeah, dad."

They settled into the cushioned seats opposite each other, FP claiming the view of the entrance, while Jughead had the service counter and grill in sight. The scent of Pop's fluffy chocolate chip pancakes wafted over, making his stomach growl in anticipation.

The lone waitress on shift hustled over, tucking an errant strand of hair behind her ear. The menus in her hand were waved away. Both were well versed in the delicacies on the breakfast menu: FP ordered a Denver omelette with hash browns, while Jughead opted for Pop's Saturday special: 3 eggs, 2 chocolate chip pancakes dusted in powdered sugar, fried ham and thick, buttered toast. The waitress—Ellie, her nametag read—flipped their ticket over her shoulder into Pop's waiting hand and made quick work of pouring their coffee.

FP reached for a cream container, peeling it open. "So, how have you been? I see you still lug that bag everywhere," he added, nodding to the backpack beside his son.

"Riverdale may not be New York City, but I'm not leaving my laptop in the truck." Jughead's fingers toyed with a sugar packet, turning it slowly. "And I'm good, I guess? School in Toledo is a joke. I could sleep through class and get a 4.0."

FP chuckled softly. "You were never one to slack. Never one to let your teachers slack, either."

"And let them text and tweet while we bow quietly and teach ourselves? Nothing wrong with high standards of those in authority."

The moment the words escaped his lips, he regretted them. His father's smile slumped to a frown and he toyed with the handle of his coffee cup. While Jughead's words had been aimed more at his grade eight science teacher, the parallels to FP's absentee parenting were undeniable.

"Dad, I didn't mean—"

"No, you did. Even if you don't think you did," FP insisted, cutting off Jughead's protests. "And that's okay, Jug. It is. I won't pretend I was ever a good father, but I wanted to be. I want to be."

Jughead glanced out the window, swiping a loose curl of hair back beneath his beanie. "I know you do. I wouldn't have left Toledo if I didn't believe you."

They sat in silence, sipping coffee and pretending the table between them was a mile long. Maybe this was a terrible idea, Jughead mused bitterly. Yeah, maybe FP had changed. But ten minutes of amicability did little to assuage ten years of erratic anger (his dad) and evasive actions (him).

Yeah, but remember HIM? Mom's asshole of the week that became a year?

Better the devil you know, or so he was told. And, as the waitress arrived with their meal, he reminded himself that Riverdale had Pop's. Delicious food, served 24-7. A safe haven.

Make it work, Jughead, he admonished himself.

"So, you said you've been working again?" he asked casually.

FP nodded, his shoulders pushing back in pride. "Yeah. Fred picked up a contract, tearing down the Twilight and helping with that huge Lodge project. Said he could use experienced hands."
"Huh. I'm glad he came around—wait, the Twilight's gone?" Jughead dropped his fork with a **clatter-clang**. "Aw, fuck! I loved that place."

"I know." His father sighed, shaking his head. "Money talks, all the way to City Hall. Same as it ever was. Fred's business was too thin to say no to the gig and me… Well, you know."

Jughead grimaced, angrily spearing a piece of pancake. The Twilight Drive-In had been a staple of his childhood. Every Friday night, before FP had taken to drowning himself in whiskey, they'd pile into the car and head out for a movie. Perpetually poor, he'd always hide with his sister in the trunk, emerging once they parked in a row far from the entrance. He remembered how he and JB would make a game of staying silent, even as the car sped over the rough gravel roads.

"I'm sorry, Jug. A lot's changed around here since you left."

"I know it has. Life moves on, with or without you. John Hughes taught me that. Or maybe he taught me to blow off school and get the girl."

FP laughed. "I always wanted to be Ferris Bueller. Instead, I got to raise him."

"Oh, sure." Jughead smirked, gesturing to the other patrons of Pop's. "The sportos, the motorheads, geeks, sluts, bloods, wastoids, dweebies, dickheads - they all **adore** me."

A shared chuckle quietly exchanged, each Jones man continued to chip away at his generous breakfast. Jughead found himself scanning the patrons of the diner, in search of familiar faces. There were a few he recognized immediately—Kevin Keller, the sheriff's son, was tucked in a nearby booth with an unfamiliar brunette; Reggie Mantle and Moose Mason were laughing and jostling each other in that **bro** way Jughead could never stand—but many faces failed to register.

Until the door to Pop's swung open, and a flood of memories strolled inside.

"Are you sure you have to go, Juggie?"

She's the only one who gets away with calling me that. She gets away with a lot of things, really. **Like her surely deliberate obtuseness, for starters.**

"You know how bad it's been lately. FP's never gonna change, and my mom is terrified of this move. She married him straight out of high school. If I don't go, she might not go." My fingers tug absently on the lace trim of her bedspread. "And I need her to be safe."

Her face darkens. "You told me he wasn't hitting you. Were you lying?"

"What? No, Betty—"

"You can trust me. You know you can, right?"

Those beautiful green eyes of hers, wide and round, are misty now. **Her voice crackles with pain, with the thought she has somehow let me down. Her perfectionism's a cruel mistress, a carbon copy of Mama Cooper's endless chastising.**

I rise slowly, my hands gripping her shoulders tightly. "He hasn't hit us. Not yet, anyway."

"But you're worried he might," she concludes.

My eyes skirt my battered black boots, unable to withstand that inquisitive stare. **Journalist's daughter, through and through. My hands fall to my sides, awkwardly fidgeting. I'm always fidgeting**
around her. Seeking a distraction from all the things my hands long to do.

"I'm just... I'm really going to miss you." Her hand finds mine, soft skin cradling the rough calluses of my fingertips. "You'll write me, won't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, of course I will."

I edge away, turning to her shelves of books. If a movie were staging the room of a teenage girl, I imagine these would be the books the prop department would choose: Judy Blume, Margaret Atwood, Harry Potter in hardcover. The Nancy Drew books elicit a smile, though. Betty's always loved a good mystery. Too bad she can't take a clue when it comes to her love life. Archie will never see her as more than a friend.

The bitter irony, of course, is that I can't seem to take a hint, either. Masochism at its Shakespearean finest.

"Oh! We're still doing the book swap, right?"

A welcome distraction, indeed. "Yes! I have yours in my bag."

It was my idea to swap books. For years, Betty and I have had an informal book club, sharing recommendations between classes and debating themes over lunch. It drives Archie nuts, since he can barely force himself to read the required list for English. I can't deny that Betty's undivided attention doesn't make my stomach roll in a strangely wonderful way.

When I announced my decision to move to Toledo, Betty had immediately pointed out how much she would miss our literary debates. Unable to let our bond break so quickly, I decided that each of us should give the other a book to remember them by. Something that we each related to strongly.

I pull the heavy tome I've selected from my backpack, smiling at the familiar cover. I could spend hours discussing Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. The way the text is physically laid out; the story within a story within a story; the themes of loss and love within... It's a book I never tire of.

I feel like she'll appreciate the stylistic elements, perhaps relate strongest to the photojournalist character. Selfishly, I want it to take days to read so she won't forget me easily.

"Is that for me?"

Her eyes are wide, pale pink lips curving into a smile. Her beautiful hair is pulled back in a perfect ponytail, as usual. I wish I could pull it loose, watch the soft waves fall over her shoulders. Her imperfections are what make her so special. I wish she could trust in them, accept them, as I do.

"Yeah, it is. I've been saving this one for summer, but I, uh, won't be here then. That mine?" I gesture to the book she's hugging to her chest.

"Uh-huh. You have to promise to keep an open mind, though."

"Betty Cooper! Have you brought me erotic literature?"

Her cheeks flush crimson. "What? No! It's just... the cover might seem a little girly, but the story is really good."

I can't help myself. "Is it a romance novel? Harlequin, perhaps? Are there brooding vampires and shirtless werewolves?"
"Jughead Jones, stop it!" Her icy gaze silences me. "Just shut up and take your gift, alright?"

Duly rebuked, I hold out my offering for our exchange. "Sorry, Betts. You know me: always taking it too far."

"Yes, you do," she mutters, trading her book for mine. "I'm going to miss that, too."

She studies the book I've given her, reading the back cover immediately. She bites softly at her lower lip, as she often does while concentrating, and I force myself to turn away, lest I grow a spine at last and kiss away the faint teeth marks that will remain. Her book is far less pages, but the cover catches my interest. Cracked Up To Be, the title announces. The cover features a young girl scarcely older than us, by my guess, lying on a bench in a school uniform. Flipping it over, I find myself intrigued. There's a mystery between the lines.

"This sounds incredible, Juggie."

"I'm intrigued by yours, as well. My mind is wide open," I reassure her.

A horn beeps outside and I grimace. My mother is waiting. I'd foolishly left this farewell to the very last minute, believing it would somehow be easier to leave her. Now, all I want is more time: time to make her laugh; time to admire her passion for justice; time to finally admit how I feel. But that time is lost, and here we are: two friends, parting ways indefinitely.

"I'll write you every week," she promises me.

"I'll always write back." I can feel the tears welling up—hot, wet traitors threatening to spill my secrets.

She throws herself into my arms, her head burrowing into my shoulder. I return the embrace, my arms tight around her shuddering frame. I hate myself for being a reason for her to cry.

"Shh, come on, Betty. It's going to be okay." I inhale deep, wanting to memorize the strawberry-vanilla of her shampoo. "Shh, please don't cry. God, please, please don't cry over me…"

Traitor orbs of saline. They're tumbling down my cheeks, into her silken hair. So this is what a broken heart feels like. Note to self: never fucking do this again. Never let love creep in.

"I'll miss you. You and Archie, you've been my friends forever. But you…" She pauses, drawing a shaky breath. "I can't talk writing or books with him. And no one makes me laugh like you do."

"And no one sees me like you do," I murmur into her ear. "You always see the best in everyone."

Another horn blast from outside. For a wild minute, I debate opening Betty's window and screaming that I've changed my mind. I'm not going. I'll take my chances with my deadbeat father. But then, I think of Jellybean, of how sensitive and small my sister is, and I know I have to be there for her as her world turns upside down.

Reluctantly, I pull back, brushing tears from her cheeks. "Don't ever lose that, Betty. That ability to see the good in people that they can't see anymore. Or never saw at all. Promise me."

She nods slowly, her fingers stretching to toy with the loose curl I can never keep tucked beneath my favourite beanie. "I promise. Don't you ever forget how big your heart is, Jughead Jones. Or I swear, I'll jump a bus to Toledo to remind you."

"I won't forget." I swallow hard. "That would be like forgetting you. And I could never do that."
A third horn blast sounds, and a fourth. This is it. It's time.

"I'll walk you downstairs," she whispers sadly.

I tuck her book into my bag and sling it over my shoulder. I'll read it on the drive to Toledo. But first, I need to make sure she'll be okay. My arm wraps around her shoulder as we descend the steps of Casa Cooper, squeezing her gently.

"On the bright side, think of all the money you'll save, not having to buy me burgers and shakes all the time," I joke weakly.

"True. I might actually be able to afford college now." She manages a smile through her tears, and I accept that's the best I'm going to get.

"Oh hush, you know you'll get a full ride to any school you want. But you'll be able to afford a very expensive car to drive there."

She leans into me, gently poking my ribs. "And I'll drive to Toledo to show it off and spite you. While drinking a shake from Pop's."

Opening her front door, I laugh. "If anyone in this world can make a shake last for that long of a drive, it's you."

She pulls away slowly, leaning against the doorframe. "Take care of yourself, okay? I mean it."

"I will if you will."

"It's a deal." Her tears fall in earnest, despite the warm smile she offers. "Goodbye, Juggie."

Fuck it. I pull her in for another hug, crushing her to my chest. Her arms snake around my waist, her fingers fisted in my t-shirt. One last time. Because no matter what lies I've told her about visiting soon, I know I won't be back. I won't be able to handle losing her again. It's that finality that emboldens me: my lips press softly to the top of her head, the barest of touches.

"I have to go."

"I understand."

"Don't hate me for it," I plead, pulling away.

"I could never hate you." She falls against the doorframe, steadying herself. "You know that."

"I do. I needed to hear it, though." One last look into those eyes of hers, and I step outside. "Goodbye, Betty Cooper."

"Until we meet again, Jughead Jones."

She hadn't noticed him yet, and for that, Jughead was eternally grateful. It had been almost six months since he'd heard from Betty, her letters dying off so abruptly, he'd called Archie in a panic, convinced she'd been hurt or even killed. Archie had been evasive, saying only that Betty was perfectly fine, but busy. Standing at the counter, waiting on a take-out order, he could readily see one new thing taking up her time: her cheerleader garb was jarring, but her muscular legs suggested she'd taken to her new extracurricular with the same perfectionistic obsession she'd tackled everything with in her life.

His father had finally caught on, cocking his head to the side. "Isn't that—"
"Shh!" he hissed. "Later."

To his relief, FP dropped it immediately. Which left Jughead staring at his old friend and unrequited… crush? Love? Hell, he didn't know. A part of him knew he should duck his head, avoid being seen. He wasn't ready for her, for the conversation he needed to have with her. His plan had always been to see Archie first and demand answers.

For now, he could only watch with wonder as she paced and texted on her phone. How could she possibly be more beautiful than he'd left her? That perfect ponytail of hers swayed slowly as she glanced outside. She was anxious about something, he immediately recognized. Was she running late, maybe?

"Will it be much longer?" she asked quietly.

"Just a minute more," a waitress assured her.

The front door chimed, and with it came a booming voice: "What's the hold up, Betty?"

She spun in the direction of the door and Jughead followed suit, recognizing Chuck Clayton immediately. He'd been on the football team with Archie in middle school.

"It's almost ready, Chuck," Betty blurted out.

Chuck's brow furrowed. "I thought you called it in?"

"I did! I did, Chuck. But it's Saturday…"

Why is she so defensive? Jughead frowned, ducking his head as Clayton scanned the diner.

"Here you go, Betty!" Pops announced loudly, handing over a large paper bag and a shake.

"Oh, thank you!" Betty gushed, rushing to meet Chuck by the door. "See? It's ready now."

"About time," Chuck spat, shoving open the door. "Let's go, Betty."

He watched the pair walk to a waiting Lexus, studying their body language. After years of reading his father for signs of intoxicated rage, Jughead considered himself a bit of an expert. And while Chuck's assertive stride and forceful opening of the doors made sense with his jock bravado, it was Betty's slow, measured steps that bothered him. There was something off there, something distinctly not her.

"Jug?"

He glanced across the table at his father's concerned look. "Betty."

"Archie's friend. Yours too, right?"

"We used to be." Jughead frowned, pushing away his unfinished pancakes. "You see her often?"

"Not anymore," FP replied. "She used to have dinner with Fred and Arch once or twice a week. Not lately, though. A boyfriend will do that."

They're dating?

"You okay?"
Jughead forced a smile. "Yeah, dad. Just surprised, and tired from the trip. Would it be okay if we headed home?"

"Sure thing. You look wiped out."

As his father signalled for the check, Jughead found himself remembering that strawberry-vanilla scent. He was exhausted, and sleep would need to come first. But after? He had some catching up to do with an old friend.
Chapter Notes

And now we're caught up to match FF! I hope this begins to explain how Betty and Chuck happened (trust me, trust in the notes - we are heading to Bughead land)

On to the next chapter, and another reunion!

Disclaimer: I own not a damn thing from the Riverdale universe. Disclaim, disclaim!
Song: Crawling Through the Window - Arkells

Two: Crawling Through the Window

"You were the singer, I was the drummer
Marching downtown, falling down in the summer

Call me on your way home
You swear she was a knock out
Crawling through the window
Every time we're locked out..."

Crawling Through the Window - Arkells

He'd passed out within minutes of his head hitting the lumpy, flat pillow. He should have expected as much, having been awake for thirty-one hours. FP, in his new effort to be Father of the Year, had led him to his old room and assured him the trailer would be quiet for the afternoon.

"I've got a meeting, next town over, "FP had explained. "You know, for being sober. We usually do dinner after Saturday meetings." His father was clearly embarrassed by needing the help, or perhaps by the addiction itself.

Jughead had smiled encouragingly. "That's good, Dad. I'm glad you have support."

With a shrug and a shake of his head, FP had deemed the discussion over, pushing open the bedroom door. "Get some rest. You look like you need it."

Understatement of the year. Jughead hadn't slept more than four hours at night for a solid three months. Too many loud arguments. Too many nights spent soothing Jellybean with music on his second-hand turntable. The blanket still itched on his neck and the mattress still dipped in the middle, but it was his bed. It would more than suffice. Body stretched out, he'd closed his eyes and slipped into darkness.

Until…

Tap-tap-tap!

"Huh?"

Tap-tap!
Jughead stirred, wiping a faint line of drool from the corner of his mouth. Rolling onto his back, his heart leapt into his throat. A shadowy figure loomed outside his bedroom window, illuminated by the light of the moon. His hand pawed the nightstand for a weapon, finding none. Goddamn it, there was a killer out there! Why didn't he have a knife, a bat, anything?

*Tap-tap! "Jughead? You there?"

His eyes widened. "Archie?"

His hand reached for a cord, his blinds flying upwards with a tug. Outside his window stood a familiar face: Archie Andrews, his best friend since birth, thanks to their fathers. The very friend he'd been planning to call on tonight.

The muscular redhead ran a hand through his hair nervously. "Hey, Jug! I'm sorry, did I wake you? FP told my dad you were getting home today."

"Yeah, I mean, you woke me, but it's fine. I didn't mean to sleep until—" Jughead glanced at a nearby clock and winced. "Shit, it's really seven-thirty?"

"I can come back tomorrow, Jug. I know it's a long trip from Ohio."

"No, no," Jughead insisted. "Come around the front and I'll let you in."

With a thumbs up, Archie had rounded the trailer and disappeared towards the front door. Yawning loudly, Jughead stumbled down the narrow hallway to the front room. His wits weren't about him, which was hardly ideal for the conversation he needed to have with his friend. Archie wasn't a genius, but he wasn't a fool. He avoided speaking ill of anyone, even if they deserved it.

If Jughead wanted candor, he'd need to wake up. Fast.

Opening the door, he stepped aside, inviting Archie in. It occurred to him that he hadn't had anyone over in years. Jughead had always gone to the Andrews house, eating dinner and sleeping over as often as he could.

"It's good to see you, Jughead."

"You too, Arch."

An awkward moment of hesitation passed, then Archie embraced him tightly. Jughead returned the hug with equal fervor, exhaling a breath he'd been holding for over a year. He'd never found a friend in Toledo that he could trust. And without trust, he didn't dare exhibit need. Need could be manipulated, used as a weapon. His father had taught him that.

"Hey Archie, would you mind if I grab a quick shower? I kinda fell into bed after a day on a Greyhound."

"Sure! I'm sorry, I should have called first." Archie leaned against the door, hands thrust inside the pockets of his jacket. "I'm just really glad you're home."

"It's fine. I'm glad to see you, too. Five minutes."

He made it four. And in that four minutes under the surprisingly hot water pelting his weary body, Jughead had formulated a plan for extracting critical information from Archie. Like what the hell Betty Cooper was doing dating Chuck Clayton, asshole extraordinaire.
Tugging on jeans and a t-shirt, he towel-dried his messy hair in haste before slapping his trademark beanie on his head. He smiled to himself as he brushed his teeth, thinking of the time four years ago, when Betty had tried to ban the beanie from her home.

"Come on, Jughead! Take it off!"

"No way, Betts." I dodge her hand as it swipes at my head, narrowly evading its capture. "I've worn this thing for two years. It's as constant as the sun."

"Yes, it is!" Betty rolls her eyes. "I'm starting to forget what your hair looks like, under there."

"Messy," I deadpan.

"Jugger!" She pouts her pale pink lips and stomps her left foot. "I mean, it's summer! We're inside. Take it off."

She chases me around the coffee table, increasingly annoyed as I dart one way, then another. I'm actually starting to worry that she'll catch me. Determined Betty is a force to be reckoned with. I dodge left, then right again, but this time, she doesn't fall for it. I back away quickly, chuckling softly. "Betty Cooper, you have a strange need to undress me. Freud would have a field day with your need to see my..." I swallow hard as she presses me against the living room wall. "Head."

Her cheeks flush crimson, but she's not backing down. "Jughead Jones!"

I press up onto my toes, but I'm scarcely taller than her. If she stretches up, she could seize victory in the form of a worn, grey knit cap with a crown embellishment.

"Gotcha," she whispers, poking me in the chest. "Now, hand it over."

"Betty, please."

She raises her eyebrow and smirks. "Gimme."

Fuck, it's happening. The panic is rising in my chest. My heart pounds, beating its frantic rhythm inside my skull. I feel myself gasp for air and the world begins to spin. It's stupid, but the thought of taking it off is turning my stomach. I close my eyes, willing the ground to stop spinning beneath me.

"Jug?" Her hands grip my shoulders, steadying me. "Jugger, hey, what's wrong?"

I shake my head helplessly, eyes closed tightly.

"I'm sorry, I was joking. You can wear it forever." Her hand cups my left cheek. "Open your eyes. Please?"

I force myself to comply, drawing a ragged breath. I focus on her face, feeling guilty for the worry she radiates. My hand covers hers and I feel the ground steadying beneath me.

"Breathe. Just breathe. It's okay. I won't leave you alone."

I could weep at her words, at how much a promise like that means to me. Instead, I draw a deep breath and exhale slowly. The fear falls away, until there is just the two of us: me and one of my best friends.

"Sorry," I mumble.
She frowns, shaking her head. "Don't be sorry. I shouldn't have pushed it. Clearly, it means a lot to you."

I nod slowly. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Then we won't." It's a firm promise, one I can trust. "Can I hug you?"

"I'd really like that right now."

Her arms are safe and soft, wrapping around me gently. I cling to her, but only for a moment. Our friendship means the world to me. Whatever this new… white noise in my head is, it has to go. I can't let a crush ruin this. Besides, she's only got eyes for Archie. It's hopeless.

"You hungry? I could order a pizza."

"Do you seriously need me to answer that, Cooper?"

She laughs, pulling away from me. "No, I don't. I just wanted to see you smile."

Spitting out frothy toothpaste, Jughead rolled his shoulders. Betty hadn't smiled once while waiting for her order that morning. That wasn't the Betty he'd known for twelve years. His father had told him things had changed in Riverdale, but what could have plucked the light from such an honest, loving person?

Archie glanced up as he stepped into the crowded living room of the trailer. "Feeling better?"

"Much. Wanna take a walk?"

"Sure. Weather's perfect for it."

They'd taken this walk many times as kids: Fred would urge them to stay within the trailer park proper, while FP would urge him to "let them be kids." Just beyond the battered sign of Sunnyside Trailer Park was a winding path through the woods. Veer left, and there was a clearing dotted with large boulders in a circle. No one knew why it was there, or how it had come to be, but everyone on the Southside had made at least one trek to the hangout. Archie and Jughead frequented it often, shooting the shit for hours.

It was a good sign that Archie was enthusiastically following him. It meant he was in the mood to talk.

"You scared the shit out of me, dude."

Archie laughed. "What, I can't crawl through your window like you crawl through mine?"

Jughead rolled his eyes. "Well no, Archie. Those football muscles are hardly a fit for the glorified doggie door called a window on that trailer."

Archie nudged his shoulder playfully. "Is that why you maintain that emo figure?"

"Well, how else am I supposed to steal dinner from your kitchen?"

The moon was full, dusting the forest with light. No flashlights necessary tonight. Jughead mulled his approach, debating how best to bring up Betty, never mind the unsolved murder of Jason Blossom. Heavy material. Jughead had never excelled at social situations, but even he knew that a reunion called for a pleasant chatter.
"How does it feel, being back in Riverdale?"

A flicker of memory from the morning meal he'd shared with FP guided Jughead. "It's good. Weird, though, but good. I mean, beyond the whole 'I'm sober, come back' deal with FP, it's a bit disorienting. A lot's changed in fifteen months."

*Tell me about those changes, Archie. Spill, like you always do.*

Archie sighed. "Yeah, I know what you mean. It's weird for me too, and I never left. Or something would happen and I'd think about how you would react. You heard about the Twilight?"

Jughead winced, shaking his head. "An institution, gone for what? Another mini-mall?"

"It'll have a theatre, at least. But yeah. Hiram Lodge had to recoup those legal fees, I guess."

Ah, yes. The embezzlement and fraud charges of New York property mogul Hiram Lodge had been major news, even in Toledo. Last he'd heard, Hiram had been released for good behaviour (ha!) and had returned to his Riverdale roots.

"Your dad tell you what he did when they tore it down?"

*Oh, crap.* "He didn't do something embarrassing or illegal, did he?"

Archie paused, leaning against an enormous maple tree. "Not at all. The Serpents hung out there constantly the summer you left. Maybe he missed you? Anyway, if he hasn't told you yet, I don't want to ruin it. But he did something really… dad-like."

"Archie, come on—"

"Jughead, it'll mean a lot to him to tell you. He was talking about it at dinner this week. Trust me, it's a good thing."

Jughead relented, leading the way down the winding path to the clearing. "And you? I knew you were playing football, but do I spy a varsity patch on that jacket?"

The redhead tugged absently at his sleeve, shrugging. "Yeah, Coach Clayton bumped me up when Jason… It's weird, walking in his shoes."

"Cleats," Jughead teased gently. "But yeah, I can see why."

*And here's the opening to the murder…*

"I still can't believe he's dead," Archie continued, sadly. "We weren't friends, but we had class together. We both played football. We'd sometimes say hi, on our way to Miss Grundy's room…"

Archie's voice trailed off, his head hung low. *Shame.* Something was there, something Archie was withholding.

"Miss Grundy? The music teacher? I didn't know you took music."

"Like I said, a lot's changed. Like football. I know I'm good at it, and Dad tells me all the time that it's my ticket to college. I get that. I know we aren't exactly rich. But I really like playing guitar. Miss Grundy offered to tutor me. She used to teach Jason, I think. She encouraged me to pursue music, to write more songs. And with you gone, and Betty on the internship in L.A., I figured I had the time…"
"Oh, no. The shift in Archie's tone… The way he unconsciously licked his lips…"

"Archie, please tell me you're not sleeping with a teacher?" The pained expression on his friend's face confirmed it. "Shit, how long has this been going on?"

"It's not! I mean… Not anymore. It was." Archie shrugged sadly. "I was lonely. I kinda get that now, that it was a stupid thing to do. But I really, really cared for her, Jug."

He wasn't lying. Archie's face was that of a heartbroken man. He knew that face well. He'd been staring him down ever since he'd slid into his mother's car and left town.

"I'm sorry, Arch. We all kinda abandoned you, didn't we?"

He ran a hand along his crimson wave, his hand shaking. "No! I mean, that internship was a dream for Betty. And it's not like you chose FP being a raging drunk that your mom needed to get away from. I made a choice. And yeah, it was stupid, looking back on it. But it was also real. And it got me working on music."

"How come you haven't told me about your music 'til now?"

"No one's heard it yet. No one else knows about Grundy, either. You can't tell anyone, Jughead. Especially not Betty."

"Of course not." Like he wanted to deal with Betty's reaction to her beloved Archie choosing an older woman over her.

"I mean it, Jug. Things with her are bad enough right now."

They'd reached the clearing, and mercifully, it was deserted. No partiers, no drunk teens. Just two old friends caught up in a dark conversation that had plunged further into blackness. Settling onto a stone seat, Jughead leaned forward.

"I saw Betty earlier, at Pop's. She was with Chuck." At this, Archie scowled. "She didn't seem like herself."

Archie grunted. "Yeah, that's a way of putting it."

"Really, dude? She's dating Chuck?"

"You're as surprised as the rest of us." Archie kicked the dirt absently, tugging off his jacket. "Well, except for Veronica and Cheryl. They don't seem to find anything unusual."

"Veronica?"

"Yeah, Veronica Lodge. Hiram's daughter? They moved here last fall, after her dad took the plea deal."

Jughead's mind drifted to the stranger seated with Kevin Keller at the diner. "Dark hair, overdresses for breakfast? Hangs with Kevin?"

"That's her. She's also Betty's new BFF. Latched onto her on her first day. By the end of the week, Betty was trying out for the River Vixens with her bestie."

The venom in his voice made it clear that Archie was not a fan of the friendship. Jealousy, perhaps? Fear of being replaced?
"So Veronica is the reason Betty hasn't written me in months?"

Archie shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I mean, Veronica has thrown a few parties since she moved here and she always invites me in person. She seems sincere. And she did tell Cheryl where to go when she tried to veto Betty joining the Vixens." His hands fidgeted in his lap, his gaze averted. "I actually think it's my fault."

Jughead tilted his head askance. "How is that possible? Betty loves you."

Archie's head snapped up. "You knew about that? And you didn't tell me?"

Jughead recoiled, as if he'd been slapped. _Oh my God, did she finally admit it? She didn't write so much as a sentence about it in her letters._

"I meant as a friend! Betty told you she loves you?"

Archie grimaced. "Not in so many words. But she wanted to date. Like, be a couple."

"AND?"

"...I was with Grundy, back then."

Jughead massaged his temples. "You have got to be kidding me. Betty is your best friend. She's intelligent, caring, funny at the most unexpected times. And you chose a fling with a teacher?"

"That's exactly why I can't date her! She's one of my best friends! She's so perfect, and I'm just an idiot who plays football and thinks he can write a folk song that isn't complete garbage. And yes, I got involved with a teacher, and in the end, she left town and left me behind."

Jughead's money was on Betty joining the Vixens in a last-ditch effort to get Archie to see her as girlfriend material. After all, was there any greater stereotype than the football star dating a cheerleader?

"When did she tell you?"

"About a year ago. It wasn't too long after school started. Betty's been distant ever since." Archie pulled a pack of gum from his pocket and offered it to Jughead, who accepted. "She hasn't been writing to you?"

"Stopped in February." Jughead popped a stick of gum in his mouth and passed it back to Archie. "I've written three times since, but nothing."

Archie huffed. "That would be Chuck's doing, I bet."

Anger reared its ugly head inside him. "Is that when they started dating?"

"Valentine's dance kicked it off."

Jughead rose slowly, pacing around the perimeter of the sitting stones. "He's not the kind of guy I'd picture her going for."

"Me neither. I'd ask her about it, but I haven't been alone with her in months. She stopped coming to dinner around May. Your dad comes, though." Archie frowned. "I don't know, Jug. I can't explain it, but something is... Ugh!"

"Not right? Yeah, I felt that at Pop's." Jughead mulled their shared concerns for a moment. "Have
you asked Veronica what she thinks of them? Or Kevin?"

"Kevin doesn't like it, either. Says she barely answers his texts. I haven't approached Veronica. I figure that she'll be all 'girl code' and shut me out." Archie stared at him intently. "I'm really glad you're back, Jug. I feel like if anyone can get her to talk, it's you."

"Me? Why?"

"She misses you a lot. She was so upset when you left. We both were down, but she went… dark. Carried that monster book you gave her everywhere. Took it to L.A."

Jughead waved away Archie's words. "She stopped writing me for a reason. If she can't be bothered to write a few paragraphs every month, I doubt she's going to make like a tea pot and spill."

"You're the only one who hasn't tried, man." His voice was scarcely a whisper now. "I'm worried, Jughead."

"Me, too," Jughead admitted. "I'll try, Arch. I just need to find the best approach."

"Oh!" Archie leapt to his feet. "The Blue and Gold!"

"Colours of our school?"

"The old school paper! Betty's been trying to resurrect it. Last time she came to dinner, she mentioned that she'd petitioned to re-open it for this school year. You're a writer."

Jughead nodded slowly. "I am. Whether I'm any good remains to be seen."

Archie grinned. "I bet helping her launch it would put you back in her good books."

"It's worth a shot." His breath was visible now in the brisk night air. "Should we head back?"

"Yeah, let's go." Archie clapped him on the back. "Welcome home, Jughead."

They walked in silence, each holding secrets close to his chest. Jughead knew there was something more to the relationship with Grundy, something Archie was desperate to avoid revealing. He'd seen the panic in Archie's eyes when he'd had pressed him on it. For Jughead, it was the web of lies he'd told himself and his friends, avoiding his feelings for Betty.

So, she'd finally clued Archie in. He suspected Veronica Lodge had hurried that along, to disastrous results. Maybe that was why she'd been extending olive branches to the object of Betty's affections. But Chuck… That remained a mystery. Had it begun as a way to make Archie jealous? If so, it clearly wasn't working, so why keep it up?

"Hey, Archie? Think Fred would be okay if I slept over tomorrow night? We could walk to school together like old times."

"And I could try and find a moment with Betty, so she doesn't get caught off guard at school on Monday."

"Sure. Dad would love to see you. Bring FP, maybe. For dinner, not to stay over," Archie quickly added.

"Pretty sure my dad doesn't like braiding hair and tickle fights, so you won't have to worry about that."
Their laughter echoed in the quiet of the night, each teasing the other as they looped the park roads. At least this hadn't changed. He could still count on Archie Andrews. Maybe Riverdale wasn't too far gone from the way he remembered it.

Until next week's installment, wherein Betty Cooper finds out her favourite beanie-clad boy is back in town...
Three: So Much For The Afterglow

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the reviews and comments!

Will Polly be in this story? YES. Polly's fate has changed, due to the delay in justice and investigation. We'll find out what's happened to her in chapter 5 and onwards.

Archie has reunited with Jughead. It's Betty's turn. How will she react? How will Chuck react? Let's find out.

Song: So Much For The Afterglow - Everclear (this one is one of the first I added to my writing playlist, because it perfectly sums up Jughead's feelings returning home to Betty)

Disclaimer: I have been informed that I do not own these characters or the world of Riverdale. Dialogue from the show borrowed for context, no infringement intended. I disclaim.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three: So Much for the Afterglow

"This is a song about the girl next door
This is a song about the everyday occurrences that make you feel like letting go
Yes I think we've got a problem
So much for the afterglow...
I remember we could talk about anything
I remember when we used to want to hang out"

So Much For The Afterglow - Everclear

Monday, Monday. Can't trust that day. Can't trust much of anything in Riverdale, these days.

I have to wonder, as I prepare for my first day back at Riverdale High, whether I should have ever trusted in this town. Maybe the cookie-cutter homes and perfectly polished people have always been illusory. Maybe we've always been a town of secrets and lies. Like the biochemistry that floated Jason Blossom's corpse to the surface, so has his murder revealed the things we wanted not to see.

But we can cling to our nostalgia, find moments of that American Dream we're fed from the teat of this country. We can eat our burgers and drink milkshakes with the hardest working man in town. I can gaze out my bedroom window at the Twilight Drive-In sign my dad stole from the site during demolition. Or, we can tie our hair up in perfect ponytails and slap on a skirt and sweater ripped from an episode of Mad Men, like Betty Cooper.

She's up early for the first day of classes, to the surprise of no one. My slumbering giant of a friend has only just managed to stagger to the shower, and she is neatly packing fresh notebooks and pens into her backpack. And while insomnia has woken me up early enough to witness this annual ritual, I can't say I'm in a hurry to start my junior year.

She is as beautiful as I remember her. The sun reaches into her bedroom to graze her cheek, unable
to resist touching her. I understand that struggle and envy its light for the privilege she grants it.

Jughead frowned, saving the document and shutting his laptop. This was throwing a serious wrench into his plan to surprise Betty on the walk to school. With Archie lagging behind and Betty on the verge of bolting out the door, there was no way their paths would casually intersect. What to do?

In the periphery, he spotted the cordless phone. Betty had been ignoring Archie for some time, but what about a call from the Andrews home? Would she wonder if someone was hurt and answer it? The Betty he’d known and trusted since kindergarten would never miss that call. Then again, he never expected her to give someone like Chuck a moment of her time.

"Worth a shot," he mumbled to himself as he dialed.

He stood in front of the window, watching her reaction. The first ring went unnoticed, but the second commanded attention. He watched her glance at her cell phone and frown. Damn, Archie, she is not happy with you, is she? A third ring, and she bit her lip. On the fourth, she answered.

"Hello?"

"Look out your window."

Her head snapped up immediately, the phone hitting her carpet with a soft thump. He watched her rush towards the window to open it, and mirrored her actions.

"Jughead?!" she called out.

"Betty Cooper. You are a welcome sight for these sore eyes." He gestured to the phone in his hand and she bent down, retrieving hers.

"How? When? Why?"

Jughead chuckled. "A true reporter's daughter."

"Goddamn it, Jughead Jones!" She stuck her tongue out at him to emphasize her annoyance.

"Fine. By bus, Saturday morning, because my dad promises he's sober and misses me. At least someone missed me around here," he couldn't stop himself from adding.

"I missed you, Juggie." The faint cracking of her voice assured him she was sincere.

"And yet, you starved me of your prose for, oh, six months? I was forced to read Cracked Up to Be another three times." He tried to keep his tone light, but the sting of her silence struck him in the chest anew.

"I know, I'm so sorry. Things have been—" She turned away from the window, glancing over her shoulder. "My mother is calling."

"Does she still wake you up before your alarm?"

"Yes!" Betty huffed angrily. "How long are you in town?"

"The proverbial cat has come back, Ms Cooper. He just couldn't stay away."

"Oh! Does that mean your folks are—"

"No." He cut her off quickly, before she got both of their hopes up. "Just me. Mom and JB are still in
Toledo."

A sharp horn blast sounded from the street, startling him. Glancing down, he fought the urge to vomit. Chuck Clayton. Turning back to Betty, he noted her rigid posture.

"I have to go, Jug."

"Betty, wa—"

She had already hung up, to his dismay. A sad little wave and she was gone, rushing off to the waiting Lexus. Jughead tossed the phone down with a groan and stormed down the hall. If Archie was going to take half a year to get ready, he intended to have an enormous breakfast. He was going to need the fuel for today.

His first day back in Riverdale High quickly proved useful in establishing the key players in the murder mystery overshadowing the town.

It had taken all of five minutes for Veronica Lodge to stroll over in her pearls and posh purple dress to greet him. Reluctantly, he accepted her outstretched hand and tolerated her escorting Archie and him down the hall. It proved a wise decision: Veronica was chatty, and often scathingly honest, a trait Jughead admired.

"I'm sure you remember Cheryl Blossom," Veronica mused, gesturing down the hall. "Fiery hair to match her 'burn it to the ground' anger issues, with just enough curves that the boys keep her as the Queen Bee."

"Has she ever explained the reason she and Jason supposedly concocted the 'oops, the boat tipped' story?"

Veronica shook her head. "No, but as cruel as she can be, take it from this reformed rich bitch: she's mostly bark, and bites because she's been mistreated for years. Her grief over Jason feels real to me when we're hanging out alone. She has her reasons."

Veronica's commentary told Jughead just as much about Daughter Lodge as it did about the maple syrup heiress. While students generally veered away from Cheryl as they roamed the halls, Veronica insisted their fears were misguided. He was hardly about to count out Cheryl as a suspect, but he did buy Veronica's theory that growing up Blossom was anything but a walk in the park.

They ventured into the lounge, staking claim to the central sofa as Veronica continued to engage them in discussion. Jughead quickly noted how she leaned into Archie as he spoke, contrasted with her sarcastic jokes and patting of his arm. Maybe her party invites were less about Betty and more about a personal agenda…

"We should totally give Jughead a proper welcome home," Veronica announced, jarring him back into the present. "An elegant soiree? Or would you prefer something more casual, with a keg?"

"How about neither?"

Veronica opened her mouth to protest, but was waved off by Archie. "Trust me, Veronica. Jughead hates parties. Best you'll get is a dinner at Pop's."

"Well, I am partial to a good milkshake, Archiekins," Veronica purred. "I accept the terms of our Holden Caulfield."
On most any day, Jughead would have fired back one of a dozen barbs about Veronica's overdressed look, or perhaps her dire need for approval. On most any day, however, Betty Cooper didn't enter a room and stumble upon seeing him.

The conversation halted, Archie and Veronica exchanging cryptic looks. Painfully aware of the attention, Jughead rose to his feet, thrusting his hands into his jacket pockets to hide their trembling. Her skin flushed and he couldn't help but smirk. He'd imagined this moment in countless ways, played out dozens of scenarios. None of them came close to the reality. For this was his childhood friend, the secretly tough girl who would defend him to teachers and share her lunch if she suspected he was going hungry (again). This was the woman who encouraged his writing in the first place, eagerly sharing her favourite books to inspire him.

And, as he'd come to understand three years ago, in that crushing moment when Betty asked him whether Archie liked her, she was the only woman he'd ever wanted to be with.

Fighting to remain calm, he flashed a nervous smile. "Hey, Betts."

Her reverie shattered and, much to the surprise of everyone in the lounge, she rushed forward to embrace him. "Juggie," she murmured in his ear. "You're really back."

His arms folded around her, squeezing her tightly. "In the ghostly flesh."

They pulled apart, each studying the other for those slight differences: a new highlight in her honeyed hair; a new, tiny hole in his beloved beanie.

Betty laughed, shaking her head. "I never thought you'd come back here."

"That makes two of us."

And there was Archie, to their left, shoulders slumped. "Hey, Betty. Long time, no see."

Her body tensed, but her smile remained. "Hey, Archie. I'm so sorry. I've been super busy, trying to pad my file for college. How's Fred?"

"He's good. He's really good. Business has picked up, so he's not awake and worrying about bills." Archie grinned, gesturing to Veronica. "Hey, you're just in time. Ronnie has a great idea to celebrate Jughead being back."

"No, no she does not. You have an acceptable idea, but only if Betty comes with us," Jughead added impulsively.

Veronica was displeased, but conceded anyway. "Archie has suggested we four venture out for a dinner at Pop's. Milkshakes, gossip, perhaps a late-night adventure at a lovely nightclub that will ignore our ages?" The trio of grimaces in reply drove her hands up in exasperation. "Okay, fine! A movie?"

"Jughead loves movies," Betty blurted out.

Veronica beamed. "A-ha! I knew my party planning skills wouldn't fail me completely. You in, Betty?"

"Of course I am…."  

Betty's voice trailed off, her eyes fixed on the south side of the lounge. Glancing over his shoulder, Jughead's fists balled at his sides. Chuck Clayton. An imposing figure in sports and, judging from the
way Ethel Muggs bolted from the lounge, imposing in the hallways of Riverdale High.

"Betty, we said we'd meet at your locker five minutes ago."

Glancing at her watch, Betty frowned. "No, you said eight thirty."

"I'm pretty sure, since I'm the one who said it, that I told you eight twenty." He jerked his head towards Jughead as he reached her side. "This what's keeping you?"

"No, Chuck, I must have made a mistake. I'm sorry."

Betty is sorry about a lot of things, these days, Jughead noted, glaring at the intruder.

"You're always sorry, Betty. Lucky for you, I am quite forgiving." Throwing his arm around her shoulder, he steered her away from her friends. "Come on, we're going to be late."

"Betty! Call me," Veronica called out. Quietly, she added, "I'll sort out the party details, don't worry. There will be burgers and cinema, gentlemen."

"You see what I mean?" Archie muttered under his breath.

"Yeah, dude. I don't like it."

Veronica's displeasure manifested in a soft growl and angrily hoisting her backpack onto her shoulder. "I swear, that boy needs to be neutered."

Archie spat out the mouthful of Coke he'd just inhaled. "Ronnie!"

"What? Maybe that would tame him." Gesturing to the clock overhead, she frowned. "It's that time, much to my disappointment. Which of you fine young men would like to walk me to Calculus?"

"I will," Jughead blurted out quickly, simultaneously disappointing both of his companions.

Veronica recovered quickly, winking playfully. "See? You totally adore me already. Wait and see, Jughead Jones. We are going to be besties." She patted Archie's shoulder as they parted. "Don't you worry. I know how to share."

"Now I know what a plate of fries at Pop's feels like," Jughead quipped. "See you at lunch, Archie."

Veronica laced her arm through his as they walked to class. She was clearly one of those touchy-feely people Jughead found repulsive and mystifying all at once. He gritted his teeth and swallowed the urge to demand she let go.

"Journalist mode, he told himself. Engage the subject on their level."

"Hey, what did you mean just now with that neutering thing? Chuck's not cheating on Betty, is he?"

Veronica shook her head quickly. "Not that I know of, although I've certainly had a hunch that he might. No, I was thinking more of temperament." Rounding the corner to the west corridor, she cast a furtive glance at the students ahead. "Have you ever had a needy kitten for a pet?"

"Can't say poverty has ever granted my family the pleasure."

"Well, needy animals are clingy. Love me, love me. Nothing is enough for them. But the difference between puppies and kittens lies in their response to being ignored. A dog will pout, sigh and wait to be noticed again. A kitten will bite you in its efforts to demand more of your undivided attention."

"So you're comparing one of the stars of Riverdale football to a tiny ball of fur with flimsy teeth?"
Veronica rolled her eyes. "Think about it. Betty is a rescuer. Chuck is all 'look at me' and nips to her hand when she doesn't meet his impossible standards."

*She's a rescuer, no question. She rescued Archie from flunking a grade. She rescued me from bullies on the playground. And now, she's rescuing needy Chuck.*

"I'll arrange dinner with Betty by end of day. *Sans* Mr. Clayton."

Her hand reached for the classroom door, only to fall away slowly, a feather drifting on unseen air pockets. She studied Jughead for a moment, her head cocking to the side. His eyes narrowed, meeting her gaze head on.

"For what it's worth," she whispered, "I've always been more of a dog person, myself."

With a warm smile and a light tug on her pearls, Veronica slipped into her waiting classroom. Jughead—exposed and strangely pleased with what seemed to be an approval of some kind—clutched his backpack tightly as he lost himself in the crowded halls.

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Betty was nowhere to be seen at lunch and Jughead's mood deflated as he realized Chuck Clayton was also conspicuously absent. Veronica, too, was nowhere to be found. It was a glimmer of hope that perhaps the two women had slipped away for a friendly catch-up.

Jughead stewed, picking at his fries while Archie discussed music with Valerie Brown. Her trademark Pussycat ears were tucked neatly on her head at the request of Josie McCoy. Something about *branding* that he couldn't give less of a damn about. In fact, the only useful thing to come of lunch was an off-hand remark by Valerie that added a new angle to a certain murder investigation.

"I can't believe Dilton Doiley actually took the scouts back to that camp site this year," Valerie mused as Doiley passed by. "After what happened with Jason?"

"Well, it's not like they saw the murder," Archie countered, popping a Dorito in his mouth.

"But the gunshot!"

Jughead snapped to attention. "Gunshot? The one Cheryl claimed she heard?"

Valerie shrugged. "The timing was right, and Doiley's camp was pretty close to Sweetwater River. He's the one who found Cheryl after the boat capsized."

"*Supposedly* capsized." Jughead tilted his head towards the bereaved sister. "That was an illusion, remember?"

"Right, but even still, her story seems like time is missing. Maybe she saw something that day. Maybe she's repressing it." Valerie toyed with a paper napkin on the table. "I mean, if I saw someone hurt a member of my family, it would mess me up."

Jughead had considered this theory before, during his initial research in Toledo. Cheryl absolutely knew more than she had told police. What she was concealing remained the mystery.

Doiley, on the other hand, had no strong ties to Jason. He was supposedly with his troop, within earshot of Cheryl's cries for help. That meant he *must* have heard the shot. Why hadn't he mentioned it in those initial weeks, when Jason was presumed drowned? Why had Jughead never come across a single mention of Doiley in the newspaper articles he'd combed through in the last two weeks? Glancing across the room, he spotted Dilton at a corner table, talking quietly with Midge Klump.
What are you hiding?

"Jug?"

He looked to his right, flashing an apologetic smile. "Sorry. Coming back is more disorienting than I expected."

Archie shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Valerie was wondering if we were coming to the Pussycats next show. They're playing an acoustic set at the coffee shop near The Register."

"When?"

"Next Thursday." Valerie replied. "We're a little nervous. Acoustic sets are new for us, but if this one gets a good turnout, the owner said we can play every week for a month."

Jughead mulled this briefly, before smiling. "Sure, count me in. We've already lost the Twilight. We can't let Riverdale be a wasteland of culture."

Truth be told, he'd never been a huge fan of the Pussycats. He was more of a classic rock guy. But Valerie was helping Archie with his music, which made her a friend in his books. Friends supported friends in times of need.

*Besides, Josie is the daughter of the mayor. Getting in her good graces may prove useful someday.*

"Awesome! I have to go meet Melody, but I'll see you soon?" This comment was blatantly directed at Archie.

"Tomorrow after school?"

Valerie's cheeks flushed pink. "Definitely. See you then!"

He studied Archie's face, assessing his expression, his gaze and the way he continued to pick at his fries as if Valerie hadn't been flirting with him for the entire lunch period. Exasperated, Jughead rocked back in his chair and groaned.

"Dude!"

Archie dropped a fry on his plate. "What?"

"You really don't have a clue about women, do you?"

Archie's stunned silence was answer enough. *Is there a single fucking woman in this school who isn't trying to get with him?*

"Let me break it down for you, as a keen observer of the human condition. *Valerie* is into you. *Veronica* is into you. Apparently, everybody but you knew Betty was interested for years. Man, how did you know-who get your attention?"

"I'm not talking about that here, for obvious reasons," Archie muttered. A beat: "Valerie is just a friend."

"Not by choice," Jughead retorted, stealing a fry from Archie's plate.

"Anyway, for your information, I know about Veronica," Archie continued indignantly. "It's never gonna happen."
Jughead's brow furrowed. "But you're friends. She seems nice enough—nice especially for a Lodge. Hell, Betty likes her."

"Betty is why nothing can happen." Archie dragged his chair closer, his voice scarcely a whisper. "Last year, Cheryl announced she was throwing an after-party for Homecoming and expected all the Vixens to be there, Betty and Veronica included. Betty asked me to Homecoming."

Jughead's stomach rolled. "And you said yes."

"As a friend," Archie insisted. "And she asked me to go with her and Veronica. I didn't know, Jug. Or maybe I didn't want to. And it's not like I could take… Anyway, after the dance, she told me about how she felt, and like I told you, I couldn't give her that. She insisted we go to the party anyway—she didn't want Cheryl to kick her off the squad. I had to at least be there for her, right?"

Jughead nodded. "If she was determined to go, at least you wanted to support her in that viper's pit. But what does this have to do with Veronica?"

Archie rubbed his temples. "Cheryl made us play Seven Minutes in Heaven. Guess who magically ended up in the closet with me?"

Veronica. "Betty took it hard, didn't she?"

"Took her days to forgive Veronica. I'm not sure if she even has forgiven me completely." The warning bell pealed through the cafeteria and Archie reached for his bag. "Anyway, I won't hurt her more than I have. I don't care if she's dating Chuck now. I won't betray her like that again."

Jughead patted his friend's shoulder. "Betty doesn't hold grudges. She knows Cheryl. But you're right: dating Veronica would re-open wounds."

The two walked to their next class in silence, each thinking of impossible relationships.

The Blue and Gold office. Or, what was once The Blue and Gold office. Defunct since 2014, it was known more as a place to steal a kiss (or more) before and after school.

Jughead hesitated outside the door, scrutinizing his strategy anew. Betty hadn't asked him to write for the paper. She hadn't asked him much of anything, so far. But Veronica's unexpected text—his phone number handed over far too readily by Archie to the demanding heiress—announcing that Betty was heading there to clean out the cobwebs had given him hope.

Or maybe Veronica is making us puppets dance for her amusement, Jughead mused bitterly.

He peered in through the small rectangular window in the door. Betty was there, as promised, and Jughead immediately grinned. Her ponytail swung as she tugged covers off equipment, unleashing dusty clouds that reflected the sun and lent a halo to her angelic smile. She was excited about this venture of hers.

Thanks to Archie, he knew Chuck had practice for the next ninety minutes. That meant he could properly reconnect with Betty, perhaps begin to untangle the web of weird behaviour and unending apologies. But first, he'd have to stop being a coward.

Pushing open the door to the office, he coughed as a poof of dust hit his tongue. "Hey, Lois Lane. Jimmy Olsen singing the blues, yet?"

"Juggie!" Betty beamed, tossing aside a dropcloth. "I'm so glad you came! You got Veronica's
message?"

So, Betty had initiated that? Jughead fought to maintain a cool exterior. "I did. What am I doing here, besides witnessing the mass eviction of a dust mite colony?"

"The Blue and Gold isn't dead, Juggie. It's dormant." Her finger trailed along a computer monitor, her eyes widening at the accumulation of dirt on her skin. "I've fought for months to fix that, and I've finally won."

"I'm surprised they even fought you on it, given your Cooper pedigree." Jughead mused aloud, approaching a nearby desk.

"I know. But that's all in the past. It's waking up, like Riverdale needs to." She leaned back against the opposing desk, grinning.

Jughead spotted an unusual item in a mug full of pens: a magnifying glass. Amused, he plucked it from its home and waved it around. "Riverdale definitely isn't Kansas, anymore. We're far over the rainbow."

Betty chuckled. "I knew you'd get it. And, if I know you and your love of true crime, there's no way you aren't fully immersed in the unsolved murder of our former classmate, Jason Blossom."

Holding the magnifying glass to his eye, Jughead smirked. "I might be writing a novel about it. Riverdale's very own In Cold Blood."

"Which started out as a series of articles." Betty's piercing eyes met his, mesmerizing him. "I'm… hoping you'll come write for The Blue and Gold."

There it was: the offer Archie had predicted. The way to regain their friendship, investigate the Blossom killing, and perhaps find out what was behind her distant behaviour with Archie, Kevin and Veronica. And yet, old fears seized him by the jugular. He was a weirdo, an outcast. People had openly mocked him in this town for writing until the wee hours at Pop's. Maybe Betty, knowing his passion for writing, was taking pity on him in some gesture of apology.

"I just don't think the school paper's the right fit for my voice," he deflected, rocking back and forth on his feet.

Betty slowly crossed the room towards him, shaking her head. "Juggie, Jason's death changed Riverdale. People don't want to admit that, but it's true. We all feel it. Nothing this bad was ever supposed to happen here, but it did. I want to know why."

He swallowed hard as she drew within two feet of him, that familiar strawberry-vanilla perfume of hers too intoxicating to ignore. This? This was his Betty: the writer, the woman passionate about truth and justice. That twinkle in her eye that had been notably absent this morning was back.

"Would I get complete freedom?"

Say no and give me an out, Betty. I don't want to let you down. I don't want to ruin this dream for you.

"I'll help, and edit, and suggest, but it's your story. It's your voice." Her voice was pleading now, sensing he was wavering.

Time alone with Betty, working on writing projects. It would be like before, when things were simpler and unrequited love was buried deep within their respective hearts. Jesus, Jughead, who are
"Doesn't sound like complete freedom, but..." He hesitated intentionally, enjoying her anxious anticipation. "I'm in."

"Okay, great!" Betty clasped her hands together and grinned, her feet shuffling in her trademark 'happy dance' that he jokingly called her Snoopy Shuffle. "In that case, I have your first assignment."

"Betty, I literally just got back to town," he teased. "You won't even cut me some slack for a day?"

"Like you ever slack off," she fired back playfully.

"Touché, Lois. What's on the agenda?"

"There's one person who was at the river on July fourth that no one's talking about."

"Dilton Doiley."

"Exactly." She touched his arm lightly and grinned. "I knew you'd be up to speed. As if you never left..."

"Only, I did leave." And there was the majestic elephant, trotting around the room. "At least I had your letters and calls to keep me grounded in Toledo. For a while, anyway."

Her porcelain visage cracked, revealing a pained woman within. Wrapping her arms tightly around herself, she turned away, pacing to the window.

"I know. I could... I could give you excuses, but none of them would be good enough."

He edged forward, placing the magnifying glass on the desk beside him. "Try the truth, then. You and I have always been honest with each other, Betts."

"What if I don't know the truth myself?"

In that moment, Jughead knew three things: he'd already forgiven her for her silence; Betty was afraid of something; and that he would do anything to help her feel safe and secure again. Betty was a creature of knowledge. Knowing was in her DNA. For her to question herself, question her truth... it was heartbreaking.

"Then, I guess we have two mysteries to solve," he replied at last, placing a hand on her shoulder. Her posture visibly relaxed at his touch. "I'm so glad you're home, Juggie. Do you believe me?"

"I always believe you. Honesty, remember? That's us."

Betty turned to face him, brushing away a single tear. "Yes, honesty. Thank you for reminding me."

Now it was his turn to look away, unnerved by her words. "So, you need another set of hands to get this place in order?"

"No, you can head home. I'm sure FP is waiting for you, being that it's your first day back. I won't stay much longer today."

Jughead shrugged. "He's working with Fred. He won't mind."

"You sure?"
Picking up a nearby feather duster, Jughead smirked. "Like you didn't secretly hope I'd offer when I saw the state of the place."

Betty laughed, reaching for a nearby broom. "There's nothing wrong with optimism, Jughead Jones."

No, there wasn't. How else could he explain the airy feeling in his chest as they tackled the grime and grit caking the office? He might not fully understand Betty's recent behaviour, but he knew that the friend he'd known since she threw a book at a bully in his defense was still inside her. With persistence and patience, he'd find a way to reach her.

They would find the truth together.

Chapter End Notes

Until next week, wherein lies FP, a memorial and a night out with the core four...
Welcome back to another installment of Gaslight, my dark AU of season one. Thank you for all the follows and favourites. Please don't be shy to leave a review, say hi, ask questions. Reviews feed the muse.

Reviewer question: will FP be arrested? Great question. Without delving into spoilers, I can confirm FP's original storyline will shift due to the time lapse and his sobriety, but he is far from safe in Riverdale.

On to a new chapter, wherein several characters struggle beneath the weight of emotions, lies and things left unsaid.

Song: A Drowning - How To Destroy Angels (this one's very Cheryl, for me)
Disclaimer: Still don't own my toys, just my own original twists on the world of Riverdale. Disclaim, disclaim.

Four: A Drowning

"It's the looking back in anger
For every second slipping by
Undertow has come to take me
Guarded by the blazing sun
Look at everything around us, well
Look at everything we've done

Please, anyone?
I don't think I can
Save myself
I'm drowning here, please..."

A Drowning - How To Destroy Angels

I stand on the bank of Sweetwater River, eyes closed, listening to the water softly breaking over the rocky shoreline. It is early morning and although the sun has risen, its warmth cannot reach me. If I were to step into the grey water, soak my clothes and curl up on a nearby boulder, I imagine I would feel much like Cheryl Blossom did that fateful Fourth of July.

I am no stranger to loss. Few of us are.

I imagine a gunshot, hear it shatter the tranquility of what was once a beloved place for leisure in Riverdale. I picture myself as Dilton Doiley, leading his troop on a bird watching expedition two miles away. I picture myself finding the crimson-haired cheerleader on the shore, beside herself with grief.

Innocence is lost in so many ways.
I cornered Dilton last week at an Adventure Scouts meeting, pulling him away from his beloved pack. It took some persuasion and a little intel from a scout, but Betty’s instincts had bore fruit: that mystery shot Cheryl had claimed to hear? The little girl hadn't cried wolf, after all. Dilton had pulled the trigger. And while the Blossom twins set out on their final journey together, Dilton was noticing Ms Grundy’s car. The car where Archie lost his innocence and, for a time, his mind.

I open my eyes, surveying the scene. I can triangulate their respective positions, marvel at how they maintained just enough distance to neither corroborate nor disprove each other's stories. The one true fact is that a gun was fired that day by a Scoutmaster with a survivalist mentality—and it was not the gunshot that killed Jason Blossom.

There's more to the story Cheryl has been desperately shilling, but I cannot bring myself to unravel her just yet. Riverdale High is dedicating a maple tree to Jason tonight, in the very place I now stand. The darkness clings to his sister now, weighing her down like the waterlogged dress of her nightmare.

It dances after Betty, snatching at her ankles as she rushes from class to class to practice. I try to engage her, but the shadows snare her, dragging what remains of the friend I love beneath the surface. My arms reach out to save her, but they falter, tangled in the kelp of a broken home and late-night calls to a ten year-old who listens to Pink Floyd on a cheap Crossley turntable.

You see, it doesn't take water for someone to drown. Most of us manage it just fine in the open air.

Jughead tugged anxiously at the hem of his sweater, studying his reflection in the dingy mirror. A memorial called for a level of decorum that his poverty didn't exactly allow for, but the thrift store had delivered a navy blue miracle, price tag still in place. It was a little small, but wool was far more forgiving than the upper crust of Riverdale's north side.

"You look so damn grown up."

Jughead startled, spinning around to find his father lingering in the bedroom doorway. FP looked tired, but still sober—as much as surprise to himself as his son, it seemed. Jughead frowned, giving the hem one last firm tug. That'll do.

"Thanks," he managed at last.

FP tilted his head, studying the room. "You going to that memorial?"

Gesturing to the camera on his bed, he nodded. "Covering it for the Blue and Gold."

"Huh."

Silence fell heavily upon them, a crushing weight that drove the air from Jughead's lungs. He thought back to the morning, to that murky river water and its death-hands. Remembered wondering how it would feel to drown, despite Jason perishing in a much more sinister fashion.

"I'm really glad you came home, Jug." FP's eyes bored holes into him, and he couldn't help but stare at his scuffed black boots. "I was there, you know. When they pulled Jason's body from the river. They tried to keep people away, but I saw him before they zipped the bag shut…"

His father's hand gripped the door jamb tightly, knuckles white. His eyes misted over and he was miles away for a moment, but only one.

"What happened was terrible, Dad. It's changed Riverdale." Boldly, he added, "Maybe it's changed some people for the better."
FP laughed bitterly, shaking his head. "Or maybe some people are too fucking scared to live without their senses sharp as a knife."

Jughead edged forward, heart in throat. "What are you afraid of?"

"Losing you and Jelly," FP mumbled, fist ing his hair. "Like I told you... I don't ever want to do what the Blossoms did. I don't ever want to bury my child."

*He's hiding something.*

"Dad, I don't cause trouble. I go to school, I come home."

"Don't have to cause the trouble to be in trouble," FP pronounced ominously. "Sometimes, trouble finds you. Jason would tell you that... Anyway, I have a meeting now, but I can pick you up after the memorial, maybe?"

Jughead shook his head. "Archie and I are going to Pop's afterwards. It's okay, Dad. Go to your meeting. I'll be fine, I promise."

His father embraced him without warning, the firm grip almost painful. Jughead let himself collapse into his arms, remembering childhood years when his father was his hero. Distant days where his father would hoist him on his shoulders at a carnival, or play catch for hours. For a moment, he was six, skinned knees and palms covered in grease, eager to help repair a motorcycle. He was eight, begging his dad to read him another scary story by the fire pit. He was—

And suddenly, it was gone. FP pulled away as abruptly as he'd reached out, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his Serpents jacket, leaving Jughead baffled and bereft.

"See you tonight," FP mumbled, rushing out of the trailer with a slamming of the metal door.

As his father's truck roared to life outside, he sank to his knees and let out a single, anguished sob.

They rode in silence: a trio of lifelong friends with so much history, yet so little to say.

Fred Andrews played chauffeur, nudging the radio a little higher once he'd clued in on how awkward the teens felt. No questions were asked, and no answers were volunteered.

For Jughead, the conversation with his father weighed heavily on his mind. His father loved him—he knew it in the marrow of his bones—but his explanation of his epiphany (and subsequent sobriety) only rang half-true. He knew something about Jason's death. Maybe it was a rumour, a whisper around the streets of the Southside. Maybe it was only a theory, but one he was certain held water. But he knew something more than empathy for grieving parents.

Betty sat beside him, her fingers twitching in her lap. Jughead could almost hear her rehearsing that checklist they'd come up with as they studied their murder board in the office. The perks of having the sheriff's son as an ally, he supposed. They'd divided duties the previous day: Jughead, under the guise of taking photos of the memorial, would study the crowd, snapping images of anyone or anything unusual; Betty, taking notes, would eavesdrop and hope for insight into why Jason had wanted to run away.

Their arrival was early, but only just: several others were making the trek down the well-worn path to the chosen tree. A simple, yet elegant, sign directed them to the left to park. Betty's fist curled tightly in her lap as Fred's truck swung into a makeshift parking space. Jughead's hand shot out to cover hers, squeezing it lightly.
"You okay, Betts?"

"Yeah. I'm just sad about Jason. Sad for Polly, too." She flashed a smile to reassure him, although it didn't reach her eyes.

Knowing how to pick a battle, Jughead accepted her charade and slipped out of the truck. Archie had warned him that the entire team—Chuck included—was expected at the memorial, and sure enough, Chuck's Lexus was already parked nearby.

_Bite your tongue, Jughead. Hold it in. There's important work to be done._

Archie, also sensing Betty's discomfort, looped an arm around his friend's shoulder. Betty startled slightly, glancing up and relaxing at the familiar face beside her. She leaned into his shoulder and sighed.

"Thanks, Archie."

"Anytime, Betty."

Fred gestured up the path and the teens nodded their assent, following dutifully behind him. Archie kept a protective arm around Betty, his face revealing a mixture of confusion and relief. Jughead felt a twinge of envy, but also understood that their friendship desperately needed this olive branch. He flanked Betty on the opposite side, reflexively falling into step with her.

_The Three Musketeers_, Betty had joked often in grade school. Inseparable and greater in strength when united.

Camera at the ready, Jughead found his first subject at the memorial site in the stiff posture and narrowed eyes of Chuck Clayton. Snapping quickly, feigning a test shot, he noted the tension in the football player's neck as he immediately made his way to Betty.

"Andrews," Clayton spat. "I didn't expect you here, with Betty."

Betty fidgeted, acutely aware that Archie still had her tucked beneath his arm. Archie, to Jughead's delight, stood his ground.

"My father drove us all here. As you can see, my best friend is saddened by the loss of Jason. That's why we're here, isn't it?"

"Arch—"

"Yes, it is. And if Betty needs anything, I will provide it," Clayton growled.

"Chuck, please…"

Her voice was so soft, so unsure. So very ignored by the testosterone twins battling it out over her. She needed an out.

"Actually, Betty is here to report for the Blue and Gold, which means we need to go set up near the podium. Excuse us."

Seizing her hand, Jughead pulled Betty away from them. Clearly rattled, she didn't protest until Jughead ushered her into place near the front. Her mouth fell open in a silent gasp of indignation, then closed again. Shrugging, Jughead adjusted a few settings on the loaner DSLR camera.

"Chuck is going to be very angry," she whispered.
"You're welcome," Jughead muttered.

"Juggie, I'm serious."

He stared at her intently, noting how her tension mirrored Chuck's moments before, with one distinction: Betty's shoulders drooped, while Chuck's chest had puffed out in dominance. He leaned closer, his lips nearly grazing her ear.

"If your boyfriend scares you, then maybe he's a shitty abuser you should be rid of."

Her stunned silence was all the answer he needed.

The memorial was fast becoming a crowd, bodies clustered and pressed into mini-cliques. The cafeteria's division of turf, replicated in dark clothes and nice shoes sinking into dampened earth from the previous day's thunderstorm. Betty shook off his words quickly, taking dutiful notes as a series of speakers elaborated on Jason's contributions to Riverdale, his caring personality and the tragedy of a life ended so young.

Jughead was mildly disappointed that Cheryl Blossom hadn't shown up in her river outing dress, as he'd been told she'd elected to do at the funeral. Clearly distraught, she clung to her father's arm as one might cling to a life preserver in choppy waters. Her black dress was couture, of course—a Blossom would never dare suppress a sense of style—but it was modest for the epitome of a Riverdale Vixen. Her glittering gold pumps were the only trace of the Cheryl he knew and loathed—the princess desperately seeking validation.

Archie stood with his father, the lone football player apart from the pack. Chuck held the centre of the jocks, his eyes boring holes into an oblivious Betty. Weaving slowly among the Blossoms and socialite friends deemed worthy of a front row view, she listened to what was said, and what wasn't. Her pencil flew, jotting down bits of speeches, along with observations in her typical shorthand. Of all her scribbles, the one that intrigued him most was Gma? Pol?

A reminder to watch Good Morning, America, or an insight gleaned from the crowd?

As Clifford and Penelope Blossom stepped forward for the final dedication, Jughead noticed Cheryl had begun to pace in small, slow circles. His camera caught her mid-stride, her loose curls half-obscuring her features. His shoulder nudged Betty's lightly and she caught on. Still making notes, she drifted towards Cheryl, whispering something quietly to perhaps console her. Cheryl remained motionless, unseeing gaze fixed on the river behind her parents.

Betty stepped away sadly, clearly at a loss, but didn't get far: Cheryl's hand flew out, grabbing her wrist. Jughead edged forward, prepared to intervene, but it wasn't necessary. Ruby red lips parted, spilling a secret long stashed away in an angry heart.

"Your sister is why JJ wanted to leave town."

Betty pulled free, stumbling towards him in shock. As he had done so many times in their youth, when bullies had teased Betty for being too smart, too cheery or simply too different from most children their age, Jughead reached for her hand and gave it a quick squeeze.

"Breathe," he murmured.

"I'm fine," she lied.

A polite applause marked the formal dedication of Jason Blossom's plaque-adorned maple tree. Punctuating her parents' performative speech, Cheryl Blossom collapsed to the wet ground in a dead faint with a gasp.
The clock chimed nine as Archie, Jughead, Betty and Veronica sat in a corner booth, sipping a second round of milkshakes. It wasn't the welcome home party Veronica had wanted, but Betty had insisted it was the night she was most readily available. No movies would be watched tonight, but dinner was had and with food came a contented Jughead. A laughing, joking Betty Cooper? That made him the happiest guy in town.

*There she is. Our Betty.*

Archie had noticed it, too, and couldn't stop grinning. Every so often, he'd lock eyes with Jughead and raise an eyebrow. *You see it?* Jughead would smirk and tease Betty, earning a playful slap in the arm or a carefree giggle. *I see it.*

"Oh B, that article you wrote last week about Weatherbee's hypocrisy in underfunding the Vixens? Fabulous." Veronica raised her milkshake in a toast. "Thanks to you, we'll actually get jackets to wear over our skimpy booty shorts."

"Cheerleading is as much of a sport as football and therefore, it should be funded like any other sport at Riverdale High." Betty toyed with the ends of her ponytail, smirking. "I did love the part where I got Mayor McCoy to agree with my assessment that diminishing women's sports teams would be setting a dangerously sexist precedent."

Archie frowned. "Okay, I'm probably about to shove my foot down my throat—"

"Famous last words," Jughead snarked.

"Hey! Seriously, though: I'm all for treating things equally, but football requires a hell of a lot of gear that isn't cheap and cheerleading is basically outfits and batons. Does the cheerleading team actually need equal funding?"

Veronica giggled. "Oh, Archiekins, you can be so oblivious. First of all, our booty shorts? They need regular replacement. They're moulded to our asses like panties. Secondly, that wasn't even the point."

"It wasn't?"

"No, the point is that Weatherbee can't assume the team needs 10% of what he gives to the football team. He should start with equal funding for everyone, then reallocate unused funds to teams in need of extra assistance," Betty explained patiently. "So, after we get our uniforms refreshed, our jackets done and our flaming batons, the football team can spend our leftovers on jockstraps and Dude Wipes, for all I care."

Jughead snorted. "If you use Dude Wipes, my respect for you is about to plummet."

"I don't even know what a Dude Wipe is!" Archie shouted, drawing the amused ears of a nearby table. "Wait, how do you know what they are, Betty?"

"Because she used to stare at the asses of UFC fighters when we would watch fights at your house in grade six," Jughead teased.

Betty's cheeks flushed crimson. "What?! I did not!"

"Oh Betty, come on! I hardly think your bestest friends will judge you for having a sex drive." Veronica winked, leaning forward. "Tell us: who has the best ass in MMA?"
"I don't have a favourite ass!" Betty was beet red, laughing so hard she could scarcely breathe.

"Everyone has a favourite," Jughead insisted. "Come on, Betts, 'fess up."

"Oh, everyone has one? Who's your favourite ass, then?"

"That Sonnen guy always seemed like an asshole, but he was an amusing asshole," Jughead deadpanned.

Archie and Veronica laughed as Betty tossed a straw wrapper at Jughead's face. "Under those criteria, maybe you're my favourite ass, then!"

Jughead pulled his straw from his chocolate shake and, in one swift motion, flicked it against Betty's forehead. A small dollop of ice cream slid down the bridge of her nose, to the amusement of their friends. Plunking his straw back into his glass, he turned to Archie and grinned.

"I'm the favourite."

A cold, wet burst collided with his cheekbone and he returned his attention to Betty, a spoon in her hand and a chocolate ice cream sheen on her skin. His finger scraped the vanilla shake from his skin and popped it in his mouth. He tilted his head, as if deep in thought, then shook his head.

"Nope, still prefer chocolate."

The jukebox shuffled songs and Veronica immediately clapped her hands. "Ooh! I love this song! Betty, let's dance!"

"V, I don't know…"

"Come on!"

Veronica pulled Betty to her feet, singing along with Fun's *We Are Young* at the top of her lungs. Pop Tate glanced up briefly from his grill, shrugging and laughing. At least Veronica could carry a tune. Jughead wiped away the remnants of shake on his cheek and smiled.

"The Betty we know and love came with us tonight."

Archie grinned. "Like old times. I missed this, you know? You, me, Betty… And Veronica is good for her."

In the aisle of the diner, Veronica twirled Betty around then swooped her into a messy version of a tango, still singing: "So let's set the world on fire! We can burn brighter than the sun!"

"Yeah, she is. I think she's the one behind Betty asking me to write for the paper."

"Um, boys? This dance floor is big enough for four," Veronica insisted.

"Yeah, that's a hard pass," Jughead replied.

"No thanks, Ronnie. We'd just trample your toes," Archie added.

Veronica pouted and swayed to the music. "Boys suck!"

For one more minute, the world was beaming with light and promise. For one more minute, Betty was singing and smiling, and Jughead let himself believe it was just for him. And then, a phone rang. Betty's phone.
"I have to get that," she blurted out, reaching for the table.

"No way!" Veronica shouted, snatching Betty's phone away. "This is our night. This is Jughead's party. You promised—"

"I won't be long. Just give it to me, V."

A fourth ring. A fifth, as Veronica held the phone over her head and darted away. Betty pawed the air, but Veronica was quicker, anticipating Betty's moves.

"You promised, Betty Cooper! We all agreed to no interruptions."

A sixth ring, then silence.

"Veronica, it could be my mother. You know how she is!"

Jughead's heart began to pound. Betty was panicking. Over a phone call. The only phone calls worth panicking over involved Ivy League schools, cops or hospitals. Yet, it was there: the wide eyes, the ashen features, the shallow breath of one coming unglued.

Veronica wagged a finger. "Nope, I saw the display. It was your downer of a boyfriend. He can be a big boy and amuse himself for a night."

A ring. Another. Archie was worried. Jughead was struggling with Betty's pained expression—specifically, with how very much it reminded him of his mother's.

"This isn't funny, Veronica!"

No, no it wasn't. Because Jughead knew what was wrong now, knew why their Betty had disappeared into a shell of herself. And as much as he wanted to give a certain football coach's son a little payback, there was a more urgent task at hand.

Calmly rising to his feet, he swiped Betty's phone back from Veronica and handed it to Betty. "No calls, just text," he told her.

It was a line he felt safe to draw, and Betty quickly assented. Her fingers flew over the keys, tapping out a lengthy message he was certain involved at least three iterations of I'm sorry. The blonde slumped into the booth, glaring at Veronica.

"Oh B, don't be like that. It was a phone call!"

"You just don't understand."

"Try me," Veronica pressed.

More furious texting. Betty's green irises misted over with tears. "I'm tired. Can we call it a night?"

"Fine." Veronica rose, storming over to the cash to settle their tab.

"Betty, that was kinda harsh."

She glared at Archie. "Don't you start, too. It's my phone. Mine. I'm an adult and I can decide who to talk to and when, alright?"

"Okay, Betty," Archie mumbled. "I'm sorry."
She patted his hand briefly, reassuring him that all would soon be forgotten. Veronica, on the other hand, left with an abrupt goodbye before the trio made their way down the street: Jughead and Archie to the Andrews home; Betty to hers. Little was said, aside from inane comments on the weather and mentions of quizzes already scheduled. Now and then, Betty would text furiously, but keeping her word, she did not make any calls.

One promising thing: Betty paused to hug each of them goodbye. A genuine embrace, tight and comforting. A glimmer of *their* Betty had followed them home. As she wrapped her arms around him, Jughead whispered in her ear.

"You owe me an explanation. I'll be over soon."

Her nervous nod assured him that she would wait up. "Goodnight, guys. I'm sorry I killed the mood."

Ever agreeable, Archie shrugged. "It's okay, Betty. We're just happy we could spend some time with you."

"It was so good to hang out with you two, like we used to. I promise, we'll do something soon." Hugging herself, Betty turned and headed up her driveway, disappearing behind the fence dividing the Cooper and Andrews properties.

Fumbling for his keys, Archie shook his head. "I hate what Clayton's done to her."

You don't even realize the half of it, Jughead silently seethed.

"Coming, Jug?"

He shook his head, rolling his neck. "I need to talk a walk. Clear my head. You go in, I'll be back in thirty, tops."

The best part about having a friend from birth? He seldom asked questions. Patting him once on the back, Archie passed his keys over and headed inside. He pocketed them quickly and approached the Cooper home, looping around the rear to where a ladder lay next to the shed. For reasons unknown to him, the Coopers seldom stored it in their garage. It was no wonder the Cooper girls snuck out so frequently. Their parents were practically encouraging it.

Gently, he lined the ladder up with Betty's window and ascended. He moved slowly, mindful of the potential for noise. Reaching her window, he tapped lightly on the glass with a single knuckle. Inside her room, Betty spun around and rushed forward to open the pane.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair," he quipped, pulling himself inside.

"So you're sneaking through my window now?" she whispered.

"I only do this for my best friends, Betts. You should feel honoured."

Her cheeks flushed pink as she looked away; he only hoped she couldn't see the heat in his own. Clearing his throat, Jughead leaned against her desk.

"Are we safe to talk here?" At her quizzical look, he clarified, "Mom and Pop Cooper. Sound sleepers?"

"Oh. Yes, medicated or natural, they're both deep sleepers. All the same, we should keep it down."
She sunk onto her bed, hands fidgeting in her lap. Jughead studied her a moment, wondering whether a direct question would work, or if he should just sit in silence until she felt compelled to fill it. He hoped for the latter, knowing if he called things as he saw them, his lingering rage over his own miserable life experiences might sour things quickly.

"You wanted to talk?" Betty prompted nervously.

"That was the deal. I got your phone back, but you need to explain why you went off on Veronica."

In the shallow light of her bedside lamp, Betty's features looked hollow. For a moment, his mind meandered into years of morbid true crime reading and the hollows gave way to a glistening skull. His heart ground to a halt as she expired in stop-motion in his fevered imagination.

_No! Not her!_

Her delicate hands smoothed her skirt, picking at invisible lint. "She just doesn't understand why Chuck is the way he is. He's needy. I'm not going to say he isn't. But he's insecure, and I get that, Jug."

"He's insecure," Jughead echoed, fighting the urge to roll his eyes.

"Yes! His father is his coach. He expects him to get a full ride to a top college." Betty shrugged sadly. "I know what it's like to bear the weight of your parents' dreams."

He drummed his fingers absently against her desk, swallowing down his frustration. He knew these lines, knew the games men could play. Of _course_ Chuck was insecure and struggling with parental pressure. It was his angle, the way he'd hooked her in the first place. Jughead knew false bravado better than anyone, and Chuck wasn't an example of it. Chuck was oozing true arrogance.

"I know what your parents have put you through, Betty. Just like you know a lot about mine." He rose slowly, crossing the room towards her. "But have you considered that being at his beck and call like this is actually enabling him? That he won't ever feel secure unless you force him to try?"

It was a gamble, and potentially a dangerous strategy, should she listen. But he would work that out with Archie and Veronica. They would keep a close eye on their friend. As much as Jughead wished he was dead wrong, he knew in his gut what Chuck's true motive was: power.

"I… No, no I guess not. It's just… Never mind." She flopped backwards onto her bed and stared at the pale pink ceiling. "You wouldn't understand."

"We've been best friends since kindergarten. Try me," Jughead urged, sitting down beside her.

"Last year, with you gone and Archie… I was really lonely. I mean, I had friends, but I was alone. Chuck was kind to me. He helped me snap out of this… darkness that I couldn't shake. So if he needs help…"

_Ah… she's rescuing him, in her mind. Just like Veronica thought. "You feel you owe him that help. You have a big heart, Betty Cooper. Maybe too big."_

She shimmied her way up the bed, turning on her side. "There's no such thing as being too kind."

Jughead drew a deep breath, willing himself to calm down. "But kindness _can_ be wasted on someone who doesn't give it back. Like a guy who calls you stupid for not meeting you at the right time before class."
"Chuck just handles things differently, that's all. He's very punctual. I know he hates to be kept waiting."

She bit her lip, a long-standing tell she had whenever she was unsure of a statement. His hand stretched out of its own volition, his fingers brushing against the faint indentations of her teeth. Don't hurt yourself for this manipulative asshole. He's not worthy of you. She sighed softly, closing her eyes for a long moment.

"I missed this," she murmured.

"Missed what?"

"You, making sense of things. Or just listening." Her eyes fluttered open, emerald irises fixed on him. "I can tell you don't like Chuck, but you're listening to my side. That means a lot to me."

It was a knife in his heart, but he forced a smile and twisted the blade deeper. "I missed this, too. You realize this is the most we've said to each other since January?"

Her jaw quivered slightly. "I was a lousy pen pal. More than that, I've been a terrible friend. Can you forgive me, Juggie?"

Helpless, his heart hurting, he nodded. "But only this once. One free pass per lifetime of friendship."

"Deal." She patted the bed beside her, lips curving into a half-smile. "Lie down with me?"

Jughead swallowed hard and swung his legs around, curving his body in a reflection of hers. Their faces scant inches apart, the air grew thinner and his head began to spin. He was lost in her: that familiar scent of strawberries and cream; those long lashes framing her eyes; the stray wisp of hair tumbling free of her trademark ponytail. The shadows around her orbits—faint and well concealed with makeup, but thick and purple up close—worried him. Was she not sleeping?

"I should apologize to Veronica," she murmured sadly.

"Yeah, you should. But she'll forgive you," he reassured her. "She knows she pushes buttons."

"Mmhmm." Her right hand clenched into a tight fist on the blanket between them.

"Bett, she will. You know that she will." His hand covered hers, squeezing gently until she unfurled her fingers.

A single, shaky breath, and her face relaxed. "Promise?"

"Promise." It was a promise he'd keep, even if he had to talk sense into the vivacious Latina.

Betty burrowed her head deeper into her pillow. "So, do you think Cheryl faked that fainting spell to piss off the Blossoms, or was it legit?"

"You know, at first I thought it might be staged. Revenge for the way they treated her after the funeral. But my gut says that being back there, where they parted ways… it was a lot to take in. I mean, if something like that had happened to Archie, or you…"

"Yeah. Polly didn't want to come today. Did I tell you she's coming home soon?"

"No! That's really good news, Betts. I know how much you miss her."

Her lips curled into a half-smile. "Yeah, I do. If nothing else, it'll be nice to have an ally at home."
Two versus two. Speaking of Polly, something really weird happened at the memorial today. Jason's grandmother pulled on my arm to get me to stop and talk to her."

"I saw that. I'd assumed she was asking about Polly."

Betty shook her head. "Oh, no. She thought that I was Polly. And it gets weirder, Jug. She told me it was smart not to wear the ring."

Jughead's eyes widened. "A ring? What ring?"

"I don't know, but now I'm wondering if that had something to do with Jason's plan to leave town. Cheryl said Polly was his reason to run. What if Polly knows about his plan?"

"Wait, you still haven't spoken to her?"

Betty shook her head. "Just a letter. My parents have been really, really weird about it."

"They're a little weird about everything, but I know what you mean. When is she coming home?"

"It won't be much longer. They won't tell me for sure." Her hand pressed to her lips, stifling a yawn. "I'm just glad it's soon."

Weary, yet reluctant to give up the comfort of being beside her, Jughead forced himself to put her needs first. "It's late. You should get some sleep."

"S'okay, I'm not sleepy," she lied.

"You are a terrible liar."

"I can lie!" she protested.

Jughead snorted. "Oh, you can lie. Nobody believes you, but you try."

"Be nice, Jughead Jones!"

"Get some sleep, Elizabeth Cooper!"

She giggled, stifling a second yawn. "Fine, fine. I'm sorry I'm keeping you from a hot date."

*Oh, Betty. You're the only date I want.*

"Oh yeah, video games with Archie. So hot."

He reluctantly rose from the bed, rolling his neck slowly. She rose, too, tugging her hair free of her ponytail. He inhaled sharply, fighting the urge to touch the soft waves tumbling messily around her cheeks. Instead, he slid the window open slowly, prolonging the inevitable for a few extra seconds.

*You're pathetic, Jones.*

"Are you staying for Sunday dinner with Fred?" she asked softly.

"Probably. I know my dad is planning to come, so it seems like a waste of time to go home and come right back."

Her fingers toyed with the hem of her top. "Think Fred would mind if I stopped by, too?"

Jughead grinned. "What, with your bird-like appetite? He'll have to make a whole extra scoop of
mashed potatoes! Such a burden."

"Maybe you could cook for once, instead of eating us all out of house and home," she teased.

"If you promise to come to dinner, I will cook the potatoes. And I'll have you know that I have mastered a garlic smashed potato."

"Well, I guess I'm coming to dinner!"

She embraced him suddenly, catching him off guard. His arms folded around her tightly, his face buried in her hair. After twelve plus years, it never stopped surprising him. The warm hugs, the moments where she called him one of her very best friends—they always shocked him. Archie had been his friend by default since birth, but Betty had chosen them on the first day of school, and he still couldn't understand why. In his life, given a choice, people generally chose to leave him, or ignore him. Betty was an exception, one he was forever grateful for. Even if she never saw him as more than a friend, his life was better with her in it.

A whisper in his ear. "G'night, Juggie."

"Night, Betts."

She pulled away, nudging her window open. "Be careful."

"Don't you worry about me."

With one long look at her sleepy visage, Jughead swung his legs out onto the ladder and made his careful descent. Somehow, he wasn't surprised to look up and find Betty watching over him. She was a protective soul.

_If only you were as protective with yourself_, he mused sadly as he crossed the yard to the Andrews home. _But I'm here now. I'm watching him. And I'm not going anywhere._

Chapter End Notes

Jughead's suspicions are confirmed, sadly. But what can he do without risking driving Betty away? See you next week, as Juggie digs deeper into a subtle pattern and Betty discovers a horrible truth.

_(Tuesdays will probably become my posting days, but let me know if you prefer Mondays.)_
Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT: I never got notified about chapter four posting last week, but my email's been weird. So if you haven't read about Jason's memorial. GO BACK.


Song: Landscape - Florence + The Machine (consider this a Polly/Dark Betty number)
Disclaimer: You know the drill. I'm just here to play with these toys and soothe myself after recent TV events.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Five: Landscape

"Cause she's just like the weather, can't hold her together
Born from dark water, daughter of the rain and snow
Cause it's burning through the bloodline
It's cutting down the family tree
Growing in the landscape, darling, in between you and me..."

Landscape - Florence + The Machine

Three in the morning. The witching hour. It's the time of night where the world is doused in darkness, and not even a full moon can cut a swath of safety to guide me home.

The air is heavy. It presses my shoulders down, forces me to bear its burden until I sink into the dampened soil. I sometimes imagine, as I walk the desolate pathways of Sunnyside Trailer Park, that it is coiling its grey fingers around my ankle, tangling my limbs until I tumble into unseen quicksand and surrender to its siren's song.

In the blackest night, I cling to a distant light to keep me on the right side of the shadows. My personal sun, nestled in the north. In Toledo, she was state borders away, unseen, but her warmth—God, that warmth!—cradled my broken body and whispered of a world where maybe someday, someone would see me and love me. In Riverdale, she is a thirty minute walk away, but her light, it is receding.

It is taking all of my strength to not make that walk, not clamber up that ladder and beg her to shine as she was put on this earth to do. Because if she is not the sun, then the darkness will swallow me whole—just one more lost little boy, who will never find his way home.

My compass, my dear friend. One more casualty of Riverdale. But this murder, it will not go unsolved. My sun will have the justice she craves.

Me? I will hold fast to the lie I tell myself every morning: "You don't love her. She's just your friend."

Riverdale High's Talent Show. An annual tradition that would typically send Jughead running for headphones and his warped Pink Floyd records. But not this time, to his horror. Oh, no.
Because Betty had assigned him to cover it for the Blue and Gold.

"You told me I could write about Jason's murder," he'd protested angrily.

"And you are! But Juggie, I have to help Kevin run the show. I can't cover something I'm a part of. Besides, Archie's performing. He needs a friendly reviewer who hasn't humiliated herself at a homecoming party."

He'd challenged her on that, pointing out that she'd moved along to Chuck, but Betty had quickly shaken her head, adamant that Jughead take the story. And so, with a headache pulsing in his temples, he sat in the back of the gymnasium, now converted to a reasonable semblance of a music theatre. On stage, his best friend strummed an acoustic guitar, eyes darting side to side.

"Archie, you're my friend, but if you can't sing it for me and a few distracted stage hands, how are you going to do it tonight?" Kevin shouted.

Archie nodded, glancing over at Jughead. His eyes were wide, pupils dilated so drastically, it reminded Jughead of a cartoon character. He flashed Archie a thumbs up, gesturing for him to play.

The first notes of Archie's song echoed off the walls and Jughead nodded reassuringly. He'd heard the song last night, and while it wasn't necessarily his style, Archie's heartbroken lyrics resonated with him. By the time Archie hit the mid-point of the song, he was even managing a half-smile.

*There you go, Arch. You've got this.*

Out of the corner of his eye, Jughead caught a glimpse of the one person who would make this wretched assignment worthwhile: Ethel Muggs. Her persistent avoidance of Chuck Clayton haunted him on nights when Betty's texts were sparse and sporadic.

*I need to know what she knows.*

Archie's song wrapped up and he applauded loudly, because no matter how *Ed Sheeran-esque* Archie's song was, it was sincere and his friend was living his dream. Jughead wouldn't even sing Happy Birthday to a friend, let alone step on a stage. Archie? He always went for it.

*And he always gets what he wants.* Jughead winced, taking a moment to be grateful he hadn't wanted Betty—only to dismiss it immediately. Better Archie than Chuck. *Thanks a whole lot, Ms Grundy.*

Ethel passed down the centre aisle of seats, finger tapping the air, perhaps counting the chairs. Her brow furrowed as she paused two rows ahead of him, and he seized the moment.

"Ethel?"

She startled, stumbling backwards. "Oh! Hi, Jughead. Did you come to support Archie?"

"Mmmmm. I'm also covering the talent show for the Blue and Gold, so I figured I'd cover everything. The team that makes the show possible and the polished performances for the town."

Ethel smiled shyly, tapping her clipboard against her thigh. "I think that's wonderful. Kevin has been working so hard to ensure this goes off without a hitch."

"You, too. I've been watching you run around for the last hour. Betty has told me how much of a help you've been with organizing ticket sales."
The name drop was deliberate, and it paid off. Ethel's eyes averted at the mention of Betty, her smile plummeting into a frown. Ethel was worried, just like Archie and him.

"Betty's a superstar. I don't know how she juggles everything…"

"Or everyone," Jughead prodded gently. "Her demanding mother, Weatherbee, the Vixens, Chuck…"

At the mention of his name, Ethel's shoulders slumped, curving inward. The clipboard tapped viciously against her thigh, surely leaving marks beneath her jeans. Her reaction only served to fuel Jughead's fears.

*What has that bastard done to you, Ethel?*

"Ethel, I need your help. I think Chuck might be bad for Betty," Jughead whispered. "Betty is one of the people that matters most to me in this planet. And I think you're worried too."

Ethel's lip trembled slightly. "He-he's not a nice guy."

"What did he do to you?" At her frantic look, he reached for her shoulder. "Ethel, no one's told me anything. But I see how you recoil from him. You don't trust him near you. You don't even want to be in the same room, if you can help it. If he's hurt you, you can tell me."

"He lies." Her voice was a hoarse whisper as a single tear slid down her cheek. "He told everyone I did… sexual things in the library with him. He did it to Veronica too," she blurted out.

Jughead rocked back on his heels. "Veronica dated Chuck?"

"One date," she clarified quietly. "He t-told the football team he gave her a sticky maple. It was right before he and Betty went to the dance."

The sticky maple: a Riverdale euphemism that made it difficult to enjoy its main export at Sunday breakfast. In Riverdale past, Jughead would muse that any guy comparing himself to syrup ought to see a doctor. In Riverdale now? Jughead was seething. His best friend was apparently dating a slut-shaming monster.

"Does Betty know about this? Does Veronica?"

Ethel shook her head. "I don't think so. Trev told me about the team laughing about it." A flash of anger marred her usually warm, welcoming features. "They *keep score*. It's a game to them."

From a distance, he heard an unwelcome interruption: "Ethel! I need your help!"

"Coming, Kevin!" Brushing the tears from her eyes, Ethel drew a deep breath. "Jughead, please, watch him. He's going to hurt her. He *is* hurting her. I don't know how, or why, but I feel it."

"I'll protect her," he vowed, placing a steadying hand on her shoulder. "Please, if you see anything that worries you, tell me."

"I will. I swear."

He watched as Ethel rushed away, apologizing loudly to a clearly anxious Kevin Keller. His mind swirled with fury, Ethel's revelations a twisting blade in his gut. *Keeping score*… What sort of disgusting bastard not only lied about women, but treated them like stages of a video game? Who else was involved?
"Oh, Betty, what have you gotten yourself into?"

Two days.

Betty had always been one of those infuriating people who never got sick. A sniffle here and there, sure, but never bedridden. It was what made her absence the following week so unnerving. His only comfort was Chuck Clayton's confusion. He drilled Archie before class on the second day, demanding to know where Betty was. Archie's lack of information sent Chuck's fist flying into a nearby vending machine; Chuck's fist left Archie and Jughead exchanging worried glances.

Jughead had immediately fired off a text: Hey Lois, what's my next assignment?

He tried to keep it light. Tried to swallow down the roiling acid in his gut. By lunch, when he'd heard nothing back—and neither had Archie, Kevin or Veronica—he'd called her. Three times. All three calls went straight to voicemail.

A second text: Betts, I know I half-assed the article on the talent show, but you're freaking me out. I need to know you're okay.

He tried the front office, batted his eyes at the nurse and asked if Betty would be out for more than a day, as he would very much like to take her homework to her. He'd fished for information, but learned only that she would be out "for a few days" and he'd be a dear to collect her work and hold onto it.

A third text, end of day: Betty Cooper, if I don't hear from you in the next hour, I am breaking in through your window to check your pulse.

"Archie?"

"I've got nothing, Jug," the redhead replied, clearly frustrated.

"Veronica?"

"Says she still hasn't heard from her, either."

Jughead paced the hallway as Archie loaded his textbooks into his backpack. "You got practice today?"

Archie shook his head. "Nah, we always take a day after a game to recover."

"Good." Jughead rolled his neck, fruitlessly trying to loosen the tension there. "Mind if I tag along?"

"It's as much your house as mine, Jug."

Jughead stared at his shoes, shuffling his feet. In so many ways, he supposed the Andrews house had been his home. He'd spent more time there than the trailer park: countless dinners, sleepovers and simply hanging out. It was strange, but even after seventeen years, he was still waiting to be uninvited.

Archie slung his backpack over his shoulder, nodding to the east doors. "Ready?"

"Yeah, let's go."
The day was overcast, a blue-grey sheen cast over the streets of Riverdale. Grey, like his world with Betty in danger. He didn't dare push—couldn't risk alienating her—but he was careful to study her each day. Was she suddenly wearing long sleeves on a warm day? Did she seem to be in pain? It broke him to acknowledge the gravity of her situation. There was no simple way to free her from an insidious abuser. He could shout it from the rooftops, and the mental damage he'd done would keep her spinning in circles of self-blame.

If Chuck Clayton laid even a finger on her, all bets were off. There would be no more patience—only vengeance. He'd be calling his dad for a favour, courtesy of the Southside Serpents.

"Do you think Chuck was lying earlier?" Archie asked, jarring him back to reality.

"No, I think he was genuinely pissed off that Betty wasn't at school. He doesn't have a clue. I don't know if that's worse, honestly."

"I just wish she'd send a text, or call," Archie lamented.

Jughead's hands dug deeper into the pockets of his coat. "Me, too."

"At least she seems better lately," Archie continued. "Like how she's come to Sunday dinner two weeks in a row. And she came to the movies on Thursday night."

Jughead smiled to himself, remembering the movie. The Bijou had run their annual Classic Movies Week and Veronica had insisted Jughead choose the movie they'd all see. After some serious debate, he'd ultimately chosen The Breakfast Club because he (correctly) assumed that everyone already loved it. He appreciated Hughes for his keen insight into teenage cliques, and considering the unusual grouping they made—a former New York socialite; an All-American jock; the classic cheerleader and A-student; and the aloof loner with a proverbial pen—it certainly rang true. One scene, however, cut too close to the bone.

I'd somehow forgotten about this scene. Bender's speech about life at his abusive home is unfolding before me now. My mouth is gritty and dry, my fingers twitching as I resist the urge to curl them into fists and swing. Fight or flight, and I choose fight. Flight cost me over a year with my best friends. Flight endangered one of them.

No, I will fight now. I will never stop fighting.

"Jug?"

A faint whisper in my ear. I avert my gaze from Bender's impression of his abusive father, sliding my hands along the arm rests.

"Juggie?"

Her hand covers my own, squeezing gently. I force myself to smile at her, reassuring her that all is well. I am no charity case. I'm not a needy kitten. Bender is shouting now, shouting at me, and I am slipping into a waking nightmare in Toledo. What about me? What about Mom? What about Jelly? What about this asshole, this waste of oxygen who is one bad day away from beating my mother?

A quiet plea, whispered in my ear: "Come back."

I blink hard and she is there: soft curls, glosed lips, and eyes that remind me of summer grass after a night of rain. She is still holding my hand and I remember she is the earth beneath my unsteady, unworthy feet.
"I need more candy," she announces, just loud enough for our friends to hear. "Juggie, can you help me?"

I nod quickly, hardly a fool. If you're drowning and someone throws a line, you take it.

She says nothing until we are outside of the auditorium, drawing me aside to a corner of the lobby. Her hand reaches for my arm, fingers massaging my tense bicep.

"Better now?"

"Yeah," I mumble.

She tilts her head askance. "You chose this movie. I know you've seen it before, because we debated John Hughes movies three summers ago. Why would you put yourself through that?"

I adjust my beanie, tugging it down to graze my eyebrows. "Because I knew everyone would agree to it."

"But it hurts you to watch it."

"Just that one part," I protest.

"One part is still too much. I don't ever want you to put yourself through something that makes you feel awful to make us happy, Jug. We're your friends. We don't want to cause you pain."

The anger is there before I can shove it down, bury it beneath the fear and love. Oh yes, the love. The cruellest joke of all is how this woman will literally give her heart to anyone but me. This intelligent, wise woman who once fretted over my father's drunken antics, who's concerned that a movie is digging a finger into invisible wounds, is inexplicably dating a controlling, abusive asshole. And it doesn't matter that I understand the psychology of abuse, understand its insidious snares. My inner Bender is seething, wanting her to notice the box he's put her in, wanting her to recognize the pain that is now consuming me.

I need some goddamn validation. I need her to see that nothing causes me more pain than seeing someone I love in danger.

"I am always in pain, Betty. You, of all people, should know enough to understand that."

The words are sharp and precise. They wound, and she takes a half-step back in her shock. Her fists curl tightly at her sides and a part of me wants her to get mad, to hit me in the arm and tell me she doesn't deserve my shitty attitude. Because as soon as the rage overflows, the guilt rushes in to displace it.

"I'm sorry. I... Should I leave you alone?"

Nonononononono, my brain screams. My mouth falls open in a mute scream, my hand pawing the air absentely. Veronica was right: I'm a needy puppy, scratching on a door, and Betty quickly hugs me, rescuing me again.

"Sorry," I mumble into her cashmere-clad shoulder.

"Don't be sorry." Her chin digs a little into my shoulder as she tightens her grip, blonde curls tickling my cheek.

It occurs to me that we've become the very thing we're evading: a John Hughes-esque teen moment.
I chuckle quietly, realizing that in so many ways, Betty is my Claire.

"What's so funny?"

I break away from her hug, shaking my head. "Art, imitating life, and vice versa."

It takes a few moments, but she catches on, giggling behind her hand. Without another word about my somewhat embarrassing meltdown, she skips off to the concession stand and buys one of each type of candy. I call dibs on the Milk Duds and she hides the Reese's Pieces in her purse so Archie won't ask for any, because his version of "some" has been "all" since he was five years old.

The two of us juggling the candy, she nudges my shoulder with hers and smiles softly. "We good?"

"Always, Cooper."

"Jug?"

"Hmm?"

They'd arrived at Archie's house—arrived at Betty's house, by proxy. Jughead noted quickly that the ladder he'd used to slip inside Betty's window was still near the shed, just waiting to be deployed.

Archie jerked his head in his neighbour's direction. "Should we go over there?"

"I don't know, Arch. Half of me thinks we should march in there and check on her, but the other half of me is afraid this is like that time Alice kicked Hal out for a week."

"It does feel like something is completely off," Archie agreed, craning his neck as he walked further along the sidewalk. "Hey, Alice and Hal's cars are both in the driveway."

Jughead groaned, kicking the curb. "Great, Mommy Dearest and spouse are here. Even if something is wrong with Betty, there's no way they're letting you or me near her." His eyes skirted the ladder near the shed, a plan forming. "Unless…"

"Unless what? We distract her with a sweater set sale?"

"Distract, yes. With you."

"Why me?" Archie demanded.

"Because you're the wholesome neighbour next door—"

"Yeah, and she hates me, Jug!"

"But not nearly as much as the son of a Southside biker," Jughead countered. "Alice hates being reminded of growing up there, and she really hates my dad, which raises questions I never want answered." He shuddered slightly, remembering a drunken rant from years ago that all but confirmed Alice had once been with his dad in the backseat of a car. "Besides, you're bigger than me, and more likely to trip the creaky floorboards."

Archie's eyes widened. "You're going to sneak in? That's a terrible idea. At least they won't call Sheriff Keller on me. You, on the other hand?"

"Look, are we going to sit here and argue, or are we going to find out what's happened to Betty?" Jughead gestured to the Cooper's driveway. "Go ring the bell. Tell them you came to check on Betty because she missed a pop quiz. Make something up. I need like, five minutes of distraction. As long
as they're not in the dining room, I'll be fine."

Archie nodded firmly and patted his shoulder. "You're right. Betty would do anything for us. We gotta find out what's going on in that house."

They parted ways, determined to get their answers. Archie meandered up the Cooper driveway, hands thrust in pockets to conceal his nervousness. Jughead ducked low into a crouch, skulking around the house in a roundabout route to the ladder. His heart was pounding in his chest, as a myriad of terrible possibilities flooded his imagination: Betty injured; Betty coping with another family crisis, one that could push her over the edge; Betty shipped off to wherever Polly was—wait! Polly. Maybe she had come home?

It didn't make sense, though. Betty would undoubtedly be preoccupied with her sister's homecoming, but she wouldn't leave Archie, Veronica and him worrying this way. Surely, she would have found a few spare minutes to send a quick group text?

Unless Polly isn't okay. And if something had happened to Polly, Betty would surely need support—something in short supply at Casa Cooper.

Jughead watched Archie muscle his way past Alice, and sprang into action. Tucking the ladder beneath his arm, Jughead moved as swiftly as he could manage without making obvious noise. He gently propped the ladder against the house and ascended. With every soft rattle, he winced, praying Archie's booming voice and Alice's refusal to hear anyone but herself would create a perfect storm of distraction. The top rung in hand, Jughead swallowed hard and peeked through Betty's window.

She was there, alone, to his relief. She studied her reflection in her mirror with a frown.

"She's okay, she's okay, she's okay."

He tapped the window gently and she startled, spinning in his direction. Her round eyes widened, Bambi-like, as she rushed over and flipped the lock. The glass pane slid smoothly upwards, with no sound to betray his arrival.

"Juggie?" she hissed.

"Dreadful etiquette, I apologize," he quipped, pulling himself inside.

"I can hear Archie downstairs," she whispered, leaning against her closed bedroom door. "Wait, are you two working together?"

"Of course we are. We're your friends, Cooper, and we've been worried all day."

His words were icier than intended, but a part of him was angry that she was here, apparently well, but hadn't had the decency to reassure him. It was February all over again, when her letters stopped and his stomach had emptied at the thought of a world without her.

Betty heaved a heavy sigh. "You can thank my mother for that. She took my phone away. I thought she called the school?"

Jughead rolled his eyes. "Yeah, and she told them you were sick. You are never sick, Betty. I can't even remember the last time you missed school."

"Chicken pox, grade five," she immediately replied, because of course she knew that. Her voice softened as she studied the trembling man in front of her. "I didn't mean for any of you to worry. It's
just... Well, it's complicated.

He settled on the corner of her bed, arms folded over his chest. "Try me. Archie's running interference."

She leaned against her desk, arms pressed behind her for support. Her sweater was slightly askew, her jeans rumpled and faded. Even her trademark ponytail was off-center. Little details that few would notice, but knowing her for as long as he had, he couldn't help but take an inventory. She was alive, in good physical health, but she wasn't herself.

"Polly came home last night."

A simple sentence. One that, on paper, was a mere statement of fact. But context mattered. Inflection, too. Betty's cracking voice and fidgeting hands, the way she stressed her sister's name—these were the true facts. Something's wrong with Polly, he realized.

"I know how much you missed her, Betts. Is she okay?"

Betty shook her head sadly. "Mom took my phone because she didn't want Polly to use it. Didn't want me to tell anyone about the family shame," she spat angrily.

Jughead rose slowly, taking a tentative step forward. "What happened to Polly?"

Tears spilled down her cheeks as she looked away. "She was pregnant. It's why they sent her away, Jug." She met his gaze at last, her features marred by unmistakable anger. "She was alone, and I didn't find her. I didn't try hard enough. I listened to them!"

Oh, shit. Pieces fell rapidly into place, painting a tragic picture. "Jason," he murmured.

Betty nodded furiously. "They made her give up the babies, Jug. The twins... Twins like Jason and Cheryl..."

He pulled her against him, hugging her tightly as she cried into his shoulder. "Shh... I'm here. I'm here for you, whatever you need."

"If I'd found her, if I'd told her about Jason, then maybe..." Her voice trailed off and her hands fisted his denim coat.

"You didn't know," he reassured her. "And your parents are monsters for sending her away like that, leaving her alone. They're the bad people, Betty. Not you. You're the victim in this, too."

"No," she insisted, pulling away. "Polly has lost everything. She thought Jason didn't want her anymore. She gave them up, thinking that he wanted her to. They didn't tell her he was dead until the babies were gone, and then..."

"Fuck. I can't even imagine how heartbroken she is."

Betty paced slowly, hugging herself as her feet traced a worn circle in the powder pink carpet. "She would have been home sooner, except for the depression. They were worried she would hurt herself. She tried to escape twice."

"Where is she now?"

"Napping in her room. I told my parents I'd sit up here and watch her. She begged me to keep them away. They betrayed her."
"Betrayed both of you," Jughead corrected her. "They told you she tried to kill herself, for god's sake!"

Betty glared at her bedroom door. "They predicted the future, I guess."

A noise downstairs captured their attention, the two of them rushing to the bedroom door. Faintly, he could hear Alice urging Archie to leave, insisting that Betty was "highly contagious" and asleep. Knowing Archie, he was being intentionally difficult to signal him that time was short.

"That's my cue," he whispered

Betty reached for his hand, clutching it tightly. "I need to be home with Polly for a few days. But she deserves answers, Jug. Jason's death cannot go unsolved."

"I'm on it, Betts. I promise you, we'll get to the truth."

She brushed a stray lock of hair from his eyes, forcing a smile. "Thank you. Thank Archie, too. I'm certain my parents were terrible to him."

His cheeks flushed and he quickly headed for the window, hopeful she wouldn't notice. "Friends to the end, Cooper. We honour our recess vows."

Betty chuckled softly. "Only because we swore over chocolate chip cookies."

Swinging his legs onto the waiting ladder, he winked. "Those were some damn good cookies."

"I'll call you as soon as I can," she promised, scanning the yard below. "Coast is clear, JD."

Jughead's lips curled into a smirk. "So you did catch the Heathers reference!"

"Like I'd forget our conversation after Winona Ryder was cast in Stranger Things? I know all of your references and innuendos, Jughead Jones. Now, hurry!"

Almost all, he thought to himself, descending as quickly as safety and stealth would allow. Then again, Betty had never clearly understood matters of the heart.

Archie was waiting for him on the Andrews' porch as he scurried from the Cooper yard, the ladder carefully left on the grass near the shed. It wasn't perfectly in place, but it was close enough to be dismissed, given the uproar in their home. Archie leapt to his feet as Jughead approached, brow furrowed in concern.

"Was it enough time? Did you find Betty? Is she okay?"

"Whoa, there, Hercules, you can unflex the muscles of fury. Betty is okay," he replied, slumping into a chair.

"She's okay?"

"Physically, anyway. Polly's home."

Archie grimaced, settling into the seat beside him with a low whistle. "Polly's been gone for ages. At least a year. How's she doing?"

"Alice took Betty's phone away so Polly can't tell the world how shitty her parents are." Jughead shook his head, rage brimming anew. "They shipped her away to have Jason's babies, then forced her to give them up."
His friend's face turned crimson, matching his hair. "You're serious? What the hell is wrong with them?"

"One of the great mysteries of Riverdale," Jughead lamented. "In any case, Betty needs answers, for Polly. She deserves to know why he died."

Archie leaned forward, his face pressed into his hands. "Jughead, I'm in trouble."

"Arch?"

Face still buried in his palms, Archie's breathing grew erratic. "There's something I never told anyone. About the fourth of July… I don't know what to do."

A chill ran down Jughead's spine as he reeled with the possibilities. Something told him this was it: the thing Archie had been hiding since their reunion in the forest. Patting his friend's shoulder, he suggested they head inside for privacy.

Twenty minutes later, Jughead sat in stunned silence, grateful for his foresight.

Chapter End Notes

And now the murder investigation begins to take shape. Betty is more motivated than ever before, and Archie's secrets will soon be brought to light.

LOVELY, AMAZING READERS: With the holidays (and my birthday) approaching fast, let me know what you think and also, whether you'd like me to keep posting or take a brief hiatus. On one hand, busy lives abound; on the other, we're about to suffer withdrawal. If you'd like me to stick to weekly posting, speak now! Otherwise, next week will be the last chapter of 2017.

Thank you for reading my slightly angsty, but heading to hopeful story. You're the best!
Six: Gunshot

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the delay in posting. I've spent the last 18 days (and counting!) with some sinus cold from hell. Barely lived through my birthday and the holidays. BUT I have one last emergency chapter ready to go, so here it is!

There's a bit of "setting things up" to this one, I'm afraid. But there's some lovely FP-Jughead bonding, so I hope that makes up for it.

Krystology: Your review made me so, so happy. Thank you. I hesitated for a while with this fandom precisely because I wanted to nail that voice of his. I'm so thrilled you've found this story and enjoy it. I'm keeping your words nearby as I try to hammer away at the next chapter.

Song: Gunshot - Lykke Li

Disclaimer: Just playing with someone else's toys while they torture me with a midseason hiatus. Disclaimed!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Six: Gunshot

"Wide awake, why you're not here
I can feel you firing straight into my heart

Goes through my head and back
Gun shot, I can't take it back
My heart cracked, really loved you bad...

Gunshot - Lykke Li

Secrets. They can be a tricky thing.

We keep them from our family, our friends, the one we love. We keep them even from ourselves, shuttering them away in a mental cupboard with the nightmares we've lived and the dreams crushed beneath others' feet. Secrets are landmines, deadly little parcels that punish us for the slightest misstep.

Secrets are a currency. They buy friendship, or convenient alliances. They are the proverbial sword of Damocles that we might suspend over the head of another. A secret shared between lovers, however—that is the secret that wistfully sighs with Cupid's approving gaze.

Sitting in Archie's living room tonight, I learned how secrets can poison the best of us, rot them away from the inside until a fragile husk remains. I realized that the heart makes us vulnerable, exposes our soft underbelly to a world that will as soon protect us as it will gut us, spilling our insides for all to see. Who we love, who we trust with our secrets—we cannot take it lightly. Or else you might find yourself like Archie, a good-hearted guy swallowing secret answers to an unsolved murder on the whim of a forbidden lover.
Maybe my fear of trusting others has its upside, after all.

"You know you gotta tell someone, right?"

Archie's hand halted on the kitchen door. "Jughead, we've been over this. If I tell them I heard the shot, I have to explain why I was there. If I say I was alone, I become a suspect. If I tell them I was with anyone but Grundy, they'll eventually catch me in a lie. And if I admit I was with her—"

"Then maybe everyone says, Hey, that music teacher is a grown-ass woman who shouldn't be taking advantage of vulnerable students!" Jughead snapped. "As much as we want to be treated otherwise, we are still kids. We're expected to fuck up, or be afraid."

The fridge door swung open wildly and Archie reached inside. He pulled out a jug of milk, slamming it roughly on the countertop.

"I knew what I was doing," he insisted. "She didn't force me into anything."

Jughead massaged his temples, resisting the urge to explain concepts like authority and dual relationships. Archie wasn't stupid by any stretch of the imagination, but he was guided by a more emotional intelligence. Morality reigned over rationality in his head. He'd have to try another tack.

"Dude, you have to tell someone. You know it's what's right."

Archie spun around, his fiery temper echoing his features. "People can't find out about Miss Grundy! Do you know what they'll do to her?"

"A kid is dead, Archie. You saw Cheryl today." His friend flinched, and he pressed on. "And what about Polly? Your best friend's sister was suicidal when she found out the guy she loved—the father of the children she was forced to give away—was murdered! Not having answers is hurting them. And holding this secret inside? It's hurting you, while she's off somewhere, prowling around another high school like the cougar she is."

"Take that back, Jug! She's not like that, okay? I mean, she left, but she said it was because she was holding me back from a real relationship. She cared about me."

Jughead's palm slammed the countertop in frustration. "Newsflash: she cares more about herself. I'm assuming she's the one who convinced you not to say anything?" Archie's silent glare spoke volumes. "And yet, she moved on, and left you in Riverdale, watching this town fall to pieces beneath the weight of a bloated corpse."

A stand-off: Archie, body trembling in anger, objectively taller; and Jughead, slighter in stature but looming over his best friend. Jughead couldn't help but wonder if he'd stayed in Riverdale, would Archie have fallen under Grundy's spell? Would he have noticed the change in his friend, perhaps stepped in before he became embroiled in a murder?

"We've been friends our whole lives, man." Jughead's voice softened as Archie's head bowed in shame. "I'm looking out for you. You've always been that guy who always tried to do the right thing. You and Fred taught me that, because my father sure didn't. And you've gotta know that the longer you say nothing, the worse it looks for you."

Archie's eyes widened. "You don't think I could go to jail, do you?"

Jughead shrugged his shoulders. "I doubt it, but they're probably going to be pissed they've wasted so much time wondering if Cheryl killed him."
"Shit!"

Jughead's eyes widened as he realized there was an alternative. "Why don't we talk to Kevin?"

Arms folded over his chest, Archie leaned back against the fridge. "That sounds like a terrible idea. He's the sheriff's son."

"Yes. Which means he knows how the law works, and what repercussions you'd face." At Archie's skeptical frown, he continued. "Look, Kevin helped us replicate his dad's murder board, which was probably a huge violation of some confidentiality clause, so if you ask him to give you time, he'll keep his mouth shut. Betty will make him, if we need her to."

A long moment passed with Archie staring into space, likely weighing his options, and his loyalties to Betty and Grundy. Finally, his voice scarcely more than a whisper, he nodded slightly.

"Kevin. But he's gotta promise upfront not to tell Sheriff Keller."

"Deal." Jughead clapped him on the back gently, jerking his head towards the door. "You going to be okay? I haven't been home much, and I feel like I should check in there."

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Dad should be home soon."

They walked to the door together, each step seeming like a mile. The secret Archie had revealed weighed heavily on each of them, for different reasons. For Jughead, the implications of the gunshot heard—and the fact Archie knew the exact time of day it was fired—would matter to the police. It wasn't like Dilton Doiley was ever going to come forward. Archie making a statement would corroborate Cheryl's, and perhaps steer the investigation in a more fruitful direction.

Archie paused at the door, turning to face him. "Thanks, Jughead. I know you're a good friend."

"You're a good person, Archie. You told me for a reason. Maybe it was so I could support you in making a decision you already wanted to make."

With that, he slipped off into the night, digging his fists into his jacket pockets. Maybe it wouldn't matter much to the investigation in the end, but he knew Archie Andrews. Holding this secret in was going to break him eventually. He needed to be free of it.

Jughead should have known Wednesday was going to be terrible from the moment he begrudgingly crawled out of bed.

The hot water was out in the trailer—the aging water heater was shot, FP had explained—which led to a three-minute frantic scrub in what was essentially freezing rain. The coffee maker had failed to brew as programmed, leaving him stuck with Folger's crystals and a heavy spoonful of sugar to make it tolerable for the road. And then, there was Archie's call, reminding him that he had early practice and couldn't give him a ride.

Which meant taking the bus he never seemed to make it on time for, or soliciting a ride from his father.

It shouldn't cause such conflict within him, but old habits died incredibly hard. Ditto instinct, which screamed that FP could not be counted on for much of anything. But he had changed, right? He'd shown up at the bus station. FP hadn't, to his knowledge, had a drink since he'd come home. He'd shown up every Sunday for dinner at Fred's and was still gainfully employed.
Heart in throat, he'd lifted his gaze from the lacklustre coffee he'd poured into his travel mug and called out to FP. Asked if maybe, were it not too much trouble, he could catch a lift to school on his way to work.

"Of course, Jug. Gimme five minutes to grab my stuff."

Jughead wasn't sure who'd been more surprised: FP, at the ask; or himself, at the eager reply.

Which was how he'd found himself in his father's pick-up truck, slurping terrible coffee that probably couldn't keep a mouse awake. An awkward, twenty-minute ride shared by two people who might as well still live in different states.

It was FP who broke the silence at last, nudging the radio volume down. "Haven't seen much of you at home. You reconnecting with everyone?"

"Uh, yeah. It was a little weird at first, but Archie and I are back to the way things were." His hands fidgeted with the travel mug as guilt trickled through his veins.

"And Betty? How is she doing?"

"She's good," Jughead answered, too quickly. "I told you that she started the school paper up again, right?"

FP nodded with a low hum, flipping the indicator to turn onto the main road between north and south. "You been writing for it? I think I saw an article typed up on the table last week."

"Yeah, Betty needed help." If it was the article he was thinking of, it would have been the coverage of the memorial service. "Weatherbee must be so thrilled that I finally took up an extracurricular."

"You always had a way with words," FP mused, glancing over with a smile. "I remember your mom and me, we'd go to those parent-teacher meetings, and they'd all complain you never wanted to pay attention, you know. Whatever, it's grade two. I never paid attention, either." He chuckled softly. "But then they'd all say the same thing: 'he's a storyteller.' You have a gift, Jug. I'm glad you're still using it."

"Thanks, dad." A beat. "Actually, I'm writing a book. About Jason's death, how it's changed the town…"

FP's knuckles gripped the wheel tightly. "A little morbid, don't you think?"

"I'm a creature of shadows. I like to study people, see what makes them who they are. It's not about the murder so much as the aftermath." The air in the cab of the truck thickened, the tension overwhelming. "I mean, it changed you, Dad. In a good way."

His father hissed softly, serpentine. "I guess it did."

Silence, save the soft rattle of the truck's rickety frame. Jughead sipped his coffee, staring at the passing scenery. Would this ever be easier? Would they ever manage to have that easiness he envied Archie and Fred for?

Maybe you should try spending time with him?

Between his concerns with Betty, rebuilding things with Archie and investigating the Blossom murder, he'd barely seen his father in the last few weeks. Quick moments before bed, breakfasts here and there, and Sunday dinner at the Andrews house—that was all he'd given his father. How could
they repair something neither was ever around to fix?

Silence and standing by had already cost him a chance with Betty. He had to try harder.

"Hey, Dad? You busy tonight?"

They made the turn towards Riverdale High, FP shrugging his shoulders. "Meeting at eight. Nothing else. Why?"

"I just wanted to know if you'd be home for dinner. I could cook. Or try to." Jughead's cheeks flushed. "I'm limited to grilled cheese and burgers, pretty much. The safety of the trailer probably depends on you standing by with a fire extinguisher."

His father grinned. "I love grilled cheese. I'm in."

They pulled into the parking lot of the high school, Jughead immediately spotting Chuck Clayton and Reggie Mantle running laps on the track. Clayton pointed in his direction, nudging Reggie. Wonderful. He suspected another interrogation in the hallways before homeroom. Near the entrance stood Veronica and Kevin, a small mercy. He'd even hug Veronica if he had to, just to avoid his most-hated meathead. Archie could only run so much interference.

"Need a ride home?" FP asked.

"Nah, I'll catch one from Arch. Thanks, Dad."

His hand moved quickly for the door handle, but froze as FP spoke again.

"Look out for Betty, Jug."

His head spun in his father's direction, studying the furrowed brow and narrowed eyes. "She's my friend. I look out for my friends."

"I know you do, but… Look, trust me on this. Betty's just like her mother. The more perfect they seem, the more they need someone." His gaze averted, he nudged the volume on the radio higher. "Lessons learned the hard way."

Jughead swallowed hard, clutching the strap of his backpack tightly. "I'm trying to. Be someone, I mean."

"You've got a big heart, Jug. Get that from your mom. Anyway, words of an old drunk, I guess. Take 'em for what they're worth."

Jughead slipped out of the truck, hesitating a moment before blurt out, "Recovering alcoholic, not a drunk."

He slammed the door quickly, refusing to look back. Had he done so, he would have caught his father brushing away a single tear before speeding out of the parking lot.

His day kicked off with a pop quiz he certainly failed, and rolled downhill from there.

Clayton cornered him outside his English class, blocking his path with a muscular arm slamming against a locker. The close proximity of his fist to Jughead's face was not lost on him.

"What have you done to Betty?"
"What have I done? You have got to be shitting me."

Chuck sneered. "She starts spending time with you, and suddenly, she's not answering her phone and not in school. You do the math."

Was her seriously implying that Jughead had caused Betty harm? After all the bullshit games he'd seen Chuck play with her mind? Jughead's fist curled at his side, the temptation to start a losing battle rising within him.

"We all know you can't add up two plus two from SAT prep, so let me break it down for you, Clayton: the games you pull with Betty? They won't work on me. You can't project your toxic masculine bullshit onto me, and you can't blame me when she finally sees you for the insecure piece of shit you are."

A switch flipped and suddenly, Jughead was off the ground, feet dragging against the locker door as Chuck clutched the collar of his coat. Jughead gritted his teeth and remained defiant, as he had learned from his father's scraps in the gravel roads of Sunnyside.

"You need to stay out of my business, Jones," he snarled.

"Looks like Betty's staying out of your business, so I'll follow suit," Jughead taunted.

"Gentlemen!" a voice boomed from down the corridor.

Startled, Chuck loosened his grip, letting Jughead's feet meet polished tile. Principal Weatherbee, in perhaps the only fortunate instance ever, was coming down the hallway. Jughead straightened his jacket and took advantage of the disruption, darting inside his classroom without another word.

_Chuck is going to be a problem. Alice Cooper has no idea what trouble's she caused Betty by confiscating her phone._

Settling into his seat, Jughead sent a quick text to Veronica. Someone needed to put Chuck on ice for now, and that someone couldn't be seen as competition. A fellow River Vixen, on the other hand, would do just fine.

A commotion to his left caught his attention, pulling him from thoughts of Betty and back into the Blossom mystery. Their teacher was late as usual, leaving Cheryl Blossom an opening to jump on her proverbial soapbox and make demands. Only this time, her demands were less shallow and selfish.

"All of you make me sick. You come and cry at JJ's funeral. You click your tongues in fake sympathy at his memorial, but secretly, you're all glad he's dead. You're glad, because Deputy Dawg is stupid enough to think I would ever hurt my brother."

She stepped up onto a desk, glaring down at her disloyal subjects. Her blood-red dress and coordinated stilettos were high fashion, but her smeared eyeliner revealed the chink in her armour.

"None of you will ever know what it is to be a twin!" she screamed. "None of you will ever know what it's like to lose half of yourself, and know if you had just done something different, protected him better, he would still be here…"

Ginger Lopez nervously approached the desk, her voice soft and low. "Cheryl, we all know you loved Jason. It's not your fault—"

"Did I ask you to speak?" Cheryl snapped. "Down, girl. Or did you fail obedience school, too?"
Duly rebuked, Ginger threw up her hands and backed away from the continuing onslaught.

"And now, while JJ lies under ground, you gobble up the tragic tale of my brother like a true crime episode of the week." At this, she glared at Jughead. "You think you can stroll back into Riverdale, Serpent Spawn, and make your name on the back of my dead brother?"

Jughead winced, a pulsing headache forming in his temples. "No," he replied firmly. "We want the same thing, Cheryl. We want Jason's killer found. Betty and I both want that."

Her eyes narrowed, and if looks could kill, Jughead would be joining Jason in the cemetery. "Then why aren't you interrogating Polly Pockets the Silverware? Oh yes, don't think I haven't heard that she's back in town. Or do you only dig through the lives of those who aren't trailer park trash?"

Several heads spun in his direction as his stomach turned with the attention. Guess that cat's out of the bag. Fantastic. Already, he could see several people connecting Betty's absence with Cheryl's tantalizing tidbit.

"Trash or not, we're the only ones telling this town that you didn't kill your brother, Cheryl. Maybe you should pick your battles more wisely," Jughead cautioned her.

Her lips parted, likely to spew more venom in his direction, but quickly shut as Mr. Cochrane finally bothered to show for class. He glanced up at Cheryl, who flipped her trademark red curls over her shoulder and elegantly descended from the desk.

"Let's get to work!" Cochrane pronounced, reaching for a piece of chalk.

Yes, it's time to get to work, Jughead echoed, flipping open his notes on Jason Blossom. This town will never heal until Jason's murderer is behind bars.

His phone surreptitiously in his lap, he tapped out a text to Kevin Keller: I need to talk to you, alone. Meet me after this period?

A quick reply: Where?

Cochrane's lacklustre assessment of the opening chapters of The Great Gatsby droned on as he tapped out another text: There's a door on the ground level beneath the far west stairwell, the one near the library. Duck in there.

Minutes passed before Kevin replied: Alright, but upfront, I don't sleep with besties of besties, even if they're James Dean broody *wink emoji*

Class passed in agonizing minutes spent sketching out theories and investigation threads while forcing himself to answer a question from Cochrane to seem attentive. His school in Toledo had done Gatsby last year, so he could bullshit his way through the next week, if he had to. By the time the bell sounded, he was already packed up, out of his seat and first out of the classroom. Scanning the hallways for Clayton, he maneuvered through clusters of chatty teens until he reached his secret hideaway, one he'd discovered in freshman year while dodging initiation from brutish seniors with a penchant for pantsing scrawny teens.

As promised, Kevin was waiting, his expression a mixture of bemusement and curiosity. "Nice space," Kevin commented. "Mind if I borrow it sometime?"

"Whatever," Jughead scoffed, leaning against the wall of his secret storage closet. "I just needed to make sure we weren't overheard. Especially now that Cheryl's on a hunt for blood."
"Bathory needs more blood of the innocent to bathe in?" Kevin quipped.

"I'm serious, Keller." Jughead massaged his throbbing temples, willing away the now full-blown headache he was nursing. "Have you heard from Betty this week?"

Kevin's features darkened. "Not for days, although that's been the new normal. Last few weeks had made me think that maybe things were changing, but…"

"Alright, this stays between us. No Veronica, definitely not your dad, no kidding," Jughead insisted.

"Swear. Now, can you stop freaking me out?"

Jughead forced himself to calm down, drawing a deep breath and lowering his voice. "Betty's mom took her phone. Polly's home and she's pissed, with good reason. Long story short, the Coopers coerced her into staying out of sight while giving birth to her shameful love children."

Kevin's eyes widened. "No… Jason's the baby daddy?"

Jughead nodded. "She gave them up, thinking he'd abandoned her. Alice is trying to bring her into line. Polly is demanding answers and today, Cheryl demanded them in front of a captive classroom audience."

Kevin grimaced, pacing the short length of the storage room. "This isn't good. My dad's already feeling the heat from the Blossoms. If Cheryl winds up the town at large?"

"There's more, which is the real reason I asked you to meet me," Jughead continued. "And it might chill Cheryl out, but it's tricky. As the sheriff's son, you have a basic handle on laws, including obstruction of justice, right?"

Kevin halted in his tracks, shaking his head. "Okay look, I built you a murder board. I'm not screwing with my dad's murder investigation!"

"I'm not asking you to!" Jughead hesitated, struggling with the best approach. "Hypothetically and off the record, if someone knew something about a murder, but didn't come forward out of fear, would they be in trouble when they finally said something?"

Kevin exhaled loudly. "Um, I guess it depends on what they know. Like, does this hypothetical person in a town with only one recent murderer know who did it? Or did they do it?"

"No and no. They know something that will rule out a theory and establish timeline. So?"

Kevin mulled this over for a minute. "And they were afraid to say something sooner? Why?"

"I don't know, probably fear of getting railroaded like Cheryl?" Jughead snapped.

"Hey, it's not like there's been an abundance of leads!" Kevin snapped. "The guy was alive for seven days, but no one knows where. Cheryl lied about the fourth, then came clean with some other story that is maybe another lie."

Jughead shook his head. "If there's one thing I learned living with an alcoholic, it's spotting a liar. Cheryl's not lying this time. She really doesn't know what happened to Jason after they parted ways."

Kevin sighed. "Then, in that case, they wouldn't be in like, legal trouble. Especially if they're from the north side. Dad would use kid gloves, shake a finger, maybe. But more importantly, he's desperate for a lead. Any lead. Whoever this is, they should talk to him."
"I agree, but you can't blame someone for being reluctant to talk about this case. This entire town is
darker now. Betty was right: nothing like this was supposed to happen here. People don't know how
to process it." Jughead grabbed his bag, moving for the door. "Wait a minute, then exit."

"Hey, Jughead? Is it Betty?"

Jughead paused and turned around. "If it was, I wouldn't tell you. If it wasn't, I still wouldn't tell
you."

"Spoken like a true journalist."

Pulling his beanie further down his head, Jughead nodded and slipped into the waiting corridor.
Kevin's counsel gave him reason to pressure Archie into doing what he would have done, had
Grundy not manipulated him with her affections. If the Sheriff showed progress in the investigation,
Cheryl would turn down the heat. That, in turn, would help him honour his promise to Betty: he
could focus on following the facts, and in turn, perhaps pull Jason's killer from a year-long shadow.

He thought back to his father's words that morning, his caution about Betty and Alice. What was
imperfect in her life? What secret was she hiding? Would knowing it help Betty, or hurt her more?

Protect her. He would do that, no matter the cost to himself. And if that meant digging into Alice
Cooper's Southside history? So be it.

Chapter End Notes

A little snark for dear ol' Chuck; a little sweetness with FP; and Jughead is plotting his
best strategy. All good things in time, including solved murders and relationship
upgrades for sleuthy blondes who deserve way better.

This is probably my last update of 2017. Thank you so much for sticking with me so far
on this AU adventure. As I'm out of my writing groove, I'd appreciate any and all kind
words to feed my Muse and kick it back into overdrive.

Happy New Year, lovelies. I'll see you next time, when Betty reveals a dark secret of
her own...
Seven: Knives

Chapter Notes

I'm slowly getting this story back on track. I'm dealing with an eye injury/allergy thing (they don't know) so I've been taking it easy on my computer. BUT we have a new chapter, and with it, some important discoveries.

Before anyone asks: I've skipped a moment, but it WILL happen. The timing's changing, that's all.

Song: Knives - The Box Tiger
Disclaimer: I have consulted all legal documents and have confirmed I don't own Riverdale. Dialogue borrowed from the show is strictly for context and no infringement is intended. I'm just having fun in this little bubble.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Seven: Knives

"I found love at the river by the sea
It's not much, but it's just enough to see
It's always changing and it's changing me...
We stop to defend what we know's not right
I can just exchange a little love for light
If it cuts like a knife..."

Knives - The Box Tiger

Some say the truth will set you free, that unburdening oneself of a secret is no different than shedding a heavy load from the shoulders. For those grunting beneath a guilty conscience, there is a freedom in revealing that which one has so desperately strived to keep unseen. The lies fall away, and with them, the energy to maintain appearances. A secret is exhausting when kept in fear.

But the truth isn't always better for those around us. Sometimes, the oblivion of a false reality is a refuge best undisturbed by fact. We all tell white lies—lies designed to protect those around us from a truth better unsaid. "I'm fine," says the friend struggling with depression. "I'm happy for you," we tell the unrequited love who has announced they're engaged to another.

The events of the last two days are a kaleidoscope of truth and lies. I turn the hollow tube, watch the shards bump and align. Blood seeps between the cracks, staining the coloured glass until all I see is red. The red hair of a murdered young man, muddied with dirt from a river bed. The fiery rage of injustice suffered by the young mother who lost their children to the Shakespearean hate of their families.

The truth, it can cut our binds, or it can cut us deeply, leaving our bodies to bleed out on the floor. I can't help but wonder if we're safer not knowing what happened to Jason Blossom. Because right now, that truth seems to me a butcher knife, its shiny blade reflecting in the moonlight. It stalks us in darkness, seeking a new set of shoulders to bury itself between, perhaps those of my very own Nancy Drew.
Pizza in hand, Jughead knocked briskly at the door of the Andrews home. Pepperoni and sausage, Archie's favourite. He hoped it would be enough to steel his friend's nerves. Food always comforted him, but Jughead understood why thanks to an article he'd read online about food insecurity and the enduring impacts of poverty. Food meant stability, security, and in some warped sense, love. For his entire life, his best friends had tended to his hunger, refusing to let him go without. They'd offered treats and shared lunches in the guise of normal lunchroom swaps, but Jughead knew better now. They'd heard the rumble of his empty stomach in class, and did as much as children could do. Kindness, love, whatever he called it, it was something he'd never forget.

The door swung open, revealing an anxious Archie. "You alone?"

"Yeah, obviously," Jughead replied, gesturing to the empty porch around him. "Fred home?"

"He's out for dinner. Says FP invited him out for a burger." Archie raised an eyebrow. "Your doing?"

"I told you last night that I'd work it out. You gonna let me inside or what?"

Archie stepped aside, ushering Jughead into the foyer. The pizza was passed off, the scent of cheese and spicy pepperoni making Jughead salivate. Archie led the way to the kitchen, scarcely dropping the box on the counter before tugging the lid open and grabbing a slice.

"I don't know about this, Jug," Archie muttered before taking a large bite.

"We went over this last night. Kevin said you wouldn't be in trouble. You agreed to tell him tonight and get him to confirm that." Jughead's eyes widened as his frantic friend shoved half the slice into his mouth. "It's going to be okay, Arch."

"Maybe." Or, rather, Mrrbrr, what with the pizza jammed in the ginger haired teen's jaw.

"Arch—"

The two of them startled as the doorbell pealed through the house. Kevin's early. Fantastic. Couldn't keep him from a juicy secret, apparently.

"I'll get that," Jughead announced, heading for the door.

"Wait!" Archie pleaded, second slice in hand.

"No more waiting." Jughead opened the door in spite of the many cursed protests behind him, forcing a smile. "Kevin. I said eight."

The sheriff's son shrugged, flashing an easy smile. "It's seven forty-five."

"Did you ever consider we needed to clear the house before your arrival?"

Kevin's eyes widened. "Oh! No, I… But wait, Fred's truck isn't here."

"Lucky for you it isn't." Jughead pulled him inside and pointed the way to the kitchen. "Better grab some pizza while you can. It's perfect for you: meat galore."

"Between yesterday's rendezvous and your compliments, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were flirting with me, Jughead Jones." Jughead's mouth fell open, but Kevin quickly cut him off. "But I do know better. Everyone but the Oblivious Twins has clued in."
Trailing Kevin to the kitchen, Jughead grimaced. *No, it's not that obvious. He's wrong. People don't know a damn thing. Except Kevin, apparently. Guess reading the body language of closeted queer jocks lends itself to spotting unrequited affection.* Jughead shook away thoughts of a certain blonde in a hurry. Tonight was about helping another blonde he cared about—one who'd had her entire world ripped away from her by cruel parents and an elusive killer. He couldn't fix the former, but perhaps the latter could be found and brought to justice.

Archie leaned against the fridge, avoiding Kevin's gaze as their guest snagged a slice of pizza. Jughead jabbed him in the arm, jerking his head in Keller's direction. Physically daunting in size, his friend seemed diminished now. Guilt, perhaps, at keeping silence? Fear of being judged for his ill-advised affair?

"So," Kevin began, swallowing a careful bite of pizza, "I came here to listen, without judgement. I'm just a friend who happens to know the law tonight."

Archie grimaced. "A friend whose dad is going to be pissed at me."

Kevin shook his head. "No, not really. Look, I did some recon. I purposely put on this true crime show last night where a witness came forward ten years after a murder. A decade. And I was like, 'Whoa, wouldn't she be in trouble for hiding that for so long?' And my dad said, and I quote, 'Better late than never. Telling the truth isn't always easy.' He's not stupid, Archie. He'll understand."

Jughead placed a steadying hand on his friend's shoulder. "We'll back you up, Archie. We won't let him punish you."

Shoulders slumped, Archie reluctantly spilled his secret to Kevin: how he'd become involved with Miss Grundy; how they'd decided to spend the Fourth of July on a private picnic; how their rendezvous had been interrupted by a sound very much like a gunshot. How the gunshot had sounded very close—as in, not across the river, where Cheryl claimed she and Jason were. How Cheryl and Jason were nowhere to be seen, putting them away from the gunshot.

Kevin exhaled loudly, shaking his head. "Whoa... I mean, this is huge. It sounds like Cheryl was telling the truth. The second time, anyway. And you didn't say anything until now?"

"How could I?" Archie snapped defensively. "Miss Grundy could have lost her job. And if I'd said I was there alone? Especially after Coach Clayton bumped me to Jason's spot on the team?"

"Yeah, okay, I get it." Kevin frowned, toying with a piece of pepperoni on his plate. "So, now what? I mean, are you gonna tell my dad everything?"

"I don't know!" Archie's hand slapped against the counter. "I can't do that to Miss Grundy. I can't ruin her career. But who's going to believe I was there alone?"

Jughead paced the length of the kitchen, mulling the options. "We want Sheriff Keller to know about the gunshot. We want him to know the time it happened, but not why you were there. What we need a plausible reason for you hanging around the river in the early morning."

"Cruising for guys?" At Jughead and Archie's baffled expressions, he smirked. "Hey, it's why I'd be at the river at odd hours of the day. Obviously."

"Not gonna work for me," Archie replied. "Not that there's anything wrong with it. Just, I can't fake being gay."

"Nor would we want you to," Kevin replied lightly.
Jughead froze, an idea forming. "What about a half-truth?"

"Go on," Archie urged.

"Well, your relationship began as music tutoring," Jughead mused aloud. "What if music was the reason you were there?"

Kevin snapped his fingers. "A secret indulgence of another kind by the river! You didn't want to risk anyone hearing the songs you were writing."

Jughead nodded enthusiastically. "Exactly. You went looking for a quiet place to work on a song. And then, after Jason was found, you stayed quiet because you were there alone and afraid that either you'd be a suspect, or the killer would come for you next."

For the first time in days, Archie's muscular frame relaxed. "Do you think your dad would believe it?"

"Without a doubt," Kevin affirmed. "Especially the fear of being the next victim. After all, nothing like this happens in Riverdale," he added with a knowing glance at Jughead.

Details were hashed out, a narrative rehearsed, and the pizza demolished before Mr. Andrews returned home, none the wiser. Goodnights exchanged, Jughead and Kevin headed out into the warm Autumn air together. Alone on the porch, both men instinctively glanced over at the Cooper house.

"Think she'll be back at school soon?"

Jughead shrugged. "I honestly don't know. Want me to break into her bedroom and ask her?"

"I think we can wait. Or I can, anyway." Kevin nudged his shoulder. "Come on, I'll give you a lift to Sunnyside."

They rode in silence, save the low hum of the radio tuned to the top 40 station. Jughead resisted the urge to mock the latest derivative pop single, well aware that Kevin lived in the opposite direction. A ride was always welcome, particularly at night, when the alternative was a stroll down a poorly lit road.

"I kinda knew about Grundy," Kevin blurted out suddenly.

Jughead turned from the window, surprised by the confession. "And you didn't think to mention this to Archie?"

"And shut him up for good? No way. My dad needs this information. I told you, the case is cold. Anything could break it open." He signalled and turned onto the road leading to the trailer park. "I didn't know for sure."

"But you suspected?" Jughead prodded.

"It was something Veronica said, last spring," Kevin explained. "Something about Grundy's resignation announcement and how she could prey on pretty things elsewhere. I forget what she said exactly, but the way she said it, and how she looked over at Archie… I wondered what the story was."

*Veronica knows about Grundy and Archie,* Jughead mused. *Must have stung for her to find out he was shooting her down for a teacher.*
Pulling over beside the Sunnyside sign, Kevin sighed deeply. "There's one other thing…"

"Hmm?"

"Whatever Veronica knows? I think she got it from Betty."

Archie skipped Friday morning's classes with Fred's blessing, finally summoning the courage to talk to Sheriff Keller. By Friday afternoon, the rumour mill was furiously sharing word that another person had heard the gunshot by the river—and that Cheryl couldn't have pulled the trigger. Jughead had no doubt, from the satisfied smile upturning her ruby lips, that the Blossom heiress was the one who'd fanned the flames.

Jughead's relief was buoyed further by an unexpected text during fourth period.

_I broke my phone out of jail._

Chuckling softly, he tapped out a reply. _Does this mean you'll be breaking out of Casa Cooper soon?_

A minute passed. _I might need some help. The warden slipped this morning. I doubt it'll happen again._

Jughead smirked as he texted back. _I've said it before, but I'll say it again: Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair._

_The ponytail is deceptive. It's not nearly long enough, I'm afraid._

He tucked his phone deeper into his lap, lest he be caught by the man droning about Chemistry upfront. _Ladder it is. Unless Mama Cooper's figured that out and fed the pieces to the fireplace._

_Not yet._ Another text soon followed. _Is everything okay, Juggie? Chuck has sent some texts and they worry me._

How could he handle this tactfully? Somehow, he suspected calling her boyfriend a worthless shitbag wouldn't go over well, even if it was the truth. He'd managed to avoid Chuck today, thanks to some helpful intel from Archie on the jock's schedule, but the previous four days had been a series of threats and nasty comments from Clayton and his goon squad.

_Nothing I can't handle, Betts._

The bell rang, startling Jughead from their conversation. Shoving his books into his bag, he waited anxiously for her reaction. With no reply by the time he reached English, he hesitated outside the classroom, typing a new message.

_I'm fine. Promise. How's Polly?_

A response soon followed. _Polly's better and you're lying. What did he do to you?_

Unable to bite his tongue, Jughead was perhaps too honest. _Let's just say if he ever treats you the way he treated me, the football team will need to adjust its starting line-up._

Pocketing his phone, he reluctantly headed inside and took his seat. He'd pressed his luck, but every passing day made it harder to pretend he was okay with the toxic trash she was dating. Sooner or later, Betty would have to face the reality of her situation. Jughead only hoped she'd be strong enough to put herself first and walk away for good.
A vibration in his pocket, then another. Hesitantly, he read the messages waiting for him:

*I'm sorry, Jug.*

**COME OVER AFTER SCHOOL. Jail break. SOS.**

Glancing up, he realized Mr. Cochrane was late—*again.* He snatched up his bag and left class without a second thought. Betty needed him and he would be there for her. He would never let her down again. If the school called his dad, he would remind him of his own words of caution. *Betty needed me, Dad.* That would be all the excuse he needed.

He made the walk in ten minutes, his chest heaving slightly from the weight of his bag and the almost-run of his gait. Quickly studying the Cooper home, he determined that both cars were mercifully absent from the driveway. Betty and Polly were alone. But for how long?

*Better take the ladder,* he decided. The escape route might be necessary.

Hefting the stairway into alignment with his personal heaven, he ascended carefully, mindful of noise. For all he knew, Alice Cooper had hired a babysitter for her grown daughters. As his eyes drew level with Betty's window, he was relieved to find her alone in her room, scribbling furiously in a notebook. A quick tap of the window pane and Betty's head spun in his direction.

Her palms slid the window open as she shook her head. "I said to come after school," she admonished him.

"*You also said SOS,*" he countered, climbing inside. "*Come on, Betts. Aren't you happy to see me?*"

Her arms wrapped around him tightly, her vanilla scent enveloping him. "*Very,*" she murmured against his shoulder.

He held her close, swallowing hard yet unable to rid himself of the lump in his throat. Had it only been a few weeks since he'd believed he would never again see her face, or hold her in his arms? It seemed a lifetime away here, in the sanctity of her room. He squeezed her in reassurance, the tension in her shoulders betraying a hidden anxiety.

"What's wrong?"

She pulled back slightly, her face inches from his. "*I got a text from Veronica. About Archie.*"

"*You know he met with Keller then?*

"Mmhmm. But that's not the reason I asked you to come over. I told Polly about it, and she started asking questions about Jason. She's been avoiding the details since she came home. But today, she wanted to know *everything* the sheriff knew.*" Her words tumbled out quickly. "*Jason had a plan. Just like Cheryl said. And Polly knows what it was!*"

Jughead rocked back on his heels. "Okay, back up. I thought your parents convinced her that he didn't want to be with her."

"*They did, Juggie. Eventually. I can't believe I didn't make the connection before. My parents sent Polly away on the Fourth of July. Can you guess why?*

It took a moment, but only just: a memory of Cheryl came to mind, and with it, clarity. *Cheryl was right. Jason had a plan to leave. With Polly.*"
Betty nodded eagerly. "Yes! Polly told me that Jason had promised they would leave town and start a new life, free of our parents and the Blossoms. They were even engaged! Secretly, of course."

Jughead whistled low. "Holy shit. No wonder Alice and Hal flipped out. Their daughter marrying a Blossom?"

"Tell me about it. Now I finally understand why Nana Rose was telling I was smart to hide a ring. Jason got the engagement ring from Nana. It's a Blossom heirloom. Penelope would lose her mind if she knew a Cooper had it," Betty mused aloud.

"So, what was the plan?"

"Polly didn't know everything, but Jason told her to pack her bag and meet him on the Fourth of July. There was supposed to be a car hidden behind an old sign for the Blossom Maple Farm out on Route 40." Betty paused, visibly excited. "No one has EVER mentioned a car, Jug."

The reason for the jailbreak had crystallized. "You're thinking the car is still out there."

"Or some evidence of it. There could be something really helpful out there, maybe a clue to Jason's killer," Betty exclaimed. "We need to go look for it."

"What about your parents? And Polly?"

"Polly has a therapy session out of town and my mother is with her. My father is probably getting drunk somewhere, having had his fill of the Cooper Crazy," Betty spat.

"So, what you're saying is this jailbreak could have been via the front door?" Jughead joked.

"Well, yes, but I find I'm getting used to you sneaking in through my window. I'm jealous Archie's been having all the fun until now."

"I do enjoy risking my life on a rickety ladder or trellis." Gesturing to the window, he winked. "Care to live dangerously?"

Betty hesitated. "I'm not that great with heights, remember?"

"I think the entire town remembers the day Betty Cooper hopped on the Ferris wheel and discovered her fear of heights." Jughead dodged a playful slap to his arm, chuckling. "I'll take the ladder down and put it away. You can meet me downstairs."

"No, wait. This is a jailbreak. We should do this right." Bitting her lip, she pointed out the window. "But you first. You can catch me if I fall."

"Betty, you don't have anything to prove to me."

"I know. I'm proving it to myself."

Irrationally, they descended the ladder: Jughead first, nimbly and quickly; Betty cautiously, with Jughead holding it steady. He studied her feet and hands, monitoring her for signs of fear or danger, but her escape from her prison was as smooth as his own. As her feet touched the lawn, she exhaled loudly and giggled.

"I did it!"

"You're Betty Cooper. You can do anything."
Her cheeks flushed and her head bowed. "I wouldn't go that far."

"Then I'll go there for you."

Time halted as they studied each other: him in his beanie and favourite 'S' shirt; her in a sunny, yellow sweater and her signature ponytail. For a moment, he considered confessing his years-long affection for her, perhaps punctuating it with a kiss, but only a moment. Because then, he remembered Polly's painful losses, and knew that no matter how he felt, or how mesmerizing Betty was when she sleuthed, he'd made a promise to help find answers for her sister.

*You've waited five years. What's another day?*

"I know a shortcut to the farm," he blurted out, hurriedly returning the ladder to the shed. "Follow me."

The name of the single lane highway—Route 40—lent an officiality to the worn stretch of pavement, but in reality, it was nothing more than a circuit that kept industrial traffic out of Riverdale proper. Many in town called it the Maple Highway, because that was all that ever traversed the winding loop: maple syrup, and remnants of trees culled to keep the Blossoms prosperous.

Jughead remembered these facts as he and Betty trekked through a neighbourhood bordering the Southside into a wooded area flanked by train tracks and an auto mechanic. He told himself it was for his book, that it would flesh out whatever happened next with a contrasting quaintness. In reality, he was avoiding a whirlwind of thoughts about his investigative partner.

What had Kevin meant last night when he said Veronica had gotten information about Grundy from Betty? Had she known about Archie being hot for teacher? Worse, had that knowledge driven her into the arms of a manipulative macho creep? And speaking of Clayton, what had he texted Betty that had given her reason to be concerned about Jughead?

So many questions, none that he dared speak aloud.

Betty's soft voice pulled him from his frantic thoughts. "Is it much farther?"

"Um, not too far. About five minutes or so 'til we hit Route 40. We should be pretty close to the Blossom property when we do."

"Good. It's already getting dark, and my keychain flashlight isn't the best."

The sky had quickly turned overcast as they headed out in some strange pathetic fallacy deal that he couldn't have conjured up in his book. The ripples of black throughout the silvered swath of clouds overhead hinted at a downpour.

Jughead drew his Sherpa coat closer as a chill rolled down his spine. "Hopefully, the weather holds until we're back in town."

"If nothing else, I'm sure that beanie could use a wash," Betty joked quietly. "You still wear it everywhere."

"I'm wearing it until the day I die." He pushed up on a low-hanging branch, holding it away from Betty so she could pass through the brush. "It's comfortable."

"Or comforting," she countered, passing so close to him that their lips almost touched. "Maybe someday, you'll tell me why."
Jughead swallowed hard. "Yeah. I… It's just silly, that's all."

Betty reached back for the branch he was holding, urging him with her hand to follow her. "If it matters to you, it's not silly, Jug."

While he wasn't sure he'd ever be willing to speak of the complex relationship he had with his beanie, he knew if there was one person he'd trust to hear it, it would be Betty. With an awkward smile of gratitude, he moved on just ahead of her, studying the shadowed path.

"We should veer left here. Closer to the farm."

Betty nodded, following without hesitation. She trusted him. Betty had always been trusting, ever the one to offer the benefit of the doubt. She was born wanting to see the best in everyone. It was why she'd offered her friendship to him. She and Archie had that in common as kids. While his parents' separation had left Archie wary, Betty had never wavered.

Archie… The longer he sat with Kevin's revelation, the more it consumed him. If Archie's actions had led to Clayton snaring Betty in his psychological traps…

"Did you have any idea about Archie's secret?" Jughead asked quickly, intentionally vague.

Betty startled slightly, toying with the zipper on her jacket. "His secret?"

"I thought you said Cheryl texted you. Or was it Veronica? I forget."

Veronica's name was a gentle prod, a hint of something more than a hidden knowledge of the events at Sweetwater River. He hated toying with her mind this way, but if she had kept the secret this long, there was a reason.

Betty recovered quickly, but her brief pause was telling. "Oh! Veronica texted me, although Cheryl did send some vague message about being right. So, Archie was at the river? Why didn't he say anything sooner?"

"I guess he felt that no one would believe he was working on music," Jughead replied casually. "Even that was a secret, until recently."

Betty grimaced. "Is that what he said?"

She knows. Kevin was right. No sense dancing around it. Honesty was the foundation of their friendship.

"So, I take it you know about Grundy?"

Betty chuckled darkly. "You've only been back a few weeks. Did you sleuth it out or did he actually admit it?"

"Something he said clued me in. Didn't take much to pry it loose. He paused on the darkened path, hands thrust inside his pockets for warmth. "He was lonely and she was there. I had just moved to Toledo."

Betty's eyes widened. "And I was in L.A."

Jughead nodded. "He's a mess over it. He cares about her, even if he knows it was wrong."

Betty tugged absentely on her ponytail, toying with the loose waves. "Juggie, can I tell you something and have it stay between us?"
"About Grundy?" She nodded quickly and Jughead matched her. "Yeah, of course."

The words spilled from her lips in quick succession: how she'd gone looking for Archie for Chemistry notes, having missed class for a Vixens-helmed community blood drive; how she'd been told he was in the music room; how she'd headed there, only to notice that the way Miss Grundy behaved around Archie was not appropriate for a student-teacher lesson. How she'd followed her home, seen other teenage boys visiting her house over the next week. How she'd seen Archie come by for a private lesson, curtains drawn.

"I was angry at her," Betty continued. "Angry that she would take advantage of them. Because Archie didn't seem to know about the others. And that meant she was letting him believe it was more than it was. I mean, it's statutory rape, Jug."

"No arguments here. Grundy was way out of line."

"Chuck started wondering where I was going. I'd been watching her for three days, taking pictures, trying to decide what to do. Because as wrong as she was, it would have meant destroying Archie's life, too. I didn't want to see him hurt that way." Betty leaned back against a nearby tree. "I decided I would show Veronica, because she could tell Chuck she was with me. I know you only met her recently, but you can imagine how she reacted."

Jughead grimaced. "Veronica wanted to confront her."

"She wanted to call the cops, throw the book at her. Full dark, no stars, was how she put it. She was as disgusted as I was. But I knew that I didn't have enough proof of it, which meant Archie would be exposed. I dug deeper, trying to find a way to leave him out of it. Turns out Miss Grundy isn't even Miss Grundy."

Jughead's brow furrowed. "She's not—Wait, it was an alias?"

"The real Geraldine Grundy died in 2010. Our Grundy was actually Jennifer Gibson, according to the ID I found in her car." At Jughead's surprised look, Betty threw her hands in the air. "Yes, I broke into her car! Not my finest hour, but Veronica and I wanted proof that she was dating her students."

He drew a deep breath and pushed away his shock. "Gibson takes on a dead woman's name and teaches at Riverdale High to, what, get access to boys?"

"She didn't admit it, but that's my theory."

The pieces were falling into place now. "You confronted her."

Betty hugged herself tightly. "Veronica and I went to her place. We told her we had photos of her affairs and knew her real name. That my mother would publish an article in the paper if she didn't leave town by the end of the week and cut things off with her students. She… resigned the next day."

Jughead wrapped an arm around her shoulders and she leaned into him immediately. "You wanted to protect Archie."

"I did… and maybe I should have just told him I knew. But by then, we were barely talking."

"He probably wouldn't have listened. He's stubborn."

Betty laughed softly. "He really is. Hot-headed ginger when he wants to be."
Jughead squeezed her gently, tucking her head beneath his chin. "I won't tell him what you told me. And I'm glad she's gone. But you should tell Archie what happened. Maybe not now, but someday. Alright?"

"I'll think about it."

"Good enough for me. You ready to find this car?"

Betty pulled away slowly, straightening her coat and sweater. "Yeah. Let's go find it."

They trudged through the darkness, soon reaching Route 40's dimly lit expanse. Jughead forced himself to push aside Betty's revelations and focused anew on his internalized map of the area. The Blossom property was just ahead to his left, but where was the sign Polly mentioned? Was it further back, in that next exit, two miles sort of way? Or was it a sign at the entrance proper? Polly's details were vague at best.

"Which way should we try?"

"I'm… Not sure. It depends on how far the sign is from the property."

"It has to be closer," Betty insisted. "Think about it: it's been over a year since his body turned up. People have been searching for any sign of where he was in those missing days for that long. The one place no one would dare invade would be Blossom property."

"This way, then."

They walked along the rural highway, facing oncoming traffic like the good, careful daughter Alice and Hal Cooper raised. Jughead struggled to focus on the scenery, seeking the entrance for the Blossom farm, but his mind—and eyes—kept drifting to the woman beside him. Her trusty keychain flashlight was sweeping side to side, reminding him of the swishing of windshield wipers. His emotions, too, drifted in similar fashion: from worry to awe, and back again. A triple chirp of her text message alert from her pocket rolled his stomach; Betty ignoring the messages ushered in a wave of relief to soothe it.

"Over there, across the highway!" Betty shouted, waving her light. "Doesn't that look like a driveway?"

It definitely did. Seizing her hand, Jughead checked both directions and ran across the desolate lanes of road. She followed without hesitation, matching his pace and almost pulling ahead. Her eagerness to find the truth, particularly for her sister, had consumed her. It was there in the steely focus of her green eyes.

It was a short walk up the driveway before they saw it, haloed by a single light overhead: Blossom Maple Farms. His heart began to race as Betty excitedly pointed a little further ahead: tucked within the trees was a very distinct car shape, sheltered by a dirty tarp.

"Polly was right," she whispered happily. "Come on, Juggie!"

He moved quickly towards the vehicle, tugging up the front corner and finding the front bumper. No licence plate. Not interesting. Circling to the back of the car with Betty close behind, he threw up the tarp and popped the trunk. What he found inside left him reeling.

Tucked beneath a woolen blanket lay a packed suitcase, Jason's varsity jacket, and a few boxes of snack foods—clearly supplies for a quick getaway. But it was the plastic packages peeking from beneath the blanket to his left that would change everything.
"What are those?" Betty asked nervously, swinging the light in that direction.

Please let me be wrong, he prayed, tugging a package loose. But he wasn't wrong. While the Serpents had never dealt drugs in Riverdale, they certainly partook. That he knew, from watching the guys at the Whyte Wyrm as a kid. This was a brick of… fuck, is that heroin?

"Drugs. Betty….?"

"Wait, Jughead, put it down. This is evidence. This is all evidence!"

He complied quickly, suddenly panicking. He'd just put his fingerprints on narcotics. What the hell was he thinking? Overhead, the sky cracked, and the rain that had been building over the last hour began to fall.

"Crap! This whole car's a crime scene!" he cursed as droplets pelted his beanie.

Maybe it was the journalist in him; perhaps it was self-preservation. His phone was out and before he could process it, he was documenting the contents of the vehicle in careful fashion. He moved in a steady grid, making sure each photo overlapped another. Nothing would be omitted.

Betty patted his arm nervously. "Okay, we need to get Sheriff Keller. And he needs to talk to Polly."

"One more," he insisted, stepping back for a more complete view of the trunk. "Alright. We'll call him from the driveway, so we can flag him down from there."

The two teenagers hurried along the gravel driveway, stones scattering like the shattered dreams of a dead teenager in a river. Overhead, the rain continued to plummet to the earth. It struck Jughead that a more poetic soul would wonder at the heavens crying for the escape Polly and Jason never made. Thing was, he knew the truth: there was no heaven or hell beyond. The forces of good and evil waged their war among the living, neither adverse to claiming a casualty.

Betty cursed her phone as they huddled near a tree. "No signal!" she shouted angrily.

Jughead checked his phone, groaning at the screen. "Nothing. Storm must be screwing up what little signal reaches the edges of town."

"Damn it!" She wrapped her arms around her chest, rivulets of icy water caressing her pale cheeks. "Why didn't we bring a car?"

"We didn't exactly have a plan," Jughead reminded her. "Come on! If we cut back through the woods to the east, we can call from Pop's."

Her arm looped through his as they hurried across the highway, as eager for warmth as they were for truth. Unbeknownst to either of them, a figure stood in the shadows, watching them recede into the distance.

Darkness would rule just fine in the flesh, in the form of a spark. Fire, meet gasoline.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much for letting me continue to fill your head with my little AU. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this one. How do you feel about Betty and Veronica secretly kicking Grundy out of town? Who's been following our duo?

Next chapter: a tale of two fires (perhaps three, if you count the slowburn of Bughead). See you soon!
Eight: A Tendency To Start Fires

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this took a while. I was trying to get it out last week, but then I flew three provinces away to see my favourite band, and it didn't quite get done. BUT my eye is better, and things should get back to normal now with a weekly schedule.

Coming up: confrontations of varying kinds. For those of you who hate Chuck, this should make you happy.

Song: A Tendency to Start Fires - Bush (perfectly angry Jughead tune)
Disclaimer: I enjoy a rebellious, sneaky Juggie, but I don't own him or Riverdale.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Eight: A Tendency To Start Fires

"Strange zoo, strange blaze
Douse my head in flames
Coming through got to get some
Happiness is a bad son..."
A Tendency to Start Fires - Bush

Everything can be reduced to sloppy science in Riverdale. Faulty equations are scribbled in haste in the blood of the ones who made the mistake of being born on the literal wrong side of the tracks.

I started this project as my own version of In Cold Blood, but blood seems to find me more than I can trace it to its source. Heat, too, finds me. I wake up in a sweat, palm swiping at my feverish forehead, wishing I could remember what had me so terrified. The flames lick my feet as I walk the streets of this town torn in two. Never has any creature been so faithful.

Science tells us that Jason Blossom lived for a week after he parted ways with Cheryl near Sweetwater River. It tells us how his body decayed, bloated and surfaced for all to see. Equations quantify combustion and calculate the precise time it takes a vehicle to burn to a hollowed husk (forty-seven minutes, give or take an unknown quantity of accelerant).

How long did it take for the baffled, beleaguered sheriff of Riverdale to equate a troubled home life and a childhood misstep with a tendency to start fires? Thirteen hours and seven minutes. I'm honestly surprised it took that long.

Jughead's alarm blared beside him, but its piercing chimes were unnecessary. He'd been lying awake for several hours, replaying the night before on a torturous loop. His conversation with Betty, and the way he'd once again suppressed the urge to call out Clayton and plead with her to consider alternatives. The discovery of the car, tucked away just as Polly had described, loaded with drugs she had certainly not mentioned. The decision to snap photos of the contents. The choice to leave the evidence, uncovered and unguarded, and run for Pop's. The wave of nausea that had overtaken them as they returned to the farm with Keller, where smoke plumed above the trees in a sickly cloud of fumes.
Someone followed us.

It made no sense, even as he mulled it for the thirtieth time. The search for the car had been a last-minute decision in an empty house, discussed briefly before execution. They'd traveled on foot, through deserted areas and nary a cracking of a twig to tip them off. How had they not noticed?

A soft knock on his door startled him. "Jug? You getting up?"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah, I'm up."

"Alright. If you can be ready in half an hour, I can give you a lift to school," FP offered.

Weary and wound up, the prospect of not walking thirty minutes to school pulled him from the warmth of his tangled sheets. "Thanks, dad. I'll get moving."

He showered quickly, scrubbing away sweat and the stench of smoke from his skin. The water tinted grey, reminding him of childhood art classes and the swampy water they'd plunged paintbrushes into, rinsing away little more than the worst globs of red and blue. He thought of Betty, of how she'd held herself tightly as she watched the firefighters extinguish Jason's getaway car and with it, her hopes of justice for Polly. The photos he'd hurriedly snapped in the darkness were the outline of a story, but the meat had been torn from the proverbial bones and carried away by an unknown scavenger. Fingerprints. DNA—the chances of either surviving were slim to none.

*I should have stayed with the car.*

He'd told Betty the same thing, standing in a canopy of maple trees illuminated by cop car cherries. Sheriff Keller had wrapped her in an itchy emergency blanket for warmth. She wore it like a cape. Even in defeat, she was his superhero. He was just the sidekick who'd failed her.

She'd dismissed his claim to blame, reminding him that she could have called a tip into Keller instead of playing detective. He knew better. This was too personal and Polly's heart was too fragile to poke fingers into, digging for secret truths.

He turned off the water, hurriedly running a towel over his body. Was Betty okay? Had she told Polly of the heroin hidden in the young lovers' getaway car? Staring at his own bloodshot eyes in the mirror, Jughead shook his head slightly. No, Polly had lost so much already. Losing her image of Jason could be a breaking point.

Teeth brushed roughly, hair combed sloppily into place beneath his beanie, he dressed in his favourite grey 'S' t-shirt and a dark plaid button down that passed the sniff test. Snatching up his backpack, he headed out to the kitchen. By the grace of Alcoholics Anonymous, his father had been kind enough to brew him a coffee and leave a piece of buttered toast on a plate.

"Truck needs oil," FP announced. "I'll be outside."

Jughead nodded, caught off-guard by the gesture. A sip of the coffee told him it already had sugar in it – the single teaspoon he preferred. The aching in his chest grew when he noticed the light dusting of cinnamon on his toast. It was a quirky thing his mother had done for him as a small child, a treat she made to cheer him up on sick days.

He chewed slowly, the warm spiciness reminding him to check on her and JB soon.

The fire was major news in the student lounge, although the significance of the torched car had been withheld from the media. Or rather, Alice and Hal had selectively applied their journalistic standards
to protect their daughters from scrutiny.

Settled on the two central sofas—Archie, Kevin and Veronica on one, Betty and Jughead on the other—Betty quietly filled in their friends on Polly's revelations and the contents of the car.

"My parents won't let me explain how we knew to look for the car." Betty's eyes flickered with anger as she spoke. "They don't want the police talking to Polly, or knowing of the shameful reason for her stay at the Sisters."

"Oh please, is this 1917?" Veronica scoffed.

Betty grimaced. "They're also worried that because she knew where the car was, that the police will think she burned it."

"But she was with your mother," Jughead countered. "She couldn't have done it."

"That's the thing, Jug. After her appointment, Polly took off. It's why my parents weren't home when Keller dropped me off. They found her wandering the cemetery at eleven last night."

Kevin's eyes widened. "Which means she could be seen as the murderer, covering her tracks."

"So who did burn the car?" Archie mused aloud. "Clearly, it wasn't Polly. She was in the hospital when Jason died."

Jughead massaged his temples, willing away a headache. "Keller thinks someone was following us."

"Oh my god!" Veronica was visibly disturbed by this theory, her gaze immediately focusing on Betty. "Maybe you two need to back off this story. Or we should all just move. I'll rent a truck."

"Guys, I can't help but worry that whoever did this will come after Polly." Betty bit her lower lip hard, her shoulders slumping. "What if he tries to hurt her because she knows something that can catch him?"

In hindsight, he would blame sleep deprivation and a nightmare about a faceless killer slashing Betty's throat as he watched helplessly. The urge to protect her, to comfort her, outweighed his usual social paralysis. His arm wrapped around her shoulders, his hand squeezing her arm.

"We won't let that happen," he vowed.

Her hand reached to cover his, squeezing softly in reply. With that squeeze, the dominoes fell. Archie's eyebrow raised, an unspoken question Jughead didn't know how to answer. Veronica tilted her head slightly, narrowing her gaze at Betty. And an uninvited guest decided to crash their meeting of the minds.

"What the hell is this?" Chuck Clayton growled.

Jughead was generally quick, but Clayton was furious, and with that adrenaline came lightning reflexes. The football star's hand grabbed Jughead's wrist, twisting his arm away from Betty at a painful angle. Betty immediately rose to her feet, tears welling up in her eyes and it was that sin—not the excruciating pain in his already damaged shoulder—that Jughead silently vowed vengeance for.

"Chuck, stop it!" Betty pleaded.

Archie was on his feet now, his pale skin flushing crimson. "Clayton, let him go."

The distraction was enough for Jughead to spin himself enough to alleviate the pressure on his arm.
Drawing a deep breath, he forced a smile of reassurance for Betty's sake.

*Don't puke, don't puke, don't puke...*

"How many times have I gotta tell you to stay out of my business?" Clayton snarled.

"I don't answer to you, asshole. I answer to her."

He saw Clayton's fist draw back, waited for it to make contact, but it never came. Instead, Jughead stumbled free, puzzled until he realized Archie had cold-cocked his teammate. And with that, the lounge had become a captive audience.

"I said, let him go." Archie flexed his fingers and edged closer to Clayton. "I've had enough of you, Chuck. Of the way you bully the other players because you think being the coach's son makes you hot shit. Tired of how you treat Betty."

Betty placed a hand on the redhead's shoulder. "Archie, please, it's fine—"

"No, it's not!" Archie snapped.

"It's far from fine." Something in Chuck's tone shifted, his words heavy with unknown meaning. "You'll find that out fast, Andrews."

"Bring it."

Jughead was torn between a desire to tackle Clayton (and likely earn an ass-kicking) and an equal drive to throw Betty into his dad's truck and get her far away from Riverdale. The only thing restraining him was a refusal to stoop to Clayton's level. How could he ever claim to be the better man if he allowed rage to rule?

Of course, Clayton found a way to fan the flames of fury within him.

"You owe me an apology, Betty," he growled at the shuddering blonde.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Jughead snapped. "On what planet does Betty owe you an apology, you pathetic piece of shit?"

Clayton lunged forward, but Jughead was ready. Drunk with power was not very different from drunk on whiskey. Both made you presumptive and blind to a sudden shift, from Jughead's experience. A quick twist of his frame and his fist found Clayton's liver. The jock crumpled to his knees with a howl.

"If you ever raise a hand to Betty, or anyone I care about, this will be a pleasant memory in comparison," Jughead hissed in his ear.

"You're dead, Jones..."

"Sure. I'm bored now." Glancing at the stunned faces of his friends, Jughead grabbed his backpack. "I'm going to work on my story. Betty?"

*Come with me. Can't you see how dangerous he is?*

His heart shattered as she shook her head slowly. "I... Jug..."

Her green eyes glistening with tears, she remained tethered to the side of a monster. And he, the one who'd give his life to keep her from a moment's pain, was left alone.
"Whatever."

He pushed his way past Cheryl and Reggie, past the gaggle of freshmen clogging the doorway, desperate for a glimpse of the show. He pushed his way through the halls of the school, weaving through the crowd to the sanctuary of the Blue and Gold office. Furious tears threatened to break free, but he willed them away, hardened his heart as he'd done when his mother had taken him to Ohio.

This never would have happened if he'd stayed in Riverdale. Archie's rejection of Betty wouldn't have been so devastating, because she would have still had a lifelong friend to count on. He would have made sure she never felt alone in her sadness, even if it shattered his soul to know that she might never know how much he loved her.

Goddamn it, he was in love with her. He couldn't deny it anymore. He loved Betty Cooper with every fibre of his being. And he could live with her never wanting more than friendship. He treasured that bond more than any hope for romance. But seeing her choose to stand by Chuck Clayton? No way. He was done being patient, done being respectful of her choices. If it walked like an abuser and quacked like an abuser, it was an abuser and he would call it like he saw it. She needed to hear it.

Pushing open the door of the Blue and Gold office, Jughead inhaled sharply. Standing next to their Jason Blossom "murder board" were Principal Weatherbee and Sheriff Keller. The former turned his attention immediately to Jughead, while Keller continued to stare at the board—likely all too aware of how much it resembled the board in his home office.

Fuck.

"Um, hi," he managed, setting his bag down on his desk.

Weatherbee and Keller remained silent, the latter finally taking notice of him. That headache he'd been nursing all morning was reaching its peak. His vision streaked with reds and blues, a tell-tale warning of a migraine to come.

"What's going on?" Jughead prodded gently.

Glancing once more at the board, Sheriff Keller sighed. "I'm going to need you to come down to the station with me."

It was what remained unsaid, the words hidden between the lines of a carefully rehearsed statement, that struck fear in his heart. Because the S on his shirt stood for many things in Riverdale. Southside. Serpent. Sunnyside Park. And all of those words were symbols of a sin: poverty.

Guilty by association, once again.

They spared him the handcuffs, but the perp walk was obvious. Some stared, while others questioned Keller's actions. Reggie Mantle snapped a photo, jostling an unimpressed Valerie Brown. As they rounded the corner for the main entrance, Archie came into view.

"Call my dad!" he called out.

Archie nodded, rushing into the front office, where a startled Betty glanced away from Chuck's huddled form and gasped.

Damn it. She was the last person he'd wanted to see him like this.
Settling into the back of the cop car, the door shut behind him like the lid of a coffin and left him gasping the thin air.

They abandoned him in the interview room for seventy-four minutes. No water, no food, but thankfully, no shackles. Riverdale was too wholesome for that. The town with pep scarcely admitted it had a body count.

Jughead's mind raced with stories of false convictions, of scapegoats and innocent teens left to suffer behind bars because they were the wrong race or social class. He thought of Chuck, wondering if he was going to press charges for that shot to the liver. He wondered what, exactly, he was brought down here for in the first place.

He thought of Betty, of the panicked pale visage staring at him through the windows of the front office. He pushed it away, remembering the moments they'd spent lying in her bed, trading case notes even as exhaustion tugged the blonde away to dreams of cotton-candy pink and fresh baked cookies.

He clung to that image of her, serene and safe, as Sheriff Keller finally entered the room, a case file in hand. A file with his name on it. And suddenly, there was clarity—and rage.

"Forensics came back on the car," Keller began, settling into the chair opposite him. "Despite the fire, they were able to pull a pair of prints off the trunk. Yours and Betty's, which was, of course, no surprise."

"Because we told you we opened the trunk, Jughead thought bitterly.

"But what did surprise me," Keller continued, opening the file, "was this. Your prints are on file from an incident six years ago, when you spent some time at the Riverdale Juvenile Delinquent Centre."

And there it was: the first time he'd been punished for being the child of the wrong parents, complete with a photo. Ten year-old Jughead Jones stared up at him—a school photo—seemingly unaware of the horrors to come.

Keller spun the file around, flipping through the pages. "For, um… attempting to burn down Riverdale Elementary School."

"Oh, for fuck's sake! "I was playing with matches." Like many kids do. "And that's a pretty tenuous connection, for a sheriff."

The dots were connecting, but Jughead refused to believe it. Surely Keller wasn't suggesting…

"Principal Weatherbee also allowed me to have a look at your school records," Keller continued, pulling another file from within his juvie case. "You have a long and rough history, Mister Jones. Bullied a lot."

"Yeah. My name is Jughead."

"By the football team in particular. Even had a run in with Chuck Clayton since your return to town. I can only assume that bullying included Jason Blossom. So, how about this: you tell me your whereabouts on the weekend of July 11th."

"This is crazy. You think I…?"
The Sheriff’s steely eyes reminded him of that time years ago, when they’d torn him from his home for being a dumb kid, for making a mistake. Because Southside kids weren’t allowed to make mistakes. Not without consequences.

"Jughead, a kid like you, raised on the wrong side of the tracks by a deadbeat dad, and bullied by kids like Jason Blossom? I mean, who wouldn't want to lash out at that?"

Everything in his rational brain said to keep his mouth shut, remain polite, wait for his father. But this was absurd. Riverdale was a small town. There was absolutely no way Keller didn’t know that his mother had packed him up after the last day of school—in June—and taken him to Ohio.

"I know you're under a lot of pressure from the Blossoms, so I'll cut you some slack for having a more ridiculous theory than that kid who hides under the bleachers with a joint and claims Jason was abducted by aliens. I was in Toledo, Ohio, helping my grandparents tear down their shed."

"And the fire?" Keller prodded.

He glared across the table, meeting the sheriff’s gaze. "I'm not talking to you anymore. I want a lawyer."

Reluctantly, Keller closed his files and left the room. A click of the door told him he was locked inside, and it was at that moment Jughead broke. It was six years ago, and once again, he was in trouble with the law.

All because of Betty Cooper.

I'm late to school. Again. Miss Curtis is going to have a fit.

It's all I can think of as I run towards the school, until I spot her in the side yard, almost hidden by the elm trees. Betty. She's hunched over something, her pink backpack beside her. I tilt my head, trying to see what's caught her attention. Probably another lost kitten. But what is she doing out here? Betty's never late for class.

Of course, her dad isn't a drunk like mine.

I make my way over to her, wanting to make sure she's alright. Cheryl Blossom has been pretty mean to her lately. She even ran out of gym class crying last week. Maybe Cheryl said something before school?

"Hey, Betty! Whatcha rescuing this week?"

She jumps up quickly, her ponytail swinging wildly as she spins around. Her hands are tucked behind her back.

"Jughead! I didn't see you. Wh-what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing. Come on, hand it over."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she replies adamantly.

I laugh, tugging gently on her arm. "You're an amateur. It's so obvious. Show me!"

Reluctantly, she stretches out her left palm and uncurls it, revealing a box of matches. The kind my mom uses to light the barbecue, long and sturdy. It's half-full. Glancing down, I now notice the carefully assembled pile of twigs and leaves.
"Um, Betty? Why do you have matches?"

"Because my mother would hate it." Betty's chin juts out defiantly as she sniffs quietly. "And I hate her, Jug. I do. I hate her."

Betty's mom isn't the worst person in the world, but her rules and expectations are ridiculous. I remember the time Betty got grounded for not cleaning a mixing bowl immediately after baking a cake. I mean, she was eight and she baked a cake! It was delicious. I ate half of it.

"Rebel, rebel, your face is a mess," I sing softly, earning a half-smile. "Whatever, we're already late. Sit down, tell me what happened."

She kneels down on her discarded jacket, careful not to dirty her perfectly pressed beige skirt. "It's stupid. I'm being a brat."

"You're ten. We're all brats," I counter, sitting against a sturdy tree trunk. "You never complain, Betty. It's your turn."

So Betty explains how her mother wouldn't let her try out for the school dance team a few weeks ago. She says the uniforms are too revealing, and that Betty should focus on "studious extracurriculars" or something like that. I don't understand Mrs Cooper at all. Why doesn't she want Betty to have any fun?

Last night, she’d asked to join Girl Scouts. She wanted to sell cookies and learn survival skills. Josie McCoy had recently joined and it was all she talked about. But her mom had told her no again, saying that camping was too dirty and dangerous.

Um, yeah. It's camping, not a fancy hotel.

"I don't know, Juggie. I was sitting there in the kitchen, eating breakfast and thinking about how mad I was at her, and then the phone rang... I saw the matches and decided she couldn't control everything." She bows her head. "I'm stupid."

"No, you're not. She is. Like being on the dance team is going to stop you from getting good grades. You get them without trying now."

"Hey! I work really hard."

I roll my eyes. "Betty, you never ask questions. You never have to stay after class. Half your homework is done before the end of the day. You're smart, deal with it."

She blushes, shaking her head. "I'm just saying that I study too. I don't know everything."

"Yet."

She throws a handful of her twig pile at me, laughing as they become stuck in my hair. I retaliate with a handful of my own, scurrying behind a tree for cover. We are definitely late for class now, but I can't say I care. I'll take detention. Gets me away from my dad.

"Darn it, now my fire won't start!" Betty complains, pulling a twig from her ponytail.

"You're also ten minutes late for class."

She's still upset, hugging the matches to her chest like the box is her favourite doll. I shake the rest of the twigs from my hair and nudge her shoulder.
"C'mon, Betts. You weren't really going to set a fire... Were you?"

"I just wanted to do something she'd hate..."

I think about this for a moment, the two of us standing beneath a maple tree, swaying slightly in the breeze. What would her mother hate? How could I make Betty smile? A rustling nearby draws my attention and with it, a plan forms.

"You have a copy of The Register?"

Betty tilts her head. "Of course I do. Why?"

"Your mother says a lot of stupid things. Let's burn some of them."

The paper is there—her mom makes her read it daily to understand local politics and world issues—and rolled up in my hand. Betty draws a match from the box, strikes it against the side. Not hard enough. Frustrated, she tries another, but she's hesitating and wasting the matches one by one.

"I can't do anything right!" she wails and drops the box, her fists curling tightly at her sides.

I pick them up for her, shaking the box like a maraca. "No, you just need to study. Didn't you just tell me that?"

She folds her arms over her chest and glares. "You're not allowed to use my words against me."

"You want to burn this thing or what?"

A slow nod of her head later, I'm striking a match. It ignites on the first try, to Betty's annoyance. I gesture to the paper and she urges me on. I light the paper, waving the match out. Betty claps as her mother's articles are destroyed. She has (sort of) done something her mom would hate. A half-smile curls her lips.

I'm distracted for a moment, but the heat won't be ignored. It burns quickly in my hand. Too quickly. And I have nowhere to drop it safely.

"Be careful!"

"Trying to!" I snap, glancing around quickly.

The nearby garbage can is metal and I try to extinguish it on the side, but it edges closer to my fingers. I have no choice: I toss it inside, watching schoolyard trash ignite. This is bad. Very bad.

Naturally, this is when Principal Carpenter shows up. And everything goes straight to hell.

Jughead leans forward, folding his arms on the table and resting his head. Eyes closed, he remembers it all: how the Principal had claimed he was a Southside troublemaker, trying to kill them all; how Betty had insisted it was her idea, but was ignored; that awful day they'd dropped him at Riverdale Juvie. They'd sentenced him to three weeks, but released him ten days early, after a beating from a thirteen year-old who didn't approve of Jughead taking the last cherry Jell-O.

Juvie was where he'd learned a liver shot, thanks to his bunkmate. That had paid off a few times now.

No one had ever believed him when he insisted the matches weren't his. Betty was a good girl, a friend trying to cover for him. She would never do something so dangerous. But Jughead Jones? Son of FP Jones? Of course he would get into trouble. He would definitely endanger other students.
A clicking of a lock and he sat up straight, waiting to be arrested for a crime he hadn't committed. Instead of the sheriff, or even a lawyer, a familiar face stood in the doorway.

"They told me I could come in for five minutes, after I pointed out that you're not under arrest," Betty explained softly. "Can I sit?"

He nodded slowly, wary and confused by her presence. Hadn't she stayed with Chuck, even after his little arm wrenching move? Why was she here now?

Her black and white checked coat was disheveled and buttoned incorrectly. A strand of hair had slipped free of her ponytail, grazing her left cheek. Her lower lip revealed a tiny scab, perhaps from biting it roughly. Her hands folded in front of her on the table as she sat. Their conversation began silently, exchanged in glances and shaking heads.

_I'm sorry_, she began.

He blew that off, wanting more than her steady stream of apologies. He wanted loyalty.

Those shimmering green irises were daggers in his heart. _I'm worried about you._

_I'm worried about me, too. But I worry about you more, Betty._

A stalemate.

"I didn't do it, Betty. Jason. You have to believe me."

"Of course!" Her hands reached out, covering his and squeezing tightly. "You weren't even in town. And I know who you are."

"Well, those Paradise Lost kids went to death row because they wore black and listened to Metallica," he countered, imagining prison and deciding it would be juvie to the power of five hundred. "I don't want to become a scapegoat."

"I'm not going to let that happen," Betty assured him. "The evidence against you is circumstantial at best, ridiculous at worst. We're going to get you out of here."

_That's pretty close to what you said last time. But Mama and Papa Cooper put a stop to that._

"Is my dad here?"

"He's on his way. Archie is here, and Fred's out there. Your dad called him." She hesitated, holding her breath. "Juggie, about this morning—"

"Not interested." He pulled his hands away, leaning back in his chair.

"Chuck won't come after you again. He promised me."

"Oh, Chuck promised, did he? And Chuck never lies?" Her silence infuriated him. "So Chuck never tells you one thing, then claims another later? He never calls you names, or tells you that you're stupid? Never makes you apologize for something that isn't wrong?"

"Jug, you don't understand!"

"And I don't want to. I don't ever want to understand how a man can treat a woman so poorly. Because I never would, and I never will." Shoving back from the table, he stared out the window. "I want you to go now."
She rose slowly, her skin ashen. "I'm sorry. This is my fault. Just like before."

"This town is broken. It's Riverdale's fault that I'm here, not yours."

He watched her turn away, watched the centre of his world slip out the door with her shoulders slumped and her arms wrapped tightly around her frame. As the door began to swing shut, a taut thread snapped within him, and with that pain, came need.

"Betty, wait!"

She spun around, and immediately she saw him. She'd always seen him, had forever known him. As she rushed back to embrace him, Jughead knew that no one would ever know his darkness like her. No one else would ever have the strength to pull him back into the light.

He clung to her desperately, a body hanging off the side of a cliff by bloodied fingers. Her strawberry-vanilla scent was sweet relief, a promise of mercy for an unwanted child of a broken home.

"You've always been worth doing time for," he murmured hoarsely.

"You've always been worth fighting for," she whispered back. "I won't give up on you, Jughead."

They remained in that frantic embrace, each seeking silent comfort, until Sheriff Keller ordered her to leave—for the third time.

Chapter End Notes

The pendulum is swinging, the mystery is coming together and Bughead is blossoming. Hang in there, shippers - we're almost where we want to be.

Next up: FP arrives...
Nine: We're in This Together

Chapter Notes

Another chapter, another step closer to what we all want: Bughead together.

A few things from reviews:

Betty choosing Chuck - oh man, I hated it too. But Betty is going to explain herself in this one, and I think you'll find it in your hearts to forgive her for it.

What's Keller thinking? Let's confirm: yes, Jughead was in Toledo when Jason was murdered. Keller is so barking up the wrong tree. He left about ten days before Jason went missing. That said, remember: 1) Keller is desperately grasping at straws, because pressure is on him to solve the only murder in recent Riverdale history; 2) Keller doesn't exactly think highly of the Jones family, so of course he wouldn't have noticed when Jughead left; and 3) he's more interested in the fire, and what Jughead had to do with that. Don't worry, he'll be sorted out in this chapter.

Song: We're in this Together - Nine Inch Nails (the lyrics are perfect for our pair)
Disclaimer: I do not own Riverdale or any dialogue borrowed throughout this story for context. But if y'all want to steal the ending of this chapter and make it happen on screen, I won't be super mad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nine: We're in this Together

"You and me, even after everything
You're the queen and I'm the king
Nothing else means anything."

We're In This Together - Nine Inch Nails

The commotion outside the door pulled Jughead from his wandering thoughts.

An hour had passed since Betty was escorted from the room, perhaps longer. Time lost all meaning in a room without clocks or phones (Jughead's cell had been confiscated upon arrival, under some illegal and vague pretense he didn't understand). He'd busied himself with reviewing the facts of the Blossom case and straining to recall every detail he could about his first three weeks in Toledo. Had he used his debit card on July 4th? How many people had seen him each day, miles away from Riverdale and a murder in progress? Had he written about these events on his laptop and if so, would digital forensics back him up?

He was massaging his temples, weary and worried, when angry voices swelled beyond the door.

"How dare you speak to my son without calling me? He's a minor!"

Dad?

A muffled response—likely Keller, trying to diffuse a Serpent scorned—and more yelling. Fred
Andrews piped up, shouting his father's name. A soft feminine voice. Betty. It could only be her. Jughead longed to press his ear to the door, but feared repercussions if he left his seat.

He was powerless, and it was infuriating.

His fingers struck the table in a fevered staccato as he waited for answers—or for his dad to start shouting again. Minutes passed like hours until the knob turned, revealing FP Jones, Fred Andrews and Sheriff Keller.

"C'mon, Jughead!" FP demanded, glaring at the sheriff.

He didn't have to be asked twice. He followed quickly behind the trio of adults, the tension thick despite what seemed to be a tenuous peace. Hushed barbs passed between them, the sounds muffled and muddy beneath the frantic beat of Jughead's heart.

*What the hell is happening?*

At the front desk, he found a certain clarity in the guise of an anxious blonde and a stoic redhead in a Riverdale varsity jacket. Archie nodded slightly, but Betty's half-smile in greeting ushered in a wave of calm. He would be going home today. What battles lay beyond, he wasn't certain yet. But the war waged by his friends—the respected and cherished citizens of Riverdale's privileged North—had been won.

Sheriff Keller reached behind the desk, lifting up Jughead's backpack. Reluctantly, he pushed it towards the teen.

"Your belongings, Jughead."

"Check that it's all there," FP ordered him. "Guards here have the stickiest fingers."

Fred nudged his friend's arm. "FP, it's fine. Jughead, take a look through your bag."

"Nothing about this is fine, and I'll be speaking to a lawyer about it tomorrow." FP's words were fittingly venomous.

Jughead searched through his bag, taking a careful inventory. His laptop was inside, power cord included. He noted it was off, as he'd left it. Textbooks, notebooks, all accounted for. His copy of *Cracked Up To Be*, cover battered from a year of being toted around, was in the side pocket he always kept it in. Despite his best efforts to look quickly, a soft gasp from Betty affirmed that she'd seen her long-ago gift in his possession.

"So, you're certain Jughead was out of town last July?" Keller asked reluctantly.

FP's entire body was trembling. For a brief moment, Jughead worried his father was going to strike him, undo all the positive strides he'd made in recent months. A shaking fist curled and uncurled at his side, revealing a small slip of paper. On it was a number and a name: Gladys.

"I thought everybody in town knew the gossip about the Jones family. I will never forget the day my wife took my children away," FP spat angrily, tossing the paper on the desk. "Would you forget something like that?"

Keller glanced away awkwardly, duly rebuked. Having searched his bag thoroughly, Jughead had found everything he needed, save one critical item.

"My phone?"
Keller balked. "What about it?"

"You have it," Jughead reminded him. "It was locked when you received it, so if I find it's been cracked or searched illegally, I'm sure the lawyer will be thrilled to hear about it."

"Right, right." Keller opened a drawer, withdrawing the missing device and handing it to Jughead. "We didn't go through your phone."

Jughead verified the lock screen was in place before pocketing the device. Satisfied, he slung his bag over his shoulder, eager to get the hell out of the police station. Memories of his previous arrest were nearing the surface, clawing at his skin from the inside. His limbs itched with a singular desire: run, and never look back.

But guilty people ran, or so the stereotype claimed, and Jughead refused to fit any paragraph of *Policing for Dummies*. He walked deliberately to his best friends, drawing strength from their silent sentinel.

"You never did answer my question about last night's fire," Keller called out to him.

Jughead froze, looking to Archie and Betty for guidance. His immediate desire was to throw things in an incredulous rage, but that seemed counterproductive to proving his innocence.

"You know everything about the fire." Betty's voice was firm and ever-so-slightly irritated. "Jughead and I found the car. Neither of us could get a signal, so we headed to Pop's to use his phone. We waited there, with Pop Tate, until you picked us up."

He drew a deep breath to steady himself, before turning around. "I asked for a lawyer, which is my legal right. But everything Betty said is true."

Fred's brow furrowed deeper as he cast a sideways glance at Keller. "Why are you asking so many questions about the fire? Seems to me that these two witnesses have told you everything they know."

Keller half-shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "I'm just making sure I understand a complex situation, one that destroyed critical evidence for a murder investigation. An investigation centred on the dead lover of Polly Cooper, who tipped Betty and Jughead off about the car."

*Ahh, there it is: he thinks I torched the car for Betty and Polly*. The irony being, he would have done it, were he asked to. He would protect his family, chosen or biological, no matter what the personal cost might be.

Clearly, his father had connected the same dots. "If you have evidence of a crime, Sheriff, I suggest you produce it. Otherwise, I'll be taking my boy home. And from here on, your questions go through me or his lawyer."

"And if you continue to harass Jughead, which is clearly what you're doing, I may just have to write a detailed account of the blatant profiling practices of Riverdale PD," Betty added, folding her arms across her chest. Keller's mouth fell open, but she quickly waved it away. "Save it. You're not accusing me of setting the fire, even though Polly is my sister. Why is that? Oh, yes, because my parents are the Coopers. We live in a nicer house than yours, and we control the local media."

He wanted to laugh out loud, or perhaps applaud Betty's succinct call-out. A knowing grin would have to suffice. Betty closed the distance and looped her arm through his, looking to Archie.

"Let's go."
The Three Musketeers shoved through the rear doors of the station, victorious. The brisk air of Fall filled his lungs until they seized, a welcome pain in his chest. Betty squeezed his arm gently, checking in as she had done for years. He nodded slightly in reply.

His heart was still bruised from her broken allegiance that morning, but when it had mattered most, she'd been steadfast in her support. Archie had shown up today. He wouldn't forget that.

Fred and FP emerged from the station, a study in contrasts: Fred's features were relaxed and sure; FP's rage simmered beneath the steely surface. Polar opposites, but perhaps that was what had brought the friends together in the first place. Fred nudged his father, drawing him aside for a hushed conversation by his truck.

Jughead cocked his head in their direction. "Thanks for calling him, Archie."

"No problem, Jug. FP told me to call my dad. I hope you don't mind. He said he was out of town, and didn't want you to be alone."

"No, that's fine. I mean, Fred's been like a second dad for my entire life." Hesitantly, he added, "I'm glad you came, too."

"Best friends, right? Besides, it was probably for the best I cut school after this morning."

"Chuck started threatening to press charges. I figured I'd just suspend myself and be done with it."

Jughead kicked the gravel beneath his feet, shaking his head. "Great. I'm sure Keller's going to be pounding on my door tonight."

"No, he won't," Betty insisted. "Because I told Keller what happened this morning."

He tugged his arm away from hers, spinning to face her. "I'm sorry, you did what?"

Smoothing her coat, Betty fidgeted with the buttons. "I heard what Chuck said in the office, so I did what any strategist would do: I got out in front of the story. I told him that he should chase a real criminal, like a bully who assaulted his classmate for no reason. That you were lucky enough to get away from him before you were harmed. That maybe if people in Riverdale paid attention to the real villains, Jason wouldn't have died."

Jughead rocked back on his heels, exhaling loudly. "Jesus, Cooper! What were you thinking?"

Her lower lip trembled as she glanced away. "That I owed you better as a friend."

Archie and Jughead exchanged glances, each wanting to hash out what this meant for Operation Get Betty The Hell Away From Clayton—Operation Asshole, for short. However, it would have to wait: FP and Fred were approaching, the latter having somewhat subdued the former. FP's arm wrapped around Jughead's shoulder, pulling him closer.

"You alright?"

"Yeah, Dad. I'm fine. Thanks to all of you."

"We take care of each other," Fred affirmed warmly. "FP, take the rest of the day paid. Betty, you need a lift?"

"Mmhmm. You going home, Juggie?"
"Yeah, I'm wiped out." Fidgeting with his beanie, he edged towards his father's truck. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

Archie clapped him gently on the back. "Yeah, Jug. I'll meet you outside school."

A bodyguard. Yeah, he could use one of those. Who better than his big-hearted friend (who just happened to play football)?

Betty's ponytail swung as she lifted her head, chin jutting out. "I'll walk with you, Archie."

It was difficult to know which of the four men was most surprised by this declaration of solidarity, but Archie's wide-eyed stare surely made him a frontrunner.

"Um, great. I'll pick you up at seven thirty."

Unsure of what to say—to Betty, to Archie, to any of them—Jughead retreated to his father's truck, tucking his backpack on the floor and settling into the worn leather seat. It smelled of sweat and grease, and also a sweet freshness, like a crisp apple. His eyes closed, replaying his private conversation with Betty. Knowing she had drawn a line and planted herself opposite Chuck, it changed things. Had his anger pushed her to shed the shackles of the slimy jock? Had she already made her amends before talking her way into the room?

You deserve so much better than him, Betty. You deserve kindness.

His eyes remained shut as his father slid into the driver's seat and turned the ignition, revving the engine a few times before pulling out of the lot. The silence between them was easy, one born of mutual understanding. Each man needed a moment to collect himself. Like father, like son, he supposed.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come right away," FP blurted out. "I was over in Centerville."

Jughead opened his eyes reluctantly, studying his father. "It's okay."

"No, no, I should have been there for you. It's just…" FP's hands clutched the wheel tightly, his knuckles a ghastly white. "I've been struggling, and my sponsor runs a morning meeting there, so…"

"Hey, that's okay," Jughead insisted, sitting up straighter. "It's okay to need help. I'm glad you went to the meeting. Your health is important, Dad."

FP shrugged, shaking his head. "I shouldn't be so weak, but all the digging you're doing into that Blossom kid? It scares me, Jug."

"Nothing's going to happen to me—"

"I bet Jason said that before he took a bullet to the head!" FP's agitation startled Jughead, so much so that he leaned into the passenger door of the truck.

"I'll be careful."

FP scoffed, making the turn into Sunnyside Park. "Careful can't stop a gun."

His father pulled roughly into the gravel patch beside the trailer, cutting the engine. Drawing a deep breath, he turned to his son. His anguish drove a sharp blade into his son's heart.

"I can't lose you, Jughead. Not again."
"You won't. I promise."

FP didn't believe him, not entirely, but his battered heart folded around itself and the discussion was over. Jughead's body ached from tension and the uncomfortable chair he'd spent most of the day in, and the promise of a hot shower and loose sweat nearly elicited a sob of relief. And yet, a nigging thought would not be dismissed, one that had looped in his skull during his pseudo-incarceration.

"Dad?"

"Hmm?"

What did you mean before, when you said Betty was like Alice?"

FP leaned back against the seat, running his fingers along the steering wheel. His gaze unseeing, he mulled the question for several long moments.

"Alice didn't always live in the North. She was forced into that cookie cutter house, Jug. Just like Betty. Being what you're not, it can eat away at you from the inside. Make your heart hard." FP shook his head slightly, casting out unwanted tendrils of memory. "Don't let Betty end up that way."

Without waiting for Jughead's answer, his father slid out of the truck and slammed the door, leaving his baffled son to wonder how FP knew Mama Cooper so damn well…

The TV picture flickered in the upper right corner as Jughead absently changed channels, looking for something to distract him from his racing thoughts. Thus far, his options were the Kardashians, Trump's latest scandal and a documentary on shady farming practices.

On the coffee table lay an open box of pizza, half devoured. Being falsely accused of murder had left a surprising dent in his appetite. An unfinished pizza in the Jones home was unheard of. He promised himself he was merely taking a break from his dinner, but the roiling of his guts told a different tale.

A re-run of *Roseanne* caught his eye and he tossed the remote aside. It would do. Besides, it was the episode where Roseanne and Dan smoked an old joint they'd found around the house, promptly reducing themselves to teenagers. A classic.

It was just getting to his favourite part (Roseanne laughing at a stoned Jackie in the bathtub, the latter lamenting her lack of kids, career and boyfriend) when a soft rapping on the door scared the crap out of him. Unsure of who it could be (Chuck? The real culprit for the torched car?), he hesitated, tugging his beanie further down his forehead. The visitor knocked harder as his cell phone beeped, signalling a new text.

His shaking hand unlocked the screen, reading the short missive: *Juggie, it's freezing out here.*

"Betty?"

He hurried to the door and threw it open, revealing a nervous blonde hugging her coat tightly around her frame. Her cheeks were soundly lashed and crimson by the wind outside—a herald of a rainy night ahead.

"Hi," she murmured.

"What are you doing here, Cooper?" It sounded harsher than he'd intended, and he quickly began to
"I mean, you're always welcome here, but I wasn't expecting you and—wait, you didn't walk here alone, did you?"

"No, of course not. Veronica's driver brought me. Can I come in?"

"Yeah, of course." He stepped side, ushering her into the messy trailer. "If I'd known you were coming, I would have cleaned up."

She patted his arm with a soft smile. "It's fine. I've survived Archie's living room on Superbowl Sunday, remember?"

Nonetheless, he immediately grabbed several empty cans of Coke and tossed them in the recycling bin before straightening the throw blankets on the couch. He reached out for her coat and flinched when her hand zapped him with static electricity.

*My life is a terrible teen drama cliché.*

He gestured for her to sit and folded her coat over a kitchen chair. Her hair was down in loose waves, a rare occurrence. She'd also changed into a v-neck sweater and black jeans, which signalled a night out on the town (Betty preferred blue for school, and the fact he knew this was almost pathetic).

On the TV, stoned Roseanne was panicking about the possibility of her kids needing an organ transplant and being unable to help, given the pot-laced state of her own insides.

"I haven't seen this in ages," Betty mused with a grin. "I wish I'd gotten here for the beginning."

"You watched *Roseanne*? Let me rephrase: Alice and Hal Cooper let you watch *Roseanne*?"

Betty rolled her eyes. "I'm perfectly capable of watching things under their noses. It's called studying at Archie's house."

Jughead chuckled, settling into the loveseat across from her. "Touché. The two of us have always made it our second home, haven't we?"

"Yeah, we have. For different reasons."

"I wouldn't say they were all that different. We were both looking for a house that felt like a home."

Betty closed her eyes, pressing her head back into the couch cushions. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess we were."

Suddenly parched, Jughead reached for the last unopened Coke, and paused. He had a guest, after all. He waved the can in her direction, but Betty quickly shook her head.

"I need to watch my diet. There's a game in two days."

Exasperated, Jughead cracked open the can and slid it across the coffee table. "Live a little, Betty. Take a swig."

She hesitated, but relented under his firm gaze. One small mouthful and she passed it back in his direction.

"There. You drink the rest. I know you want to," she teased.

"To diabetes," he toasted, knocking back half of the soda in one go. Setting the can down, he leaned
closer, studying her carefully. "Why are you here, Betty? And don't lie. You know I see right through you."

Her fingers toyed with the end of her blonde locks, seemingly perplexed by their presence on her shoulder. "I don't know… I wanted to talk to you."

"Veronica's driver brought you here?"

Betty nodded. "She's my cover. My mom thinks I'm out at a movie and sleeping over at Veronica's afterwards."

He rubbed the back of his neck angrily, willing the knots there to release. "So your mom is banning you from seeing me? I wish I was surprised."

"No! No, Jug, not at all. But she can't be trusted to lie, so she needs to believe I'm with Veronica." She pauses, glancing out the nearby window. "Veronica is my cover for Chuck."

Ahh. The driver, the subterfuge, it all made sense, especially after this morning's scuffle.

"What was so important that you'd go to all this trouble? I mean, we could talk at school tomorrow, or even before school."

Suddenly transfixed by her sneakers, Betty frowned. "Chuck can't know I was here tonight. He really can't."

"And he won't, Betty. Hey…" He rose slowly, moving around the table to sit beside her. "Hey, it's okay."

Betty leaned into his shoulder with a pained sigh. "I don't deserve you. I should have left with you this morning, but Chuck… It's so complicated. I can't even tell you why. Not all of it. But I want you to understand that I made the best decision to protect all of us."

This was taking a turn that was making him want to slug Clayton in a few more organs. "Betty, has he hurt you? Please, please tell me."

"Jug, I—"

"No, Betts. Remember my dad? Remember what you told me? Friends take care of each other when they're in danger." His hand cupped her chin, forcing her to look at him. "Has he hurt you?"

"No." A single tear slid down her face. "Not physically. I promise."

He believed her. But he also recognized her careful choice of words for what it was.

"I know he messes with your head. We all see it. You can tell me and Archie."

Betty pulled away, drawing her knees to her chest. "He just… I think he just feels so powerless in his life that he wants to feel powerful any way he can. So he wants me under his thumb. I guess…" Her voice trailed off, her eyes glazing over.

"Why do you put up with it?" he asked quietly. "Betty, don't you know how special you are? How kind and intelligent?"

Her shoulders shrugged. "It doesn't even matter. He's got the power."

"Why?"
"I can't tell you what it is, but he knows a secret. Something I never want anyone to find out. **Anyone, Jug,**" she added firmly, silencing his protests. "And he holds it over me. He'll tell the whole school if I make him angry. And I'm sorry, but I'm not ready for that!"

Damn it. How could he convince her to leave him when he was holding a grenade like that? And what could Clayton possibly know that not even Archie or he knew? She curled into the opposite end of the couch, fists balled up in her lap. His heart broke, seeing her hurting this way.

"Okay, I get it. It's your secret and you should have the right to decide who to tell and when." He reached for a blanket, unfolding and tucking it carefully around her. "I just want to say, I would never, ever judge you for anything, Betty. If you ever want to tell me, I'll listen, okay?"

"It would ruin everything," she whispered sadly.

"We'll have to agree to disagree." **Wait a minute.** "Betty, if making Chuck angry is going to make him spill, then why did you tell Keller about our fight? Why did you defend me?"

Her mouth fell open, as if realizing the magnitude of her actions at the police station. "Oh… I wasn't thinking of that. Oh crap, I really didn't think… Not that Keller will do anything to him."

"No, he won't. He'd rather arrest me than do me a favour." He leaned closer, nudging her shoulder. "So?"

Tucking her hair behind her ears, Betty met his gaze willingly for the first time since she'd sat down. "I was sitting there, waiting for you to be released, and I remembered when we were kids, and you coming home from that place. You've never been the same, and I kept thinking, what will jail do to him? I didn't want to find out."

It wasn't the appropriate reaction, or one she expected, but he couldn't help himself: Jughead laughed loudly, shaking his head in disbelief. Betty's eyes narrowed, clearly unimpressed, but it was a struggle to swallow down the chuckles.

"What is so damn funny, Jughead Jones?"

He drew a deep breath and held it to steady himself. "I'm so sorry, it's just… I wonder how you noticed that, but you never put two and two together." At her quizzical look, he tapped his beanie. "You bugged me once about wearing this. Think about it."

She sat up quickly, folding her legs beneath her. "Oh. It was around that time, wasn't it? I guess I never considered they were connected."

"Yeah, it was a few months after I got back. My dad got it for me. Thought it would help with the changes, I guess."

He was intentionally vague, not comfortable with unfolding the details of his panic attacks and nightmares of the beating in juvie. How he couldn't sleep in his room alone. The fear he had of crowded spaces, because you couldn't keep track of so many people, couldn't see a fist coming for you until you were down and surrounded…

"And it helped?"

"Yeah. He said he was a king among his friends, which made me a prince." His voice cracked, remembering one of the few good memories he had of his father. "It's silly, but it made me feel tougher. Safer."
Her fingers reached up to toy with the solitary curl that never stayed underneath the damn hat. "If it makes you feel better, then that's all that matters. There's nothing silly about wanting to feel safe. Your dad did something really kind for you."

"Don't tell Archie, alright? I just… You know?"

"My lips are sealed," she assured him.

She leaned towards him and he reflexively lifted his arm, ushering her closer. It was something they'd done for years, usually while watching movies. He'd never thought much of it—neither had she, best he could tell—but the gesture felt weighted with meaning. Maybe it was the way she curled into his side, stretching her arm over his waist. Maybe it was the contented murmur that spilled from her lips like a secret. He hugged her tighter, wishing it was this simple to protect her from Clayton.

"I guess you're my beanie, then," Betty mumbled.

"Hmm?"

"You calm me down when no one else can. I'm braver with you around. You're my beanie," she echoed, yawning.

He rested his head gently on hers, overwhelmed by her declaration. The TV droned on, a re-run of *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. They watched Will and Carlton toss snarky one-liners, laughing softly in unison.

"Juggie?"

"Yeah, Betts?"

"There's another reason I came over tonight. I saw your dad's coat, in the truck while you were locked in the room…"

**OH.** This wasn't good. He'd never spoken of his dad's affiliation with a gang to anyone, especially Betty.

"Anyways," she continued, "when Fred dropped me home, Polly was arguing with mom about Jason. Mom was insulting him because of the drugs, and Polly loved him, so she was mad. I took her upstairs and she told me that Jason had mentioned drugs as a way to get money, but she didn't think he'd really do it."

"Okay…" This was going somewhere, and he suspected he wasn't going to like it.

"She says Jason was going to ask the Serpents for drugs. Is that possible?"

Jughead groaned, waiting for Betty's anger. "Well no, they don't deal anything hard. I know weed gets dealt regularly, no matter how clever my dad thinks he is with his code talk. But the heavy stuff? Some of them use it, but they don't deal it. My dad's against it."

"Hmm, so maybe one of the users connected Jason with their dealer?"

"Possible."

Why wasn't she angry? Or disappointed? Scared, even, to be in the home of a big, bad biker?

"You could have told me," Betty added, as if reading his mind. "I wouldn't have judged you for your father's choices. And FP seems really sweet, now that he's sober."
"Sobriety is really good for him," Jughead agreed. "He's struggling. He was at an extra meeting this morning. He's at his regular one right now. I'm worried about what Keller's stunt today will do to him."

"Me too." Betty burrowed closer, pulling the blanket over her legs. "Got any good movies to watch? Unless you want me to go back to Veronica's now?"

"No!" Smooth, Jughead. Could you be more obvious? "I mean, it's been a shitty day, and with all the time apart in Toledo, this is good. I missed our movie nights."

"I'm sure you found a movie buddy in Toledo," Betty dismissed him. His silence prompted her to dig deeper, like the journalist she was born to be. "Oh Jug, please tell me you made friends out there."

"I didn't need friends. I had JB. Girl listens to Floyd on a turntable. She's cooler than 98% of Toledo."

Betty poked him in the ribs. "You have to let people know you, Mr. Antisocial."

He hesitated briefly, squeezing her arm. "Well, Archie was never great at calling, and your letters dried up, so I got used to it. Being alone."

"You can be alone in a crowd, too," Betty mused sadly.

He reached for the remote, switching the input to the DVD player. "Let's see what's already loaded… Ahh, of course. You down for *The Last Picture Show*?"

He'd watched it last week, reminiscing about the Twilight. Between his sleuthing and his father's evening meetings, neither of them had been watching a lot of TV.

"I haven't seen it in years. Let's do it."

He hit play, relaxing into the sofa and pushing aside the myriad of questions and fears filling his days in favour of a movie older than his parents. His mother favoured old black and white films, passing her appreciation to her eldest child at a young age. There was something earnest and real about a work of art born of acting, costumes and little else. It felt as close to life in Riverdale as anything ever could be: confused, hurting people, struggling to find love and meaning in a world that could be cold and cruel.

Betty made it half an hour before passing out in his lap. Considering the later hour (approaching eleven), he was surprised she'd made it that long. A soft nudge did nothing to rouse her, posing a challenge for Jughead. A few careful manoeuvres and he'd slid himself out of the way, leaving her curled up on the sofa.

A rustling of keys outside alerted him to his father's return. He hurried to the door, opening it gently with a finger pressed to his lips.

"Betty's asleep," he whispered.

FP's brow raised. "Betty? What's she doing here?"

"She needed a friend."

FP nodded thoughtfully, stepping past him and surveying the sleeping blonde. "Her mom know she's here?"
"Not a clue."

"Good. Alice would lose her damn mind." Pulling off his boots, FP rolled his shoulders back as he headed into the kitchen. "She staying over?"

Jughead glanced over at the sofa, smirking at the soft grunt Betty made as she rolled to her side. "She's exhausted. I don't want to wake her."

Pouring a glass of orange juice, FP shrugged. "I'm fine with it. But you're not sharing a bed."

"Dad!" he hissed. "Come on. We're friends."

"For now," FP muttered, chugging his drink. "Turn down your bed, I've got her."

Jughead headed down the hall, pausing for a backwards glance. His father had gently slid his arm beneath Betty's head, his other hand gripping the back of her knees. In a smooth, slow motion, he lifted her into a cradle, and took a step towards Jughead.

"Go!" he whispered.

Jughead rushed ahead, pushing his door open and folding down his blankets. His father followed close behind, a faint bead of sweat on his forehead betraying the exertion of his task. Carefully, he laid her down, the two of them freezing as Betty briefly stirred, then settled in.

"Girl's dead weight," FP whispered. "She really needs sleep."

Jughead pulled the blankets over her. "I think it's been a while."

"You take my bed," FP told him. "I'll take the couch."

"Dad—"

"You need rest, Jug. Don't argue."

He relented, grabbing a pair of pajama pants from the top of his dresser. Pausing beside the bed, Betty's voice echoed in his mind.

You're my beanie.

Smiling to himself, Jughead tugged his beloved crown from his head. Stretching it wide, he nestled it atop Betty's messy waves.

A queen, he thought happily. You can have it tonight. If you're safe, so am I.

If FP understood the gravity of the gesture, he let it go. A nod exchanged, the men departed, each hopeful Betty would find peace in the Southside that evaded her in the North.

Chapter End Notes

So Betty's being blackmailed to stay with Chuck! Does this make her actions clearer? Do you forgive her for standing by Chuck last chapter? What do you think he's holding over her? (I've left a few breadcrumbs along the way)
Next time: Betty tries her luck at charming a snake; Archie and Jughead are done with Chuck's BS; and Polly's life takes a dramatic turn.
Be kind, feed your fanfiction writers. We are powered by theories, raging at villains and swooning over ships.
Ten: A Story About a Girl

Chapter Notes

Ever have a chapter where the beginning comes together, the ending is easy, but bridging the two just doesn't work? This chapter was like that.

We're approaching an important turning point in this one. I'm very excited to get there. It's so close.

I'm so happy you all loved Bughead bonding time, now with beanie cuteness. It tied so well with the lyrics of that last song. She is literally his queen.

Mad love to every wonderful reviewer, including the epic Em11134 who always leaves the best reviews.

Song: A Story About a Girl - Our Lady Peace (a little optimism for Bughead)

Disclaimer: Nothing's mine except my own ideas. Borrowed dialogue is for continuity only. I have no money, so don't sue me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ten: A Story About a Girl

"Baby girl, stand up and fight
   This is not some paradise
   This is just where we live...
Are you waking up slowly
   Nothing but lonely
   Are you waking up
   Holding, holding your breath
Are you looking for something
   I promise you one thing
I promise I’ll always, always be there"
A Story About a Girl - Our Lady Peace

According to Christopher Booker, there are only seven basic plots. Seven different tales to tell. And we tell these stories, over and over, and are satisfied by it. There's a comfort, I guess, in a universal truth, no matter how you dress it up.

I don't know if Booker's right, but Hollywood wants to prove me wrong with their endless reboots of movies that were either just fine the first time, or sucked then and will suck now. Riverdale, too, wants to prove me wrong. Every carefully manicured corner garden, every pristine storefront, it's all a ruse. The curtain is hiding the sad truth, and no, it's not a wizard we're unmasking. It's the same old stories, the ones where we end miserably, with therapy bills we will never pay off—if we live to tell the tale.

Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Riverdale. Ancient grudges break to runaway teens to a body in a river and a teen mother stripped of her children.

The sins of the father and the cycle of abuse.

I could go on, but these aren't the seven stories people want to hear on endless repeat. These are the skips of the record that send you yanking the needle up, shaking your head. You will polish them away, hide them in cookie cutter suburbia. You will dismiss them with the seven stories that let you believe you are different, that it's somehow their fault.

This may not be one of those seven beloved stories, but it's the one I know best. This is a story of a girl in trouble, and the boy who can't seem to save anyone. But he's going to try.

The chirping cell phone alarm at five in the morning hadn't roused him, although his dreamscape shifted to include a chorus of maddening birds outside the window. The panicked voice of Betty Cooper, however? Jughead was on his feet in a heartbeat, rushing across the hall and oddly grateful for the claustrophobic nature of trailer life.

"Oh my god! Oh, she's going to kill me!"

Betty's voice was strained and shuddering. As Jughead pushed open his (her?) bedroom door, he found her scrolling anxiously through her phone.

"Oh my god, I'm sorry, Veronica," she murmured, texting what he assumed were those precise words to her friend.

He kept his voice soft, not wanting to startle her. "Betts?"

She startled anyway, the phone hitting the floor. Her mouth formed an 'O' and her almost-anime eyes were particularly wide. He leaned against the doorframe, giving her space.

"Jughead! What happened? Where am I?" She surveyed her surroundings, her breathing shallow. "Wait, is this your room?"

"It is. You fell asleep during the movie, as usual," he added with a smirk. "I tried to wake you, but you were out cold. We put you here to sleep."

"We?"

"My dad?"

Betty flushed, smoothing her rumpled sweater as best she could. "I'm so embarrassed. I must have been so heavy to carry."

Jughead rolled his eyes. "If Veronica and Cheryl can toss you in the air, my dad can certainly carry you without strain. It's fine."

"No, it's not fine," Betty insisted, her panic renewed. "I was supposed to be home by six-thirty to shower and change for school! Veronica was going to send me home in her car. Now, what am I going to do?"

It struck Jughead then that Betty was still wearing his beanie, her curls wild and unruly beneath it. His chest ached at the sight: it was everything he could ever dream of. He wondered if he could snap a subtle photo before she noticed, capture the moment to cling to on nights where the darkness felt thick like smoke, choking his airway until he was gasping beneath tangled, sweaty sheets.
"Jughead, snap out of it!" Betty pleaded.

"Sorry, sorry. It's early, Cooper. I haven't even had my coffee yet." Peeking his head out of the room, he heard a faint stirring from the couch. "My dad could drive you home," he offered.

"And have my mom catch me coming home with a Serpent? Have you seen the articles she writes about them?" Betty grimaced, shaking her head. "You'd think it was personal."

Maybe it is. But there wasn't time for that now. The clock was ticking.

"Can Veronica send her driver here?"

Betty leaned over, reaching for her phone. "I don't know. She was really angry I never came back or texted her. I have a feeling I'm going to get the Lodge Cold Shoulder until I apologize in person, ideally with a gourmet goodie or a coupon for a free mani-pedi." She examined the screen, tossing it on the bed in frustration. "Nothing."

"I could try Archie," Jughead mused, heading across the hall for his phone. "I think he's up getting ready for a run."

Two birds, he added silently, grabbing his cell from the nightstand. Betty was mumbling something about not bothering their friend, oblivious to the quick snapshot he took under the guise of sending a text. Oh, he texted as well—he really thought Archie was a good solution—but the way the sunlight framed her face through the slats of blinds... He had to remember her this way.

"I don't have time," Betty insisted. "Can you call me a cab?"

"I could, but won't Alice question that?"

"I'll just tell her Veronica's driver was busy taking Hiram to a meeting."

Betty's hands instinctively slid up to scoop her hair into a ponytail and made contact with the woven beanie. "Um, Jug?"

"Hmm?"

Her voice was scarcely a whisper. "Please tell me I wasn't rude and stole your beanie?"

"Oh, oh no, you didn't..." Now it was Jughead's turn to blush, his hand running nervously through his own bedhead disaster. "I just... I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. I crossed a line."

"No, it's okay—"

"I just wanted you to be safe and—"

Her hand shot out, pressing over his mouth. "That was really sweet of you. I know how special it is to you. Thank you."

Jughead turned away, glancing down the hall as FP approached the bathroom. "My dad's officially up. Did you want a coffee? Toast?"

"How about some answers?" she replied in a hush.

"Not sure we have that cereal, but I can check," he deflected quickly.

Betty frowned, nudging his arm. "I need to help her. She needs to know the truth."
Yeah, he knew that. But he also knew his father was struggling, and more importantly, wanted him to back off the Blossom murder. Asking questions that would potentially implicate the Serpents? Not exactly a great way to start the day.

"The timing, Cooper. That's all." Her pale pink lips pouted and he knew he'd give in eventually. "Go call your cab. Give me a minute to think."

Her shoulder brushed against his bare chest, the cashmere soft and warm, and he felt his knees buckle ever-so-slightly. How she couldn't see his weakness, the way his entire world orbited hers now, he didn't know. But he was grateful for her ignorance.

"Oh!" Her hand reached for the top of her head. "Let me give this back."

"Keep it. For now," he clarified. "'Til the cab comes. I don't need it in here, and um, knowing the great Betty Cooper, having every hair on your head out of place is driving you up the wall."

*Smooth, Jones. Smooth.* But she bought it. He knew her that well.

"I know, I'm a mess. I can't wait to grab a shower and scrub out all the mousse Veronica put in it last night."

Betty meandered down the hall in search of the landline, leaving Jughead to scramble for a t-shirt and mull how best to ask his father about the drug dealings of the Serpents. *At least he's sober,* he mused. Raging drunk FP would have never taken kindly to Betty's intended line of questioning. Glancing at the bathroom door, he debated giving his father a warning, because who was he kidding? Betty Cooper, heir apparent to the Register, keeping her questions to herself? There was a greater chance of Jughead being crowned Prom King than that.

Pulling on a white t-shirt, he stepped into the hall, nearly colliding with his father. FP cocked his head to the side with a half-smirk.

"If I knew Betty could get you out of bed on time, I'd let her stay over more often," FP teased.

"Funny. Really funny." He could hear Betty on the phone now, requesting her cab. "Dad, I hate to spring this on you, but you know how Betty needed a friend last night? You might be able to help her."

"Me? Not sure how."

*I'm not sure, either, but I hope I don't hate what I learn.* "She's trying to figure out something. It's important. But you might not like it. I just… She's fragile right now."

FP's gaze narrowed, his eyes black in the dim lighting of the hall. "Get to the point, Jughead."

"Just… If you're going to blow her off, be kind, alright?"

FP contemplated this for a long moment, his features expressionless. There was no reading the man when he recoiled within himself. Jughead had learned that all too well during a raucous poker game with Fred and Archie when he was thirteen.

"I'll try," he relented. "But only because it's Betty. And you better go make me a coffee for this."

"On it."

Betty had settled into a kitchen chair, her phone on the table in front of her. Her eyes widened in
anticipation as he set out three mugs on the counter.

"Coffee?" It was a plea, more than a request.

"On it, Betts. Don't you worry."

He'd learned his lesson from the first week home, and had taken to prepping the coffee maker the night before. A quick dollop of grinds into the waiting filter and the switch was flipped on to brew his favourite dark roast.

"Cab said twenty-five minutes," Betty grumbled.

"It's early, Cooper. And some drivers won't come to the Southside."

Betty's brow furrowed deeply. "Why wouldn't they?"

Jughead laughed darkly, doling out sugar (two spoons for Betty; one for himself; a half-spoon for FP). "Because we're a bunch of gang members out to kill them, or impoverished people who'll try to skip out on the fare, that's why."

Betty tugged the front of his beanie over her eyes and slumped forward, resting her head on her arms. "I hate this town," she mumbled.

By the time FP meandered into the living room, Jughead was readying his requested mug of dark roast. Passing it to his father, he doled out Betty's cup next. He placed it on the table beside her with a soft thump. Immediately she snapped alert, smiling to herself and reaching for the handle.

"Coffee!" Her happy sigh and the low-slung beanie nudged Jughead's lips into a bemused smile.

FP settled in across the table from Betty, silently daring her to poke a bear. Betty, having taken a few sips of caffeine, looked to Jughead for guidance. With a shrug, Jughead busied himself with yesterday's paper.

"How's work going, Mr. Jones?"

Ahh, leading with casual chatter. It worked on many people, but FP was not a trusting man. Misdirection required a bit of faith.

"It's tiring, but it pays the bills. Fred's a good guy to help me out." Gesturing to Jughead, FP leaned forward in his chair. "Your parents as thrilled as I am that you're digging into a kid's murder?"

Betty's cheeks flushed scarlet, but to her credit, she kept her chin up and her gaze trained on the weary biker. "I'm pretty sure they'd like to lock me in my room forever, but it would be hypocritical for the owners of the town paper to condemn their daughter for being an investigative journalist."

FP huffed angrily. "Like the Coopers have ever let hypocrisy stand in the way of what they want."

Jughead leaned against the kitchen counter, studying the chess match unfolding before him. Betty had always been persistent and observant, but FP had spent his entire life under a microscope. The law, the North—someone was always watching him, waiting for him to screw up. He could hide in plain sight. Hell, Fred hadn't noticed he was running with the Serpents for over a decade.

Betty paused for a gulp of her coffee, eyeing the clock overhead. "My parents are hypocrites, Mr. Jones. They're cruel and they lie. And it's broken my family. It's broken my sister."

Jughead was intrigued, and also impressed. "Polly was supposed to run away with Jason on the
Fourth of July," he chimed in.

FP blanched, his expression settling into one of genuine, deep remorse. "That must have been hard on her. Jason…"

Betty clutched her mug tightly. "Yeah, it was. She was pregnant when he disappeared." Her gaze drifted briefly to Jughead before she continued. "Mr. Jones, I think Jason was desperate to leave town. He wanted to be with Polly, far away from the Blossoms and their money. Polly told me that he had a plan to make money fast… involving drugs."

Jughead studied his father carefully, his stomach rolling as FP's grip tightened on his coffee. He was nervous, maybe even angry at Betty. No, Dad...

"And you assumed that a Serpent would be involved?" FP pushed his coffee away, leaning forward in his chair. "Because of course we're running drugs. Just like your dad likes to write in his paper."

"Dad, calm down," Jughead warned, approaching the kitchen table.

"I only thought that you would know who did have drugs to sell," Betty mumbled. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"No, you didn't mean to." FP's hand curled into a fist on the table, knuckles white with tension. "And I wish to God I could tell you how wrong you were, Betty. But I can't."

Jughead's jaw fell open as his father's eyes welled up with tears. Betty, too, was stunned by his words, her hands twisting anxiously in her lap.

"Serpents don't deal in drugs," FP began, his voice shaky and low. "Not that hard shit. It's why we're barely getting by, most of us." He turned to his son, shaking his head. "When things got bad with your mom, I thought maybe, if I could pay off our debts, maybe she wouldn't go."

Jughead tugged anxiously on his hair. "Dad, what did you do?"

"I started doing jobs for a guy. I'm not proud of it, Jug. I'm not." His father was pleading now, his hand stretched across the table. "I just didn't want to lose you. But Fred found out, and he fired me and… I did. I lost all of you."

Jughead was reeling with this new knowledge. His father had not only been dealing heavy drugs—heroin, if he read between the lines—but Fred Andrews had known about it. He'd known about it and fired his dad, pushing him deeper into the darkness.

"Jason came to me before he disappeared," FP admitted quietly. "Showed up at the Whyte Wyrm like he owned the place. He was an idiot to think he could dabble in drug dealing, but he was determined, and I got to thinking. A clean-cut kid like that? No one would suspect him of running. I gave him a number to call."

"You were just trying to help him," Betty murmured. "Maybe… maybe you were thinking he was just trying to protect someone he loved, too."

FP shrugged sadly. "He was supposed to drop cash off the night of the Fourth. When he disappeared, I just thought he'd fucked off with the drugs and the money. And then they found him. In the river."

Betty reached out across the table, her hand covering FP's. "Polly just needs to know what happened to Jason. Do you think the drugs are why he died?"
FP grimaced. "I don't know."

"Tell me you didn't have anything to do with his murder," Jughead blurted out.

Betty gasped quietly, clasping her hand over her mouth. Jughead held up a hand to silence any protests, his attention focused on his father. His expression furrowed, he'd aged years in just moments. The way FP's body trembled terrified him.

"You really think I could do that?"

"I need to hear it, Dad. Please."

A single tear slid down his father's grizzled cheek. "Jug, I'm a terrible father, ain't no getting around that. I've been a drunk, and I've barely supported this family. I let you down. I let Jelly and your mom down. I've spent a long time thinking that maybe that heroin got him into trouble, and maybe if I had told him to get lost... But one thing I'm not—one thing I'll never be—is a killer. I won't cross that line. I didn't kill Jason Blossom."

Jughead believed him. His mouth was ashes and sand, his words scattered in the exhale of relief. He managed a nod as a car honked outside.

"My cab." Betty slid out of her chair, hesitating beside the defeated man across from her. "Thank you, FP."

"I didn't kill him." It was scarcely a whisper.

"No, you didn't," she soothed, heading for the door.

Jughead followed close behind, helping her gather her belongings in a hurry. A cab willing to trek into Sunnyside wouldn't wait long, not even for a daughter of Riverdale's north. Betty tugged her jacket on quickly, poking her head outside and asking for a moment.

"Will he be okay?" she whispered.

Jughead shrugged. "I hope so."

Noticing the small mirror by the door, Betty took stock of her appearance. "I look like I spent the night at a kegger. But I'll have to make do."

His hand reached out to stop her as she stretched to remove the beanie. "One second. Look at yourself in that mirror, Betty. You see that?"

"See what?"

"You. Safe. Brave." He swallowed hard, letting his hand fall away. "The next time you don't feel strong, I want you to remember her. Alright?"

Betty turned towards him, pulling the beanie free of her disheveled curls. "I will. I promise, Juggie." She pressed his hat into his hands and smiled warmly. "See you at school?"

"Yeah. Unless my dad needs me."

Her hand reached out, grazing his arm. "See you soon, I hope."

He stood at the door, watching her slide into the backseat of the cab. The driver reversed quickly, eager to escape, to return to the safety of suburban perfection. Normally, Jughead would feel
insulted, but he also wanted the driver to hurry. He wanted Betty far from here, far from a world
where teenage boys trying to do right by their girlfriends found themselves running drugs for dirty
dollars.

Closing the door, his focus fell on his troubled father. Shame pressed down upon his shoulders, his
body slumped in the worn kitchen chair. Jughead had done this to him, and for that, he felt
responsibility. But not guilt. His father's track record had created shadows of doubt that cast long and
lingered. Trust could only be rebuilt with transparency.

It was clear now that his father's breakthrough that day at Sweetwater River had been about more
than a fear of his child being zipped into a coroner's bag. It was the burden of knowing his actions
may have set off a chain of events that led to Jason's demise. And maybe they had; there were so
many questions left unanswered. But his father was no killer. Jughead knew that to be true.

"You gonna be okay, Dad?"

FP huffed softly. "Yeah. Yeah, I will be."

It was a lie. The coffee he'd made his father remained across the table, cold and murky, like the water
Jason had been pulled from. Jughead edged forward cautiously, reaching for his father's hand.

"Should you maybe go to that morning meeting?"

His father batted him away and glared. "I'm still the parent, Jughead."

"And I need you to be okay."

Rising slowly to his feet, FP massaged his temples with callused fingers. "Didn't say I wouldn't go,"
he muttered, heading for his bedroom.

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He didn't make it to Archie's in time to walk with his friends, but Jughead skidded through the main
doors of Riverdale High in close pursuit of them. Betty's trademark ponytail was higher than usual,
but perfectly centred and smooth. Her clothing jarred him immediately: the blue and black plaid
button down was unfamiliar, the black tank top beneath scooping lower than she usually favoured.
Her trusty blue jeans were in play—some things never changed—but there was decidedly casual
look to her.

He loved it.

"Wait up!"

Betty glanced back, grinning widely. "There you are! I was just telling Archie how this morning's
walk was almost like grade school, when we'd all meet on his porch."

Archie stepped aside slightly, making room for Jughead. "You mean, when we'd spend twenty
minutes arguing because we could never agree on a topic all three of us wanted to talk about?"

"That's not true!" Betty protested. "We would talk about movies we saw."

"And you and Jughead would throw around film theory while I just wanted to quote lines," Archie
counteracted.

"Dissecting dialogue is relevant to film theory," Jughead chimed in, nudging his friend. "Besides,
what about you and Betty talking cars? You'd lose me at spark plugs."
Betty laughed heartily, her backpack clipping down her shoulder. "Oh man, remember the time Jug mixed up a catalytic converter with a carburetor?"

"It's all engine bullshit," Jughead scoffed, much to his friends' amusement.

They'd meandered down the east hall, closing in on Betty's locker, when chaos came in the form of Cheryl Blossom, her blood-red stilettos clicking down the hall.

"Cooper! We need to talk, now!"

Betty froze, clutching her bag tightly. "Polly."

One word, so heavy with meaning. Jughead had no doubt that the grieving, angry sister hiding in the attic of the Cooper home was the reason for this little social call. He tapped his beanie, staring at Betty. *Be strong. Be brave.*

Reluctantly, Betty turned to greet her cheerleading captain and often, her nemesis. "What do you want, Cheryl?"

"How could you not *tell me*?" Cheryl whispered, clearly troubled.

Huh. Cheryl Blossom seemed more hurt than hell-bent on rage. This was rare, indeed.

"Tell you what, exactly?" Betty evaded.

A perfectly manicured hand tucked ruby strands of hair behind Cheryl's diamond-dotted ear. "That Polly and JJ had babies? That he was a father? That I was..." Her voice cracked and for a moment, so did her usually hardened veneer. "We're his family, Betty. The Blossoms had a right to know."

"I just found out last week," Betty snapped. "Trust me, Cheryl. Your parents are hardly the only shitty ones in town."

Archie, ever a peacemaker, stepped between them. "Cheryl, hey. I know this must be a shock. Betty's been struggling with it, too. You both should have been told."

"Well, thanks to Sheriff Keller, we know now," Cheryl retorted, refocusing quickly on Betty. "Mommy and Daddy are *not* happy that Blossom descendants have been sold off to some middle-class couple at the whim of your sister."

"Excuse me?" Betty stepped forward, pressing her chest against Cheryl's. "You have *no idea* what Polly has been through! How dare you?"

Jughead's hand flew to her shoulder in a gesture of calm. "Betty, she only knows what Keller told her."

"Exactly," Betty growled. "She doesn't know that no one, not even her precious *mommy and daddy* bothered to tell Polly that Jason was murdered. That she was abandoned and alone."

Cheryl, clearly sensing the landmine she'd spiked with her designer heels, rocked back on her heels. "Betty, I'm sorry—"

"Oh, you're sorry?" Betty sneered. "Sorry that my parents manipulated her into the adoption? Or are you sorry that your hateful parents are the reason Jason and Polly couldn't just be together?"

Jughead's arm flew out, blocking Betty's advance. "Betty, please. She didn't know all that. But she's sorry now, aren't you?"
Cheryl nodded nervously. "I am. I… I just want him back, Betty," she confessed. "And if he has children out there? Maybe that's the way to keep him alive."

They'd gathered a small crowd of onlookers, to Jughead's dismay. He looked to Archie, the one with social clout, and he'd nodded immediately, urging people to move on. Betty and Cheryl were mercifully oblivious to the gawkers.

"If Polly had known he was gone, she never would have let them go."

"But she did let them go. And my parents aren't going to stand for it."

"And what does that mean?" Jughead interjected.

Cheryl hesitated, pursing her painted lips. "They've hired a lawyer and a private investigator. They're going to demand legal custody of the twins."

Betty blanched, leaning against the locker bank. "They're… what?"

"They're going to find the babies. And they're going to demand custody of them." Cheryl edged backwards, shaking her head sadly. "If Polly didn't want to give them up… I'm sorry, Betty."

"Cheryl?"

But she was gone, slipping into the bustling, jarring crowd filling the school halls. Archie shielded Betty from the crowd, keeping their shoulders from connecting with her shuddering frame. The two men exchanged a look, neither sure what help they could offer, if any.

Jughead leaned closer, forcing her to focus on him. "Betts? What do you need from us?"

"Polly. I—I need to tell Polly."

"We have first period together," Archie announced. "I'll tell Ms. Houston that you had a guidance meeting. Buy you time."

Betty embraced him tightly. "Thank you, Archie. I'll probably miss the whole class by the time I run home and back, but she needs to know. They're her babies."

Out of the corner of his eyes, Jughead caught a flash of letterman jacket and winced. Here comes trouble…

"Betty!"

In unison—her, with fear; Archie, a curse—his friends announced an unwelcome arrival: "Chuck!"

The coach's son, and Jughead's least favourite person in Riverdale, surged through the crowd and pushed Archie aside. Betty was cornered, and she immediately diminished in his presence.

"I came to pick you up this morning. You weren't there."

"I told you last night, I stayed over with Veronica. Remember?"

Chuck laughed softly. "Oh, I remember. But your mom told me you'd come home this morning to change. And that you walked here, with Andrews."

Jughead seethed as Chuck intentionally shoved Archie, enough to stumble his friend. Clearly, someone hadn't paid attention yesterday. He threw a hand up to keep Archie from starting a fight. If
Weatherbee wanted to suspend someone, he'd take the fall. He trusted Archie to keep Betty safe.

"What did I tell you about harassing my friends, Clayton?"

"What did I tell you about minding your own damn business?" Chuck growled. "Betty, we need to talk. Now."

Betty shook her head, edging towards Jughead. "I don't have time right now, Chuck."

"Make time."

"She's not going anywhere with you, Clayton." Jughead stepped forward, and in doing so, offered Betty an escape route behind him. "She said no. Take a fucking hint."

"Oh, do you want to talk here?" Clayton's eyebrows raised, his expression sickeningly smug. "Because we can talk here, in front of your friends and this hallway full of students."

"No!" Betty hugged herself tightly. "Chuck, we can talk at lunch, I promise."

So, it was true. Clayton was actually blackmailing her with a secret, and Betty was clearly terrified of it being spilled. How could he help her flee to Polly? How could he disarm an abusive jackass with a knowledge bomb?

His eyes widened at the realization: defuse it. He turned to her, mouthing instructions: Just go. Because he had this. He could buy her time, and he wouldn't even need a liver shot to do it.

"That won't work, Chuck. Betty told us everything." At the football player's disbelieving look, he repeated himself. "Everything, asshole. You can't hold that over her anymore. Archie and I will always have her back. And you? Maybe you should watch yours."

Jughead had learned one thing from his father's years of alcohol abuse: how to lie convincingly. To teachers. To police. To his parents. To Jellybean. And for him, it wasn't a lie. Whatever secret Chuck lorded over her, he didn't give a damn. He would never abandon Betty. There was nothing she was capable of that he couldn't accept. That truth gave him conviction and thankfully, Archie knew how to play along.

"You think you're gonna catch me with your fancy punch again, Wednesday Addams?"

"That's not the only trick up my sleeve, Clayton. Why don't you try me?" he dared.

Behind him, he heard a soft shuffling of sneakers. He looked to Archie, who nodded slightly. Betty was escaping. Betty would get to Polly. Whatever came next, it didn't matter.

Chuck hesitated, clearly wanting to inflict pain on Jughead, yet unwillingly to make a move. Archie, however, knew exactly what he wanted: in a swift movement, he shoved Clayton across the hall, amused when their foe nearly fell into a garbage bin.

"I've had enough of your macho bullshit, Clayton. And so has the rest of the team. Keep it up and not even your dad pulling the strings will save you." With a nonchalant shrug, Archie gestured down the hall. "Let's get to class, Jug."

Whispers and giggles echoed behind them as they looped around the corner to Jughead's locker. Once out of earshot, Archie asked Jughead what Betty had supposedly told them.

"I don't know. But whatever it is, he's using it to keep her with him."
"I have never wanted to kick someone's ass so badly, Jug."

"Same," Jughead echoed.

Jughead was lying. But he would never tell Archie about him so it didn't matter.

They parted ways for class, but kept in close contact all day. Between classes, they intentionally converged, as if to check on each other—and look for Betty. Archie texted Veronica. Jughead texted Kevin. Lunch came and went, the four of them worried about Betty's absence. More worrisome was the absence of Chuck Clayton, although Kevin noticed Reggie was also not in the cafeteria.

Cheryl, too, was absent from English class. Perhaps she had gone home to confront parental demons of her own. For all of her mean girl posturing, Cheryl did love her brother dearly. Perhaps she respected that in Polly, and in turn, felt empathy for a mother whose children were effectively stolen away. Jughead would reserve judgement on her for now.

During fourth period, a text finally arrived: Mom came home. I'm okay.

You coming back today at all?

Her response was quick. Maybe. Will call you tonight either way.

Alice Cooper, guaranteed to derail the best laid plans. Probably dragged Betty to a lawyer of her own to determine what legal moves the Blossoms could make. Relieved, Jughead focused on his classes, taking notes and struggling to catch up after a week of distractions. If his grades dropped, he knew Weatherbee would remove him from the Blue and Gold in a heartbeat. The principal was already unhappy with his coverage of the Blossom case. Jughead wasn't going to hand him an excuse to silence him.

Archie met him after class, walking him to his locker. "I can't stay long. Practice tonight."

"My condolences," Jughead replied. "At least we'll know where he is for a while."

"I'll keep an eye on him. Ronnie said the Vixens practice ends around the same time. Might go check on them after coach cuts us loose."

Jughead frowned. "Vixens practice? Did Betty come back to school?"


Within second of accepting the call, Archie was clearly furious. His skin flushed, eyes darkened, he began to pace the halls. Jughead's heart began to pound.

"Where did she go?" Archie demanded, moments later interrupting Veronica. "No, that's not good enough. We need to be sure she's alright…. Okay. Okay, you do that. I'll focus on him…. Okay, keep me posted."

Jughead had texted Betty immediately, but she hadn't responded. Damn it, damn it, damn it! Archie had no sooner hung up his phone before Jughead grabbed his arm, needing answers.

"What happened? Where's Betty?"

"Veronica says they were arguing outside the locker room. When she came around the corner, Betty bolted. She's ditched practice, told Veronica to tell Cheryl she knew why she had to bail. She's not
answering her phone." Archie hesitated. "Ronnie says Chuck scared her. Like she thought he would hit Betty."

"I'm going to hurt him."

Jughead spun around, determined to catch himself a predator, but Archie grabbed his arm and yanked him back. "No. We're not giving him the satisfaction. He won't miss practice. His dad will never let him live it down. I'll go there and handle Clayton. You need to find Betty."

Archie's words made sense, but the fury... it was consuming. This was what poets meant by the phrase seeing red. He wanted Clayton to hurt. He wanted him on his knees, begging for Betty's forgiveness. He wanted him run out of town. He wanted him to know her fear. He wanted—

Archie shook him by the shoulders gently. "Jug, she needs us. Find her. I know you can."

"Alright. I'll find her. Keep that bastard away from her, Arch."

"Text me when you find her, alright?"

"I will."

Jughead hurried down the hall, his thoughts scattering like coins in a fountain. Think, Jughead. Think. Did she go home? Maybe, although clearly she'd had her fill and chosen time with Cheryl Blossom over being there. Pop's? Maybe. Very public, which had pros and cons, he supposed.

Wait. Of course.

He doubled back down the hall, veering north. If she didn't want to go home, and didn't want to be seen, she'd go somewhere close. Somewhere nobody else went—except him. The Blue and Gold office was the perfect refuge for her.

He glimpsed her ponytail through the window as he approached and immediately heaved a sigh of relief. She was here. It was going to be okay. They could grab milkshakes, and watch a movie, or hell, just take his dad's truck and drive until the gas ran out.

It was going to be okay—until it wasn't.

His hand frozen on the doorknob, he watched through the window as Betty's fingers dabbed makeup on a purple bruise encircling her left wrist.

Chapter End Notes

Hands up! Who hates Chuck more than ever? *throws hands in the air*

ANNOUNCEMENT TIME

There is now a Spotify playlist for all of the chapter songs for this story. You can hunt me down (username: emptysthemepark) and quickly find my playlist, cleverly titled Gaslight. The music really speaks to the mood of each chapter and often, how Jughead feels. I may start posting the next chapter's song in advance there as a clue. I'll try and figure out how to link it to my profiles, but I hate the unfriendly coding so wish me luck! You can also tweet me (dillonac) and I'll hook you up.
Next time: Jughead confronts Betty in a desperate effort to get her to leave Chuck, but will she risk her secret being exposed?

Reviews are fuel. Keep them coming. I see you, regular reviewers, and you are HEROES of fanfiction.
OKAY, MUSIC RAMBLE. This chapter is named after the song that kicked off this entire story idea. It's a bit of a rollercoaster so buckle in.

I strongly recommend you go find the story playlist on Spotify or just look up Gaslight by Scott Helman. And while you're at it, you can realize that he has multiple songs that fit Bughead so well, namely Kinda Complicated (a song about opposites in love), You Made Her (domineering parents who don't appreciate a headstrong daughter with a rough-around-the-edges boyfriend) and Ripple Effect (a couple rising above their messed up parents).

Also, lyrics quoted in this chapter are from I've Rationed Well by July Talk which is a perfectly Bughead song for this tale.

Thank you so, so much for all your kind reviews. I got hit with a flood of them and they made writing this so easy. Now, let's continue to fix this mess and make Bughead happen, because it is ENDGAME.

Song: Gaslight - Scott Helman

Disclaimer: Riverdale is so not mine, and maybe that's a good thing, because here come angsty times.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Eleven: Gaslight

"You thought that you were in control
Turns out that's impossible
Cause you handed it off to a fool
Now only you can save you
There's a fire in the house now
But you won't come out
You think the smoke is a storm cloud
But the ceiling's coming down
Keep me awake in the middle of the night
Oh why can't you trust your own eyes?
Keep me awake in the middle of the night
Oh why can't you see the gaslight?"

Gaslight - Scott Helman

His tight grip on the doorknob was the sole tether keeping him from storming into the gym, crashing football practice and leaving bruises on the body of Chuck Clayton. The tension radiated up his arm, into his shoulder, lighting up a series of nerves that hadn't worked properly in a long time, and the fiery rage receded to a soft burning.
No, no violence. She mattered more than that. But answers? He needed those.

He pushed his way into the office, noting how quickly she tugged her sleeve down. A long, plaid sleeve of a top he'd never seen her wear before. Her anxious look fell away to a nervous smile as she recognized him.

"You scared me!"

"Funny. You've had me scared for the last few minutes," he replied, circling the desk towards her. Betty fidgeted with her sleeve, leaning against the wall. "I don't know why—"

"Did you really think Veronica wouldn't call us for help?" Jughead knew his temper was getting the better of him, but he could only repress so much anger. "You ran off and wouldn't answer your phone."

"I'm sorry, Jug."

"I don't need an apology. I need you to be safe! I need you to be honest!" His hand shot out, tugging on the sleeve of her plaid button-down. "This isn't your usual look, Betty. What's with the makeover?"

She flinched away, eyes averting to the ground. "Nothing else was clean. My parents have been fighting too much to do chores."

"No way, don't you do that," he pleaded. "Betty, we promised. You promised me."

His hand reached for her on instinct, tilting her chin until they were face to face, eye to eye. In hers, he saw pain, and guilt. She was lying, and she knew it. But she was suffering beneath the weight of her false words.

"Please, tell me the truth," he repeated, softening his voice. "Too many people have lied to me, Betty. I can't deal with it from you."

Her lower lip trembled and she bit it viciously, drawing blood. It terrified him, reminding him of a night he longed to forget.

"Hold still," I whisper, dabbing with the wet cloth.

"It stings," she whimpers sadly.

"I know it does. I'm so sorry, but we have to clean it up." I brush her tangled hair from her face, wincing at the bruise on her cheek. "We'll get you some ice."

"It's going to sound weird," she whispered.

"Betty, I'm weird. You never see me leave the house without wearing this damn beanie. That's weird."

To his surprise, she laughed quietly, her lips curving into a half-smile. "Okay, valid point."

"Of course it is. You're stalling."

She shrugged her shoulders sadly. "I… I wanted to feel brave. I don't own a beanie, so…"

Oh. OH. It hadn't occurred to him how very much her outfit was one he'd wear: plaid layered over a
plain shirt of some kind. Hell, he was wearing a plaid shirt over a faded grey tee today. And as much as it meant to him that she saw him as strong, her answer, although seemingly genuine, was incomplete. A lie of omission.

"It's pretty warm for long sleeves," he prodded. "Especially for someone who's always pushing hers up to her elbows and complaining about the heat at the Andrews house."

Her eyes widened and he glanced down at her covered wrist expectantly. Reluctantly, she extended her arm to him, turning away from the reveal she knew was inevitable. His fingers gingerly tugged the sleeve up, revealing a mostly-concealed bruise that very much resembled two fingers gripping far too tightly. He winced at the sight, at how ashamed she seemed to be of something she held no blame in.

"How badly does it hurt?" He turned her arm slightly, gritting his teeth at how deep a shade of purple it was.

"No worse than a bumped knee in cheerleading practice," she mumbled. "Juggie, I…"

"You should take this to Keller." Her shocked expression caught him off guard. "Betty, this is abuse. This is physical evidence of that abuse. He should go to jail for hurting you."

Betty shook her head quickly, yanking her arm away. "No, I don't want to deal with that. My parents would freak out. And Polly? She's too shaky to handle this right now."

"They can deal! Your boyfriend is abusive and he's left marks. And over what? Not getting to drive you to school today? Are you listening to me? Do you hear how absurd that sounds?"

Hugging herself tightly, Betty turned towards the window, staring out onto the courtyard. A soft sniffling noise betrayed the tears he knew she was trying to hide from him. As much as he wanted to console her, he sensed that she didn't want it. Not right now.

"It wasn't like that," she finally replied.

"Then what was it like?" Jughead scoffed. "He wasn't angry, but so happy that he hurt you? Betty, you're a journalist. Examine the facts."

She turned away from the window, brushing aside errant tears. Her hips pressed into the window sill, as if it were the only thing keeping her from collapsing to the floor. The setting sun trickling through the blinds cast a jaundiced pallor over her skin that sent his stomach churning.

"I am." She paused, tapping her wrist lightly. "This happened… um, yesterday."

His mind flooded with images: his altercation with Chuck; his detainment; Betty's late-night visit to his home. How Chuck could never find out she'd been there. His surprise that she'd shown up at the station. Her carefully layered lies with Veronica and her mother. You're my beanie.

"Tell me what happened," he urged.

"When they arrested you, I heard Archie call your dad. He told him he was going to head over to the station. I wanted to go with him, but Chuck?" A heavy sigh. "He was just very angry and in pain. He didn't mean to grab me so hard."

So, this is my fault. She has those bruises because of me.

"Yes, he did. Because he is an angry, abusive piece of garbage. He's always been that way. He's
been a bully since he hit puberty."

He backed away from her, backed himself into a corner, steadying himself. He needed to see the room. He needed to know his exits. Because in his mind, he was ten, taking a beating for a Jello cup. In his mind, he was thirteen, being shoved head-first into a toilet by Reggie Mantle. In his mind, he was in Toledo, as a sickening pop resonated in his skull and he crumpled to the ground in pain.

He closed his eyes, drawing a shaky breath. He kept on failing everyone. Everyone.

Her voice cut through the rumbling in his skull, soft and defeated: "If I hadn't pulled away so hard, if I'd just explained where I was going…"

"No, this is my fault," he insisted. "You got yourself hurt for me, and that's not okay. I'm not worth it."

He hadn't heard her approach over the pounding of his heart, now lodged in his throat. Her arms were around his neck, her warm breath on his neck, and he wanted to weep. She had just wanted to be a good friend to him, and had paid a price he couldn't accept. For that, he denied himself the comfort of her embrace.

"He never should have hurt you." He reluctantly opened his eyes, disoriented by how the world was so very much the same in the wake of his mistakes. "I'm not letting him off the hook for what he's done. Abusers don't get to deflect blame. But I'm never going to forget that he went this far because of me. And I'm not going to let you excuse this away, Betty."

He ushered her back, needing space to move. He slid off his own plaid shirt and carefully yanked his right arm free of his t-shirt. Turning his back to her now, he revealed a secret he'd been keeping for months. A secret that had made it easy to take a gamble on his father's plea to come back to Riverdale.

"You see that lump?" he asked. "That weird, reddish lump near my shoulder blade?"

"I do. What is that?"

Turning around, he gingerly redressed. "That, Betty, is scar tissue from the waste of oxygen my mother decided to date in Toledo. That's from a dislocated shoulder that he refused to let me get medical care for, so I reset it myself."

Betty gasped, rocking back on her heels. "Oh my God!"

The moment he swings at JB, I lunge, ready to tear out his jugular with my teeth. I am feral. I am a lion, defending the pride. I warned my mother about this guy, but she dismissed me. Said he was different.

He is different, alright—he's worse. He is stronger than me, faster. Practiced at his twisted craft. My arm is in his hands and it folds behind me like origami until my shoulder pops. I hit the ground, a searing pain spreading through my right shoulder. My hand hangs at an odd angle and I know it's dislocated.

He won't let me call the ambulance. He rips the phone out of the wall. He takes my cell phone and rips out the battery. He throws the modem outside. Oh, he's done this before. My mother's picked a professional.

At two in the morning, I manage to pop my shoulder back into place, or I think I do. She comes home at six and for the first time since we've arrived in Toledo, she listens to me and kicks him out.
I don't tell her about my arm. We don't have insurance, anyway.

"I bet he didn't mean it either. Didn't know his strength?" Jughead shook his head in disgust. "Like he didn't mean to take a swing at JB and split her lip open. Betty, they never mean it. It's a goddamn lie, and I wish you'd wake up and see that no secret is worth this!"

His shoulder ached from the effort, but he hoped that Betty was beginning to understand the gravity of her situation. It was a truth he'd kept from his father so far. He'd taken great care not to let anyone see it, to not let the daily ache break through his practiced stoicism. But if it would help her break free, he would let her stare at it for hours, poke it, take pictures—hell, he'd tell his dad if she promised to leave Clayton.

Betty's fingers fist ed her long sleeve shirt, crumpling the fabric inside her palms. Her blood-stained lower lip, downcast gaze and diminished stance drew the air from his lungs. He reached for her in spite of himself, his outstretched hand grazing her arm before falling helplessly to his side.

"Juggie, I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll end it with him," he pleaded. "Say you'll let us help you. Archie, Veronica, Kevin and I—we're your personal army. You're not alone. You never were."

"That's bullshit. I was alone!" She recoiled from him, her body shuddering with a sob she would not allow. "You were gone, Archie was dating our music teacher, Kevin was sleeping with some guy he wouldn't let anyone meet, Polly was gone…but Chuck was there."

"Chuck was there to take advantage, just like he's done before."

This was going nowhere. They were two people in pain, crashing into each other like bumper cars. They jostled and jockeyed for position, but it was all whiplash and weary bodies. His heart ached within his chest, battered and beaten down by the futility of fighting with her. Her greatest attribute—seeing the good in anyone—had become her ultimate downfall. It was all just gasoline poured on the fire within.

Snatching up his backpack, he headed for the door. "Call Veronica. She's worried sick."

"Jug?"

A single, soft-spoken syllable, it scarcely carried five feet. It was contained, confined, as much a prisoner as she was in her so-called relationship.

"You know, I get why the Blossom case has gone unsolved for so long," he mused, glancing over his shoulder at her. "Clearly, digging deeper isn't your strong suit anymore. Not if you think Chuck is your only option."

He stormed out of the office, immediately regretting his words. They were cruel, cutting to the core of her. The kind of shitty thing his father would fling out when drunk.

Damn it!

And yet, he couldn't bring himself to turn around, to take it all back, tell her he'd love her until the day he died. That she was as integral in shaping the man he'd become as his DNA, because she'd nurtured the best parts of him while his family had left them to rot and decay.

With a text of reassurance to Archie and a plea for Kevin to pick Betty up, Jughead made the long walk home. He kept his bag on his right shoulder, the strap cutting into scar tissue, as his penance.
He stumbled into the Whyte Wyrm at nine, on a mission to forget a certain blonde beauty with Bambi eyes of emerald green.

Although the Serpents didn't serve minors in the Wyrm as a rule (tempting the Sheriff to shut them down was a foolish enterprise), the teenagers were allowed to hide in the back offices if they chose to knock a few back. Jughead had never been much of a drinker, but he'd settle for a few shots tonight—if he couldn't get what he really wanted.

Sweet Pea wasn't there, to his disappointment, and he wouldn't dare ask anyone else for pot. Settling in at the bar to wait for him, Tall Boy wandered by. Perhaps sensing his desperation, the intimidating man passed him a nearly empty bottle of Jameson and told him to head in back.

"Don't tell your old man I gave that to you," he uttered menacingly. "And brush your goddamn teeth before going home."

*How am I going to do that?*

Jughead shrugged his agreement, figuring details could wait. For now, he craved a little oblivion, perhaps a few dead brain cells. Wasn't this what teenagers did? Taking a swig, he locked himself in the back office and sunk into a worn out chair. Maybe it was time he was a little more normal—whatever the fuck that was.

He flipped through his Spotify account, settling on a playlist for the broken-hearted. He took another swig from the bottle, the burn of the whiskey strangely appealing. He almost spat the bitter liquid out as the first song echoed his life in eerie symmetry.

"*Then I met a whiskey, and I moved across town*  
*Away from the river, and the girls, and you..."

It was a duet: a deep, rich voice and a soft, delicate woman in a call and response. It was a mirror of his friendship with Betty Cooper, a knife in his heart. He should skip it, but it was a pain he understood. In that, it was comforting.

"*We'll survive by telling lies*  
*We've rationed well..."

He was a hypocrite, he realized, setting the bottle on the desk beside him. Hadn't he demanded honesty from her? Insisted on it, even? *No more secrets*, or so they promised. But he was keeping one himself. Maybe he was keeping it poorly—Archie had made a few remarks laced with suspicions, and Veronica had certainly noticed *something* between them—but he hadn't told Betty the plain and simple truth.

Who was he to demand more of her?

*That's different. I can't lose her as a friend*, he told himself.

*So you insulting her was being a friend? Okay, Jughead. Great friending.*

Rolling his neck, he slumped further in the chair. Whiskey wasn't doing anything but leaving a nasty hint of acid in the back of his throat. He knocked back another shot all the same.

There were bigger problems than his hopeless affection for Betty Cooper. The omnipresent anger within was troubling. It was an unwieldy, unreasonable creature that spat fire and curled his fists until his fingers ached. His rage at Jackass Boyfriend, his frustration with his mother for letting that
disaster of a relationship continue for months, his lingering resentment of his father, his fury at the mere thought of Chuck—it was too much negativity for one body to bear.

He'd lashed out at Betty. His father was dangerously close to falling off the wagon. Jughead was the common denominator. He was a block of C4, one lit fuse away from chaos and destruction.

Glancing at the time, he abandoned the last few shots of whiskey. His father would be home from his meeting in an hour, and he couldn't reek of booze when he arrived. His father had made many mistakes, but he was a good man at heart. Jughead wanted him to stay sober, and maybe realize that himself.

And Betty? He'd have to take a step back, protect her from his unsettling rage until it burned itself out to embers and ashes.

His phone buzzed in his palm as he secured the back office. One new text message. Warily, he opened it.

*Spending the weekend at Veronica's. I'll be safe there. I won't be alone.*

What lay between the short statements gave Jughead hope. She had heard him, even if she wasn't ready to face it head-on. Now, it was his turn.

*I was out of line earlier.*

He nodded to Tall Boy on his way out, an acknowledgement of the secret exchange. Stepping outside, he stared up at the sky, counting the scattershot stars dusted in clouds. He'd spent so many nights at the Twilight, willing the stars to sober up his dad, or help him make sense of the turmoil within. They'd never spoken to him. Or maybe he'd never learned how to hear them.

His phone hummed and he glanced down, heart in his throat. *I just need time to think about it all.*

He'd finally done it: he'd finally driven her away. And he couldn't blame her for cutting her losses. His mother had happily done the same, practically throwing him on the bus back to Riverdale.

Tugging his beanie low, he slipped away along a dimly-lit street, clutching his phone to his chest as if it could somehow heal his broken heart.

He ditched school Friday, exaggerating the mild hangover he woke up with into a possible stomach flu. Between his desire to mangle Chuck's smug features and a crippling anxiety that rolled over him at the thought of seeing Betty, he had no business stepping through the doors of Riverdale High. FP had immediately offered to stay home with him, a gesture that left him reeling, but he'd waved his dad away.

He chose not to tell Archie and the others about the bruises.

Three in the morning ruminations had led him to conclude that while Betty was in danger, her friends collectively knew that. To break her confidence by revealing her injury placed her at greater risk of harm. If she withdrew from everyone, there would be no way to know Chuck's next shitty move.

Having made several less than stellar remarks of his own, Jughead spent his day online reading about anger and its connection to childhood abuse and instability. It didn't take a research paper for him to connect the dots there. It was the articles that explained where the anger came from, and how to work through it, that he found useful.
Which was how he came to digging through the shed out back.

It was a tiny locked structure, scarcely big enough to stand in, but it was where his father had stored away the belongings left behind in the exodus to Toledo. Specifically, it was where his mother's things were. The boxes were slightly dank, and dead insects collected in webs dotted with dead leaf fragments, but he soon found what he was looking for: her porcelain dolls. Three of them.

He'd always found them creepy as hell, to be truthful. Their unnatural blue eyes and too-white faces reminded him of the dead. But today, they only evoked anger and hurt. Today, they represented what his mother seemed to think of her living, breathing children: that they, like the damn dolls, should be seen and not heard. That they should remain where they were placed, until she cared to spend time with them.

Jughead sniffled, ignoring a traitor tear sliding down his cheek. That she'd only been kind to them to spite his father.

In another corner, he found his old baseball bat, dented and splintering slightly from years of smashing it into trees in the clearing with Archie. It would serve him well.

Nauseous and exhausted, Jughead laid the dolls out on the ground behind the trailer, ignoring the confused look of his neighbour. Three dolls: one for each life she destroyed with her actions, including her own. Jughead understood that much; he wasn't without compassion for her. But his anger was vast, and he needed release.

Hefting the bat over his shoulder, he swung until the dolls were ceramic dust and silk fragments.

The weekend passed in a sleepless haze of writing and pacing the paths in the woods nearby, worrying about Betty Cooper. Occasional texts from Archie and Veronica assured him that she was being watched over. Archie had driven Betty and Veronica back from the away game Friday night, noting Chuck had kept his anger in check in front of Coach Clayton. True to her word, Betty had made the Lodge home her own for the weekend, slipping in and out to visit Polly, but otherwise remaining in the care of the vivacious Latina. Saturday afternoon, Veronica had texted him a link to her Instagram account with a heart emoji. Puzzled and somewhat annoyed—social media had never been and would never be his idea of a good time—he clicked through and smiled in spite of himself.

It was a series of images—six in all—of Betty, Veronica and Polly. Lodges prefer blondes, the caption read, dotted by hearts and rainbows. It was the first time he'd seen Polly since her return home, and he immediately understood Betty's concern for her well-being. As much as she tried to smile, Polly's eyes were rimmed in dark circles, the blue irises dull. The sisterly embrace in the fourth shot, however, was full of love. If Polly felt nothing else, it was affection for her baby sister.

Betty, on the other hand, seemed genuinely happy in each image. Veronica had caught her mid-laugh in a pair of Lolita-heart sunglasses, the sunlight creating an ambient glow about her. It was breathtaking. It was a stillframe of the Betty he'd grown up with: carefree, a little shy, but full of light.

Thank you for looking after her, he sent back.

Veronica replied immediately: Every good puppy deserves a treat *wink emoji*

Shaking his head with exasperation at her joke, he had spent the evening flipping through Veronica's account, hunting images of Betty. It struck him how few of the shots included Chuck—almost as if Veronica were quietly declaring her stance on the relationship. In several images, he'd clearly been
cropped out, but in most, Veronica had pulled Betty into a hashtag "sister selfie". For all of her rich
girl veneer, Veronica had a good heart. Betty was lucky to have her as a friend.

He'd finally fallen asleep early Sunday morning, his phone opened to the picture of Betty in his
beanie, but a lazy Sunday was not meant to be. Pink Floyd's "Time" blared on a loop until he
reluctantly cracked open an eye to glance at the display. Seeing Archie's name, he hit talk.

"It's early," he grumbled.

"It's noon!" Archie countered.

Jughead rubbed his itchy eyes, rolling away from the sunlight peering through his blinds. "And I
went to bed at seven."

"Well, I'm sorry, but you're going to have to drink a few coffees and get over here. Now."

The urgency in his friend's voice worried him. "Why? What happened?"

"It's Betty." Archie's voice was quieter now, and in the background, Jughead heard a door shut.
"She's not doing well. She needs her friends."

Jughead's heart began to race. What was wrong with Betty? She was supposed to be with Veronica,
safe from the fists of Clayton. Safe, too, from his own rage, which he'd spent the weekend dispelling
as best he could, in hopes of apologizing to her tomorrow.

"I don't know if she wants to see me right now," Jughead admitted, sitting up. "I was a little harsh on
Thursday, Arch."

"No, you're wrong. She needs us. The Trio. The Three Musketeers."

"There were actually four of them—"

"I know, I know. She's been telling me that since grade one." Archie sighed heavily. "Look, she's
been here since eight this morning, and she keeps asking if you and FP are coming to dinner."

"But dinner is cancelled this week."

Fred Andrews was out of town, meeting with Mary Andrews to finalize their divorce. He'd called to
cancel dinner on Friday night. Jughead had been grateful for the extra time to formulate a worthy
apology for Betty.

"I told her that, but she keeps insisting we could have it without my dad. She needs you, Jughead.
Please."

Jughead rose slowly, rolling his neck to loosen the knots there. "Do we know why she's so upset?
Did Clayton do something?" Because if he did, I have a baseball bat.

"No, it's Polly… Just, damn it, just get here. I don't know what happened between you two, and I
really don't care. She's asking for you, so she clearly doesn't care as much as you do. Get in the
shower, grab a coffee and get to my house."

"Alright! Give me an hour." The ferocity of his friend's demand caught him off-guard. "It's bad, isn't it?"

Archie hesitated briefly. "Yeah, it's bad, Jug. Hurry, okay? Take a cab if you have to. I'll pay."
"Tell her I'm on my way."

He promised an hour. He made it in forty minutes, thanks to his father flooring it in the truck. All it took was a Betty needs me and FP was grabbing his keys. It would seem that Jones men had a decided weakness for Cooper women, he mused, still curious as to the nature of FP's relationship with Alice. He'd downed a coffee on the way, not that he'd needed it. The fear of what could have Betty in such a state that ever-pleasant Archie Andrews was barking orders was pumping adrenaline through his veins.

His hand hesitated at the door, unable to knock. What if Archie had lied? What if Betty hadn't asked for him? What if she was upset with him? Crap, this is a terrible idea. Then again, his entire life was a series of bad ideas, wasn't it?

Drawing a deep breath for courage, he sputtered as the door flew open of its own accord, revealing a dishevelled Betty. Her eyes were swollen and red, her cheeks flushed. He immediately noticed she was in the same blue plaid shirt she'd worn on Thursday, although she'd missed a button, rendering it askew.

Archie hadn't exaggerated: this was bad.

"Betty?"

"Oh Juggie!" She threw her arms around him, sobbing into his shoulder. "She's gone!"

She… Polly? Gone?!

He held her tightly, tucking her head beneath his chin. "Shh, hey, I'm here. Let's go inside where it's warmer, huh?"

She burrowed into his side, allowing him to usher her back into the warmth of the house. Archie stood in the foyer, his expression pained. Told you, he mouthed. They made their way into the living room, settling Betty between them. Archie passed her a box of tissues which, judging from the crumpled pile on his table, had already been put to use.

"Okay, what happened? Who's gone?"

Betty sniffled loudly, pulling a tissue from the box. "Polly. She… She… Archie?"

"Polly has moved in with the Blossoms," Archie announced, clearly angry about this news. "They took her away this morning."

Jughead shook his head to clear the fog, because there was no way he'd heard that correctly. "I'm sorry. The Blossoms? The very people who drove Polly and Jason to think that faking his death was the only way to have a relationship?"

Betty blew her nose, mumbling about it being gross. "They're trying to get the babies back. She… She says she doesn't care how, she just wants them back."

Of course. Cheryl and Betty's confrontation Thursday morning. Cheryl must have walked away with Betty's information and fed it to her parents. Had they maybe seen a way to hurt Alice and Hal Cooper? And Polly… he couldn't blame her for doing whatever it took to see her children again.

He rubbed her back gently, wishing he could do more to ease her sorrow. "I'm so sorry, Betty."

Betty dabbed her eyes with her shirt sleeve. "I know she just wants the babies, and I want her to see
them. I do. But I just got her back. I don't understand why she has to live with them."

Jughead didn't understand it, either. There were no words of wisdom that would make this okay, no hug enough to ease losing her sister a second time. And so he kept a steadying arm around her, letting her quietly cry out her sorrow. Archie ventured to the kitchen, returning with cans of Coke for them all.

"Did you maybe want to watch TV, Betty?" Archie offered. "A movie? You can watch anything you want, even Twilight."

Betty snuffled, managing a half-smile. "Archie, you know I hate those books."

"You've never hate-watched a movie?" Archie joked. "I love watching bad horror movies."

"Horror's different," Jughead mused. "It usually comes full circle from awful to amusing."

"Twilight is a horror movie," Archie insisted. "I have to cover my eyes, it's so terrible."

Archie continued to flip channels, baiting Betty into banter about the merits or failings of each. Understanding his friend's strategy, Jughead joined in, feeling immense relief as Betty stopped crying long enough to set her Kleenex box down. Her body relaxed, burrowed deep into the sofa between them.

Archie was right: this was a wound only the Trio could heal.

After bouncing between re-runs of Friends and The Suite Life of Zack and Cody (loudly protested by Jughead), talk of ordering pizza began in earnest. Archie took charge of food, with Betty demanding a vegetable of some kind be on her share. Now in control of the remote, Betty was flipping through the movie options on TV.

"Hmm. Not in the mood for the fiftieth installment of Fast and the Furious," she quipped, scrolling onwards. "No… No… Ooh, what's on the Classics channel?"

Jughead's eyes widened at the movie about to start. It was certainly a classic, without question. In many ways, it was a perfect film for Betty to watch. But would it be too much for her in a raw emotional state?

"Oh, it has Ingrid Bergman and Angela Lansbury in it! I love Murder, She Wrote," Betty enthused.

"Yeah, but I really don't think Archie will be down for a classic film. Maybe we should try Space? Or Starz?"

Betty rolled her eyes. "Archie is one of my best friends, but his taste in movies is… questionable. Come on, Juggie. It's got mystery in it."

And spousal abuse, he added silently. Damn it, what should he do?

"Betty, it's a dark movie. Might not be the right thing for distracting you."

"My whole life is a dark movie. I'll feel right at home." She glanced over her shoulder, searching for Archie. "BRING POPCORN!"

Damn it. It looked like Gaslight was happening, against his better judgement. All he could do now was sit by her as the story unfolded. The pizza ordered and popcorn in tow, Archie returned to the couch and promptly became a footrest for Betty. She laid her head on a pillow in Jughead's lap,
absently munching on the buttery snack on the table.

It was a scene from countless weekends in their lives. But it wouldn't end with the same jovial laughter and littered carpets of their youth.

As Jughead predicted, Betty was unsettled by the mental manipulation of Paula by Gregory, her new husband with sinister intentions. Jughead had run across a copy of the film on Friday, nestled in his mother's stored belongings. It had occurred to him that it might help Betty see the nature of Chuck's mind games. Hell, the term gaslighting had come from it. But the way she clutched the pillow tighter, the popcorn abandoned… he worried it was too much.

And then it was.

"The playbook," she murmured. "I didn't take it."

"Betts? You okay?"

"I didn't take it," she echoed softly.

The doorbell rang, signalling the arrival of their dinner. Jughead was no longer hungry. Reaching for the remote, he hit pause, using Archie's departure as his excuse. He tapped her shoulder gently, nudging her to sit up.

"What playbook?"

She drew her knees to her chest, hugging them tightly. "There was this thing, months ago. He insisted I'd taken it and he was going to be in trouble. He said I'd done it on purpose. I didn't even know what it looked like, Jug. But I opened my locker and it was there."

"And there's no way you like, grabbed it with your textbooks by mistake?"

Betty shook her head furiously. "No, no way. It's very distinct. There's something else…” She glanced over at the door, where Archie was counting out cash for the delivery guy. "I was about to break things off with him. But then he told me he knew my secret, and then the playbook showed up… I thought I was losing it."

That bastard. He'd trapped her in a relationship from hell from the very beginning, keeping her off-balance so she wouldn't see the signs. Jughead drew a deep breath to steady himself, knowing he had to keep his focus on helping her.

"Veronica kept telling me yesterday that I'm never happy around him. That I'm not myself. But when I'm with her, or you guys, or Kevin, I'm… me, I guess?" Betty rose to her feet, staring at the frozen image on the screen. "I knew he was troubled, but… What has he done?"

Archie returned, setting the pizza boxes aside as he noticed a clearly troubled Betty. "Hey, what happened?"

Tugging anxiously on her ponytail, Betty began to shake. "How did I not see it?"

"Jug?" Archie rounded the couch, tapping his friend on the arm. "What's going on?"

Jughead held a hand up to silence him. "Betty, you weren't meant to see it. It's not your fault."

"But I should have," Archie stepped forward, wanting to comfort her, but she backed away. "No, I need to think. I'm sorry. I need to—I have to go."
"Betty, wait!"

Archie meant well in reaching out for her arm. Jughead knew this. Betty surely knew it, too. But in the wake of her realizations, the contact made her flinch. Archie immediately backed away, stunned by the anger in her eyes.

"Let. Me. Go."

"Okay, I'm sorry." The redhead immediately backed away, hands held high. "I just want to help you."

"I know. But I can't be here right now. People have been hurt and—" She hesitated, looking pointedly at Jughead. "I should have seen it," she admonished herself, before throwing open the front door and rushing away.

With the slam of the door came the questions. "What the hell just happened, Jug?"

Jughead watched Betty cross the front lawn, heading back to her house. "She's finally realized what we all know: that Chuck is a monster."

Archie roughly ran a hand through his hair. "Okay, but she knows we don't like him. Why does she have to go?"

"She's ashamed." His fingers poked and pulled at the discarded pillow on his lap. "Okay, but she knows we don't like him. Why does she have to go?"

"She's ashamed." His fingers poked and pulled at the discarded pillow on his lap. "She shouldn't be, but she is. And I have no idea how to help her."

He couldn't help her. He couldn't help himself with that.

"Should we call Veronica?"

"Can't hurt," Jughead mused. "Veronica's been doing her best, you know. Trying to help Betty see what we see."

Archie made the call, stress-eating pizza as he managed to relay Betty's breakthrough between bites. Veronica agreed to call immediately, texting just minutes later.

Voicemail. Should I just go over?

Jughead dismissed the idea immediately. "Alice hates Hermione. Betty told me there's a history there. With Polly leaving today, Alice won't do Veronica any favours."

Archie replied, throwing his phone down on the seat beside him. "I hate this! I hate what he's done. I hate that he's causing her pain. I need to make him pay for this."

"You can't. Not yet," Jughead amended quickly. "Whatever he's holding over her, she cannot handle that getting out right now. Not with losing Polly. We have to follow her lead."

An hour passed. Two. He texted her twice, urging her to come back and save them from the pizza he couldn't stomach. She didn't reply. Archie reached out, with no response. And then, Jughead finally had a good idea: the bedroom window.

He took the stairs two at a time, pushing into Archie's room and picking a path around dirty laundry to the window. Her blinds were half open, but in that gap, he could see her at her vanity table. She was brushing her hair, her lips pursed in a frown.

"Is she there?"
"Yeah, she's there." He slumped against the windowsill, his stomach in knots. "I'm not good with this, Archie. People. Helping them. What do we do?"

Archie shrugged. "Neither am I. She left, remember?"

"Because of me. Because of our less than stellar conversation Thursday after school."

"Hmm." Archie stepped inside, kicking a pair of jeans into the corner of the room. "I'm not the greatest at this stuff, but my dad is a good guy. And whenever I've messed up, he says an apology never hurts."

"I tried that. She needed to think," Jughead lamented.

"When was that, Thursday?" Archie settled on the bed, pointing to the Cooper home. "Whatever it was, she didn't care by today. Did you ever think that if she's blaming herself for Clayton's BS that she's blaming herself for whatever happened with you?"

And there it was: the pieces fell into place. Betty was blaming herself for the way Chuck had wrenched his arm. The very same arm, she now knew, that his mother's boyfriend had dislocated. Hadn't he blamed himself for the bruises on her arm?

"Archie Andrews, you are a good friend. But I have to go."

Chapter End Notes

The observant will notice my cheekiness with the channel surfing our trio did. I couldn't help myself.

My heart aches for Betty. She's been manipulated so badly, abuse and mistreated. But Jughead is not giving up on her. Don't you worry about that. As you can see, he's been through a lot, but he's stronger than he realizes.

Next up: I skipped a moment in the original timeline, observant readers. Isn't it about time we try and make it happen in this world?

Reviews earn you good karma, fact. Thank you to everyone who reads quietly, and thank you for those who nudge me to update, love the story, feel that Jughead sounds true to the show (I work really hard for that - it means a lot that it's working). See you next week.
Alright shippers, it's time we convince these two to sort their shit out.

Your reviews made me so happy - special shoutout to new readers stumbling into my AU. I'm so glad so many people found the reference to Suite Life amusing - mad props if you also clued in on Cole's role on Friends. I'm equally happy that people are finding the characters realistic/true and that the depictions of abuse have felt accurate. I've drawn some pieces from a past relationship for this story, so I am very committed to being real and thoughtful. (I'm good now, married to someone who treats me as an equal and with kindness - don't worry!)

Where's Veronica?
Remember, she and Jughead have not had much reason to bond and this is all his POV. That said, she will have a stronger presence from here on out. She plays a key role in the next chapter.

What about Betty's secret?

It will come out in the next few chapters (unsure of pacing yet) and it is not the same revelation Chuck makes in the show at Jughead's surprise party. I've done something different. Betty does give you some hints in this chapter!

Song: Touch - July Talk (go listen as you read, from the moment Jughead and Betty are together - I think it adds something to the events)

Disclaimer: Not my TV show, not my characters, but I do make these puppets dance. Dialogue is borrowed strictly for context and no infringement intended.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Twelve: Touch

"No one gets to get this close
You told me to fit right in
Where I was needed most
We had to wait, anticipate and come of age..."

Touch - July Talk

For all of their domineering ways, the Coopers seemed oblivious to the covert usefulness of their ladder. Take now, for instance: currently, Jughead was stealthily sneaking it around the side of their home, on a mission to reassure their younger daughter. The height was perfect, and it leaned against the side of the white picket special with scarcely a sound to betray his plans (or lack thereof).

In reality, all he had was a theory: that Betty had run off because she blamed herself for Chuck’s actions in the student lounge.

He couldn't dismiss her feelings. Thinking of the bruises on her wrist sent a flood of ice water
coursing through his veins. But he could reassure her that he didn't hold her responsible. They could process their misplaced, albeit genuine, guilt together.

He ascended slowly, mulling how best to greet her. Soft-spoken empathy? Impassioned concern? A silent hope to be invited in? Reaching the top rung, his nerves consumed him. He tapped quickly, his frantic thoughts akin to a Pollock painting.

The blinds lifted, revealing a worried Betty. Recognizing her visitor, her eyebrows lifted in question of his unexpected visit. Delicate hands yanked the glass pane roughly upwards and she stood expectantly before him.

Fuck it; he could only be himself.

"Hey there, Juliet. Nurse off duty?"

For a moment, it was there: a half-smile, tugging gently on the corners of her pale lips. It quickly collapsed beneath the remembered weight of her epiphany hours before, but it offered Jughead hope. Betty stepped aside, allowing him to crawl through the window into the sanctity of her bedroom once more.

Jughead scanned the room, quickly noticing the open journal on her desk. A pastel pink candle in a large glass jar—strawberries and cream, he decided after a deep inhale—burned on the bedside table. Her bed was sloppily made, the pillows askew.

"What are you doing here, Jug?"

He dug his hands deep into the pockets of his Sherpa coat, hiding his fidgety hands. "I came to check on you," he offered.

"Why?" Her words were faint, a delicate tinkling of wind chimes.

"Because that's what you do when you care about someone. You check on them when they've had one of the worst days imaginable." Jughead approached her with caution, the memory of her outburst with Archie still fresh.

A pained, guttural cry slipped from between her pursed lips as she turned away. "The worst," she echoed.

"Talk to me, Betts. Please?"

Her hands slid up her cheeks, fidgeting with her ponytail. Tugging on it, smoothing the crowd of her head, willing it to embody the calm perfection she surely did not feel.

"This family. They're crazy. What my parents did to Polly? I don't even have words for it. Who does that to their daughter? To their grandchildren?"

"They're parents. They're all crazy."

She began to pace, tracing a well-worn path in the plush carpet beneath her feet. The rapid motion to and fro was dizzying, but he resisted the urge to halt her. How many hours had he spent walking in the woods this weekend, wearing down dirt paths as he dissected his every insecurity? Too many.

"Polly… The way she talks, Jug? She's not… I mean, she's my sister. She's still Polly. But there's things she says, and they scare me. They don't make sense. Or maybe they do."
"She's dealing with a tremendous amount of grief," he gently reminded her. "I'm sure it's hard for her to keep her thoughts in order."

Betty paused midstride, staring out the window behind him. The sun was setting, casting its copper hue over his shoulder until it kissed her right cheek, as if longing to envelop her in its warmth.

"And now, all I can think is… what if I'm crazy like them? What if that's why I let Chuck twist my mind up into knots?" She blinked away her tears, swiping them angrily with her sleeve. "What if I got you and Archie hurt because I'm just another crazy Cooper?"

He took a hesitant step forward, then another, studying her posture for signs of flight. But there were none—just a beautiful woman, folding upon herself until she was tiny, perhaps so much so that she might be granted her wish to disappear.

He would not let her give up on herself so easily.

"You didn't get me hurt," he told her, his hands gripping her shoulders to steady her shaking frame. "You do not bear the weight of what he's done. And yes, I know, I'm a huge hypocrite after what I said Thursday," he added quickly at her exasperated huff. "But if you'll agree to let your guilt go, I'll let mine go, too."

Head bowed and hands wringing before her, Betty sighed. "I feel awful. And stupid. And confused about so many things. I don't even know what's real anymore. Isn't that what being crazy is?"

"Hey, we're all crazy," Jughead replied gently, ducking his head into her line of sight. "We're not our parents, Betty. We're not our families."

His voice cracked, shattering upon words of wisdom he'd heard so many times—often from Betty herself. Because this time, he believed them. He was not his father, nor his mother. Betty had always been a radiant sun beneath the dour roof of the Cooper home. They were more than their DNA, more than the chaos between their respective four walls.

Her chin lifted slightly and her nose grazed his. "Promise?"

"I swear."

He was breathing her air, pressed close like this. Every exhalation felt like a butterfly's wing, fluttering in a whisper-kiss. His grip on her shoulders loosened, but she did not pull away from him. If anything, she drifted closer, her fingertips grazing his waist.

He swallowed hard, unable to dislodge the lump in the back of his throat. "Also…"

"What?" she murmured.

_This isn't the time, Jughead. What are you thinking? What are you doing? You're going to push her away!_

But he was so tired of pretending. So tired of fighting the gravity of her. He would be pulled into the fire of her sun. He would happily burn, if she knew the truth of his heart.

She bounced impatiently before him, tilting her head askance. "What?"

He'd spent years on the sidelines, studying her for signs that she might one day entertain the thought of dating him. He'd listened to her many laments over an oblivious Archie, choking down acid as he wore a calm demeanor to conceal his own affections. And he knew, if it was what she wanted, that
he would bury these feelings for the rest of his life and remain best friends—that a world without Betty's laughter and Nancy Drew tendencies was a world barren of joy. He would give Betty anything she desired. But there wasn't a chance in hell he'd let her continue to believe that Chuck Clayton was the only man in the world who could ever want her.

His hands slid up her neck, cradling her cheeks as he leaned in to kiss her. It was everything he'd ever dreamed of.

The softness of her lips struck him first: how she melted into him, delicate and gentle. The hint of cherry in her lip gloss tantalized him; he wanted to nip and lick, taste and tease. She was raw honey-sweet, flooding his senses as her own hands wrapped around his neck, tugging him closer. Streaks of lighting coursed beneath his eyelids and his knees buckled. The world was fracturing beneath him and he was ready to die for this, die for her and oh my God, the quiet purr rumbling in her throat was his breaking point. He was done for.

He pulled back first, breathless and bewitched, and she smiled shyly up at him.

"Wow…"

He nodded furiously, language lost to him now. He wanted to kiss her again and again. Caress her cheeks and marvel at the elegant strength of her jawline. Pull the elastic from her hair and tangle his fingers in the loose strands falling free.

Holy shit, I kissed Betty Cooper!

Her fingers danced along his cheek, stretching to toy with an unruly curl peeking out from beneath his beanie. A gesture she'd indulged in countless times over the year, but it suddenly held more weight. Maybe it always had, but neither had been willing to acknowledge it.

"Juggie?"

"Hmm?"

Her cheeks flushed crimson as she studied his face. "How long have you wanted to do that?"

Jughead winced. "I'm not sure I should answer that."

"No more secrets," she gently rebuked him.

He pulled her closer, holding her to his chest. "Five years, maybe more," he admitted, burying his face in her hair.

Betty burrowed into his shoulder, her hands gripping his hips. "That's a long time."

"I'm good at waiting."

"You're good at kissing, too."

He took this as an invitation, pressing soft kisses atop her head, behind her ear. His name fell from her mouth like a prayer to a heaven he'd never believed in. Her mouth captured his, lips parted, and he staggered backwards into her desk. She chuckled softly into his mouth as her right hand slipped beneath his faded tee. He shuddered beneath the circles her palm lazily traced along his skin, resisting the urge to pull her tight against the sudden throbbing in his jeans.

With one last flick of her tongue along his lower lip, Betty broke away. "Still wow," she demurred.
"No lies detected," he quipped lightly, running a finger along the bridge of her nose.

On the bedside table, her cellphone chimed with a soft reminder of an appointment and with it, reality. Her mood suddenly shifted: her brilliant smile burned away to a soft ember, and she pulled away from his embrace. Betty sunk slowly onto the end of the bed, her shoulders slumped.

"What am I doing? You don't want me, Jug."

Oh god, I pushed it too far. I pushed her and ruined it all.

He crouched beside her and tentatively reached for her hand. "If I crossed a line, I'm so sorry. Please believe me."

Her eyes widened. "No! You're wonderful. But there are things I've done that you don't know. Bad things."

"Your secret?" he prodded. "Betty, I told you that there's nothing you could tell me that would drive me away."

"I'm scared, Juggie," she confessed. "Scared of you finding out. Scared of—oh my god, Chuck. What if he finds out about this?"

"So I'll cancel the skywriter," he deadpanned, to her visible annoyance. "Listen, until you sort out Chuck, whatever just happened? That's between us. We'll figure it out. We always do."

Betty's hand slid her sleeve up, revealing her bruises. Her makeup was wearing off, the purple seeping through the faded ivory smears. Her fingertip traced the edges, as if memorizing the damage done.

"Can you pass me that white plastic package on my vanity?"

He obliged her quickly, noting the label: makeup cleansing wipes. She yanked one from the package, running it in rough circles until the devastating reality of Chuck's abuse emerged. He gasped in horror, realizing now that even Thursday, he'd only seen perhaps half of it. Nearer her elbow, the skin was almost black.

"He convinced me this was an accident." She crumpled the wipe angrily, tossing it across the room. "But it wasn't. I know that now."

Jughead sat the wipes aside, running his thumb gently over the top of her hand. "What can I do to help you feel better?"

"Can we just lie down for a while?"

He gestured to the door of her bedroom. "Parents?"

"It's locked. Dad's gone, and mom is probably drunk by now, anyway." She shimmied up the bed, hugging her pillow tightly. "Please?"

They shifted onto their sides, lying face to face, holding hands in the space between them. It was an easy silence: his thumb drew sloppy hearts upon her hand; her eyes roamed his features, as if seeking to draw them from memory later. Her breathing slowed until it rose and fell with his own.

"Five years?"

He nodded slightly, glancing away. "I was in denial for a while, if that makes you feel better? Um,
She nestled closer, pulling their clasped hands to her chest. "It's just... You listened to me talking about Archie all those years, and never once did you let on that you... Wanted to kiss me, I guess?"

"I wanted—want to be with you," he corrected her. "But it's okay if you don't. I can get over it."

"Juggie, don't say that."

"I can't lose you as a friend." And now he was confessing, unfurling his sins. "Your friendship means everything to me. I won't jeopardize that for anything, Betty."

"Shh." Her finger pressed to his lips. "I just... Can I tell you something I've never told you? You can't laugh, though."

He tugged absently at his beanie as he squeezed her hand. "I won't laugh."

Betty bit her lip gently as she studied their entwined hands. "I might have thought about this—us—a few times over the years. But I always pushed it away as fast as I could."

Jughead's heart thumped in his chest. "Oh. Well, with Archie around—"

No! It wasn't like that," she insisted. "I ignored it because I was so sure you never thought of me like that."

Jughead rolled his eyes in disbelief. "You're beautiful, kind, wickedly intelligent and bake amazing cookies. I never stood a chance, Cooper."

"I don't know. For years, I felt like I was crashing your friendship with Archie. Three's a crowd, right? You barely talked to me unless Archie was around."

"Um, because I was a social outcast with one friend gifted to me through my dad's BFF. And then, you happened."

Betty managed a small smile and his heart skipped at the sight. "When we started hanging out on our own, I was so relieved that you liked me, so grateful that you didn't hate me, or resent me for taking up Archie's time. We'd built this bond of our own over books and movies, and it meant a lot to me. So any thoughts I had, I ignored them. I guess... I didn't want to lose our friendship, either."

He was reluctant to bring it up, but there was a blatant contradiction in her words. "But you're friends with Archie, and you still tried to make it work."

"I did. Because my mom was keen on it. Because everyone seemed to expect it, so much so that it felt like a safer bet. Even if it didn't go well, I knew Archie would shrug it off quickly and we'd stay friends. He even seemed interested at times. It was confusing. You, on the other hand, have a tendency to put up walls and shut people out."

"I worked very hard to hide it, or ignore it. Because why would someone like you..." His breath hitched in his chest as she slid closer, curving her body against his own. "No one wants damaged goods, Betts."

"You are not damaged, Jughead Jones. Not to me." Her head rested on his heart, ear pressed to his chest. "I'm crazy, so I would know."

His arm wrapped tightly around her and his fingers drew circles through the flannel sleeve of her
shirt. "Maybe you are, if you're thinking of being with me. I'm okay with it."

"Juggie?"

"Hmm?"

"How do I break it off with Chuck?"

Jughead shrugged. "Easy. Dump a garbage can on his head and tell him to fuck off."

She propped herself up on his chest, staring down at him. "That's not what I mean. He knows the thing. If I leave him, he's going to tell everyone."

"Alright, let's approach this rationally. What's the worst that could happen if Chuck told people about your secret? Would you go to jail?"

Betty winced. "Maybe?"

Jughead's eyes widened as he searched her for signs of deception, finding none. "Seriously? I don't believe it."

"I don't think charges would be laid, for reasons I won't explain. But technically, yes." Betty bowed her head in shame.

"Then whatever it was, it was justified," Jughead reasoned. "Moving on, let's put jail aside. I will be here for you when the secret spills. What about Archie?"

Betty hesitated, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of his tee. "I—I'm not sure."

"Well, I am. Archie can't hold a grudge for long. He'll get over it in a day or two at most." At her disbelieving look, Jughead elaborated. "Betty, he is so angry with Chuck that anything you have done will be forgotten. He just wants you to be safe. What about Veronica?"

Betty mulled this for a moment, nodding slightly to herself. "She won't be mad."

"The plot thickens. Your most recent addition to your squad will forgive you, but your lifelong friends will judge you?"

"Kevin probably won't be mad, either. He loves drama."

Jughead traced her jawline, smirking at how her cheeks flushed in response. "So, all of your best friends will stand by you, plus you'll be free of an abusive jerk. Rationally, is your secret really as much leverage as Chuck believes it is?"

"It's still really bad, Jug."

"I get that. In the ideal world, it will remain yours to reveal or conceal. Of course, you have leverage of your own."

Betty's eyes narrowed. "And that is?"

"Physical evidence of abuse," he replied softly. "Take photos. Upload them somewhere safe. Send me copies as well. He talks, he goes to jail."

She rested her head on his chest, closing her eyes. "I really don't want to go there."
"He doesn't have to know that. He only needs to *think* you will."

A quiet yawn and a mumbled question: "How long can you stay?"

*Forever.* "As long as I'm home before eleven, my dad won't notice."

"Mmmkay."

The flickering candle on the table beside them cast shifting shadows on the wall beside them. The dark figures stretched and danced, swaying as if surrendering to a song only they could hear. It was the song humming deep within his throat, caught in the fear of waking up to find the last hour had never happened. Jughead concentrated on each of his senses in turn, memorizing this moment he wished would never end: the scent of vanilla and strawberries; the soft *whoosh* of breath as she exhaled; the lingering taste of her lip gloss; the softness of her skin; and the way the candlelight lent a halo to the woman who'd been his personal angel for years.

Whatever happened tomorrow, a week from now, a year, it didn't matter. He would always have tonight.

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY. Much better.

Next item on the agenda: taking out the trash, so to speak. But can Betty cut ties without Chuck spilling her secrets to the school? And another student has a secret to spill...

See you next week! Thank you to everyone who reviews, favourites and reads. It helps so much. And remember: this story has a playlist on Spotify (username emptysthemepark). I've been adding the coming chapter's song as a clue a few days before posting.

Need a question answered? Hit me up on Twitter at dillonac
I'm sorry it's been a while. Between spending a week following my fave on his concert tour and coming home with a wicked flu, I haven't been up to writing. But we're back and ready to have a little fun.

Bughead have finally kissed (my heart!) - but we have some unfinished business. Chuck haters, it's time to take out the trash.

Song: Control - Poe (which is such a great "GTFO loser" jam, I highly recommend it)

Disclaimer: I have fun with the toys in the Riverdale sandbox, but I'm only borrowing them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Thirteen: Control**

"While you were looking the other way
While you had your eyes closed
While you were licking your lips 'cause I was miserable
While you were selling your soul
While you were tearing a hole in me
I was taking control..."

Control - Poe

*Power. It corrupts, absolutely. Don't even fool yourself that you could escape its allure. The ability to bend the world to your every whim is a fantasy everyone has, at one time or another. With power comes control: when your will influences that of your inner circle, they will act as you wish, perhaps without recognizing that their actions are no longer their own.*

*For seven long months, Betty Cooper, the kind-hearted Girl Next Door has felt the suffocating grip of power, has danced to its melody almost despite herself. It's the world she's always known: someone else has always held power. There's always someone pulling the strings, tugging her limbs until she collapses in a heap.*

*Power is influence, but it can be denied. We can ignore it for the voice within, whispering the truth beneath the weight of a terrible lie. The denial of power is to reclaim control, to own it and ultimately, ourselves. Jason Blossom pushed aside the inherent power of being the heir to a business dynasty, choosing to forge his own path. His desperate need for control may have ultimately led to the brutal ending of his life.*

*For Betty, taking back control may be the only thing that will save hers.*

Jughead stepped out of his father's truck Monday morning with a knot in his gut, unsure of what to expect inside the broad doors of Riverdale High School.

He'd slipped out of Betty's room at ten-thirty the night before, leaving a half-asleep and thoroughly
kissed blonde beauty behind. She'd texted him goodnight shortly afterwards, reminding him that she had an early morning Vixens practice, but would try and see him before first period. The heart emoji she'd signed off with had given his own heart palpitations. He'd read and re-read the text in his father's truck, distrusting his own memories. Jughead Jones, the bold suitor? Jughead Jones and Betty Cooper, a tangle of limbs and locked lips in the soft glow of candlelight? Betty Cooper—brave, brilliant beauty—confessing a buried crush on him spanning years?

If he hadn't been the ones whose lips were pressed against hers, he wouldn't believe the story himself.

True to his word, he intended to play things cool, preparing himself for Chuck engaging in his usual territorial aggression. Betty had assured him she would find a way to break it off—her epiphany and the worsening bruises on her left wrist had brought his true nature into sharp relief—but she wanted to be strategic about it. He would honour that request for her sake, as long as Chuck posed no further threat to her safety. But one hand raised, one more bruise, and all bets were off.

Drawing a steadying breath, he pushed his way inside.

Archie was the first person he spotted, the athletic ginger chatting with Valerie Brown and Josie McCoy. Noticing Jughead, he hurriedly excused himself and approached. Jughead steeled himself for Archie's inevitable questions—and lingering anger with his teammate. As much as he personally favoured Archie's make him pay mentality, he would have to be the voice of reason.

"Dude, what happened last night? Is Betty okay?"

"She's going to be," Jughead replied quietly. "But if you see Chuck around, resist the urge to say or do anything, alright? Betty's planning things out."

Archie grimaced, his fingers flexing at his sides. "Yeah, that's not going to be easy."

"Tell me about it. But you and I both know how smart Betty is. Let her map out her strategy. Trust her, Archie."

It was as much for his benefit as Archie's. Trust her. She wants to be with you.

They settled into their preferred sofa in the student lounge, distracting themselves with talk of football and the upcoming Homecoming Dance. Archie was struggling with asking someone to the dance—someone he refused to name, although Jughead had an idea—and mulling asking a so-called "safer choice" instead. After ten minutes of Archie's hedging and Jughead telling him to just go for it, their casual chatter was broken up by a commotion in the halls. Kevin Keller rushed inside the lounge, waving at the two friends.

"Get out here, now!"

Betty.

Archie and Jughead rose quickly, the latter using his smaller stature to his advantage as he darted and wove around the gawking teens crowding the halls. As he edged closer to the eye of the proverbial storm, he spotted a clearly furious Chuck Clayton, whose fiery focus was fixed upon Veronica Lodge. Veronica, arms akimbo, was overdressed for school: her sleeveless black mini-dress and spike heels screamed cutthroat executive more than high school student.

"She's been avoiding me all weekend, and I think you're the reason why," Chuck snapped angrily. "I've told you before, Veronica: I'm not interested in you, so knock the meddling off and get over it!"
Veronica yawned, patting her hand daintily against her crimson lips. "Oh, this song and dance is so old, Chuckie. I would rather extricate my own eyeball with a spoon than entertain the notion of dating an insecure behemoth like you. As for Betty, why don't we let her speak for herself? I know, that's a foreign concept to you, but let's give it a go, shall we?"

Chuck edged forward and Jughead immediately reacted, moving to her side. Veronica smirked, patting his arm and pointing behind him.

"Good puppy," she whispered coyly. "I think she's got this, though."

Spinning around, Jughead's jaw fell open. Strolling down the hall in a royal blue blouse and a black mini-skirt was none other than Betty Cooper. More shocking to him was the fact her hair was down, the honeyed locks curled loosely to frame her face. Noticing Jughead, she nodded firmly, as if to reassure him that she was in control.

A very good thing, since he was struggling to control his urge to pin her against a locker and never come up for air.

Betty stepped in front of Veronica, Jughead and now Archie, who'd flanked Veronica on her right. She surveyed Chuck from head to toe, shaking her head.

"Chuck, you really need to stop projecting. That's what Freud calls it, right Veronica? When a boy who has been dumped by his girlfriend four days prior insists someone else is pursuing him hopelessly?"

"Whatever it is, Freud would have a field day with this one's daddy issues," Veronica sneered.

Chuck's eyes narrowed as he stepped forward, intentionally looming over Betty. Betty, to Jughead's proud delight, took a step forward to match him. She wasn't backing down, although Jughead noticed the faint curling of her left fist.

"Betty, you're being ridiculous. We haven't broken up. And if anyone was going to do the leaving, it would be the football star, not a lowly, mousy girl who had to bribe her way onto the cheerleading squad."

A low blow, one Veronica was unimpressed with in particular. But Betty held her head higher, chuckling softly.

"You really don't remember it?" Betty asked, feigning concern. "It happened right outside the locker room. You refused to apologize for assaulting my friends, and I told you it was over. But that's you, right Chuck? You can't seem to keep anything straight, these days. Mixing up times, taking my textbooks home… Why, you're a complete mess! You should feel lucky I ever wanted to date you."

Her words were calculated, but controlled. To the many onlookers, this was a nasty break-up; to her closest friends and Chuck, this was a declaration of war. *I know what you did*, she was saying. *And you're not getting away with it anymore.*

Turning around, Betty smiled sweetly at Veronica. "Veronica, did I not break up with him Thursday afternoon?"

"I witnessed it myself. You missed practice, trying to manage him. He was a distraught mess. Couldn't believe you'd dump him. I had to let you stay at my house because he wouldn't leave you alone. All of the calls and text messages?"

The two women regarded Chuck with pity, Veronica clucking her tongue for good measure.
Jughead shot a glance at Archie, who was as dumbfounded as he was. Betty had not only found a way to break-up with Chuck, she'd turned his abusive tactics back on him to strategically discredit him.

"You think you're so clever, Betty. You and your dark twin, here," he added, leaning closer. "Should I tell our audience how dark you can be?"

And there it was: the threat she'd both expected and dreaded. Jughead edged closer, uncomfortable with Chuck's proximity to her. If the bastard dared to make a move to harm her… well, he'd be back in cuffs. There would be no restraint, no matter how badly Jughead wanted to prove himself a better man.

"Veronica and I spent the weekend documenting what happens when you hang on too tightly to a woman who clearly wants nothing to do with you. Would you like me to publish the photos so our classmates can see how dark my bruises are? I bet they'd look great on the front cover of the Register," Betty hissed.

Archie visibly tensed, clearly furious at this revelation. He turned to Jughead, immediately recognizing his previous knowledge of the extent of the abuse. The look of betrayal on his best friend's face stung Jughead. You did what you did for Betty, he reminded himself. Hopefully, Archie could understand that.

Chuck took a half-step backwards, his gaze darting to her left arm. "You wouldn't draw attention to yourself like that. And even if you did, photos prove nothing."

Betty edged closer, her voice scarcely audible. "Now Chuck, you do know that I'm friends with the Sheriff's son, right? I hear forensics makes rapid advances all the time—including matching a hand to a mark on skin."

There it was: fear. Chuck was afraid of Betty, and the sight made Jughead want to organize a parade in celebration. Backing away with calm, deliberate steps. Betty folded her arms over her chest.

"Show's over. Spread the word: Chuck Clayton is single, whether he likes it or not," Betty announced loudly.

Veronica hooked her arm through Betty's, nudging her gently. "And now, we exit in grand fashion. Jughead, Archiekins, Kevin?"

Kevin quickly caught up with the group as they departed. As Jughead had reassured Betty, her friends had her back. They would surround her and shield her. They would bear witness. She would never be alone again.

The group spilled into the office of the Blue and Gold, their small sanctuary. The moods were mixed: Veronica and Kevin were thrilled; Archie was hesitantly pleased, standing off to the side; and Jughead was both proud and uncertain of his standing with either of his best friends. But none of that mattered, really.

Betty's hands fidgeted at her sides, but her smile was genuine and wide.

"That was fabulous, B!" Veronica gushed, clapping her hands. "Just as we rehearsed it. Better, even."

"I can't believe I did it," Betty murmured.

Jughead nudged her shoulder with a warm smile. "I can. I've told you before: you can do anything."
Betty's cheeks flushed a deep shade of scarlet. "Oh, Juggie, stop!"

"Hello, can we talk about the shedding of the iconic ponytail for this momentous occasion?" Kevin circled Betty, admiring her outfit. "It's like you dressed for a party."

"Um, it is a party. It's Betty's 'Freedom from Assholes' party and I'm hosting it at the Pembrooke tonight. You are all invited, of course." Veronica pulled Betty into a tight embrace. "I am so, so proud of you right now. You are a Goddess. You are mighty."

"I couldn't have done it without you at my side, V."

Misty-eyed, Betty took a step backwards, eyeing each of them in turn. As she locked eyes with Jughead, she unconsciously licked her lips, which only reminded him of his newfound appreciation for cherry-flavoured lipgloss.

_You're killing me, Betts._

"I need to thank all of you. You've stood by me, even though you probably realized long ago that Chuck was… He doesn't deserve words. And I know it must have tried your patience with me, telling me what you saw. Telling me I'd changed." Her hands trembled at her sides as she paused for a deep breath. "Telling me you were scared for me. Begging me to see that I could do so much better."

At this, she looked to Jughead, clearly pained by their argument. He shook his head slightly, patting his right shoulder. _I get it. I know this world. You needed time._

"Anyway, I, um… I don't want any secrets about this. I know you're upset, Archie," she added softly. "I'm sorry I hid this from you. From all of you, until today."

Pushing up her sleeve, Betty revealed her bruises. In sunlight, they were even more horrifying. The finger-like marks were blurring into a mass of purple-black, the edges yellowing now as it began to heal. Veronica dabbed at her eyes, shaking her head in sorrow. Archie was seething with rage.

"Archie, don't," she pleaded, pulling her sleeve down. "I know what you're thinking. But this is my life, and I don't want any more violence in it."

Archie hesitated, clearly torn between honouring his friendship and his desire to tear Chuck apart. Jughead clapped him on the shoulder lightly, nudging him towards the anxious blonde.

"Don't take her control away like he did," Jughead urged him.

With a heavy sigh, Archie held his arms open, closing them about Betty's frame as she rushed forward. Her soft whispers of gratitude eased the ginger's anger as he rubbed her back gently.

"He had no right to hurt you, Betty."

"I know." Conviction in her tone reassured her friends that she meant it. "And if he tries anything, Veronica took photos of my arm, just in case. It's going to be okay."

Archie pulled back to study her face. "But are you going to be okay?"

Betty forced a smile. "I will be. I'm not going to lie, I feel shaky. But, as I was reminded recently, I have really good friends who will be my personal army."

"Damn right you do!" Veronica exclaimed as the warning bell sounded. "We're walking you to and
from class for the next while—don't argue, Betty Cooper," she warned at the blonde's raised eyebrows.

"We have first period together," Kevin reminded her. "Shall we?"

Betty nodded, holding up her hand to halt their exit. Her shy smile disarmed Jughead, distracting him from the arms being thrown around his neck. For a moment, he froze: was this a friend hug, a boyfriend hug, both? Reciprocating the embrace, he erred on the side of friendly, although he couldn't resist whispering in her ear.

"You should leave your hair down more often."

"For you? Maybe I will," she whispered back.

There was no doubt in his mind: last night had not been yet another in a series of recurring appearances by one Betty Cooper in his dreams. It was real.

"Thank you for everything, Juggie. I won't forget it."

He watched her leave, flanked by Kevin and Veronica for security. Archie lingered, and although they had five minutes to get to class, Jughead sensed he'd be running down the hall to make it in time. While Betty may have persuaded him to back off of Chuck for now, the redhead needed to let off some steam. It looked like he was the target.

"You knew about it, didn't you?"

Lying was futile. "I caught her covering it up on Thursday."

"And you didn't think to tell me?"

"Oh, I thought about it. And your Hulk-smash anger is exactly why!" Jughead leaned back against a nearby desk. "Look, Arch: she wasn't listening to me. She was making excuses for him. We got into a fight over it. The last thing I wanted was for her to fight with all of us and end up alone with him."

Archie growled, clearly frustrated with Jughead's explanation. "Even still, we're best friends, Jug. I don't like being left out on something big like this."

Jughead bit his tongue, stewing in the uncomfortable silence between him. In his heart, he was confident he'd done the right thing. He'd done right by Betty and, in turn, she'd felt safe to reach out to Archie when Polly moved out. Having known Archie his entire life, he knew his friend would see it the same way—eventually. But his big heart often drowned out his better sense, and had Archie known of Chuck's aggression, he would have smothered her with concern, or worse, stirred up the proverbial hornet's nest by avenging Betty.

"Then again," Archie mused aloud, jarring Jughead from his thoughts, "you two are cutting me out on a lot of things."

"I don't understand-"

"Look, I saw you, alright?" Archie kicked the ground softly, suddenly fascinated by his sneakers. "I was cleaning my room up after you left and… You left the blinds open."

*Oh. OH.* Now Jughead suddenly had an urge to count floor tiles. The betrayal of concealing Chuck's assault on their friend had been the spark in a powder keg of questions Archie had been reluctant to
"I'm not mad. I just… What's going on between you and Betty?"

Jughead tugged his beanie lower, skirting his eyes. "I don't know for sure. I mean, we had a moment. But I don't want to rush her, given everything that's happened."

Archie nodded thoughtfully, rubbing the back of his neck. "I mean, is this new? Liking Betty, I mean?"

Jughead hesitated, well aware of the question within the question: had he been pining for Betty as she pined for Archie? Lying wasn't an option, but the truth was a little embarrassing for him. Oh, I've been in love with her since I figured out she was the only girl I'd even consider taking to a movie. There was also the hint of upset in Archie's voice that troubled him. He can't be jealous… can he?

He ultimately settled for vagueness.

"I missed her a lot in Toledo," Jughead ceded.

Archie reached for his backpack, slinging it onto his shoulder. "I just wish you'd told me sooner. You and me, we've been friends for our entire lives."

"I know that, Arch. It's not you. I don't exactly do vulnerable."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess you don't."

Archie yanked the office door roughly, the two of them stepping into the bustling hallway and veering in opposite directions. Jughead feared it was a metaphor for their friendship.

Jughead was on escort Betty to lunch duty, as per a series of group texts organized by Veronica. He had absolutely no complaints, of course, although he wondered how much Betty had revealed to her friend while strategizing their Clayton takedown. Betty was the last to emerge from her classroom, her loose curls bouncing with every hurried stride.

"Juggie, there you are! Come on, we have to go."

"I've never seen you this excited about cafeteria food."

Betty rolled her eyes, tugging on his sleeve. "Not lunch. We have to make a quick detour to the Blue and Gold."

The newspaper officer was en route to the cafeteria, just a short distance around the corner. Usually the one in a hurry, he found himself struggling to keep up with Betty's frenetic pace. As she reached for the doorknob, he threw out his arm, blocking her path.

"What's going on? What's the rush?" Lowering his voice, he added, "If this is some plot to get me alone, I appreciate your ingenuity, but I'm very willing."

"As much as I look forward to picking up where we left off, this is business," Betty replied. "Besides, for your sake, I think we should nix PDA until we see if Chuck will behave himself."

"Star-crossed," Jughead deadpanned. "And this business inside?"
"You'll see," she evaded, nudging his arm out of her way.

Jughead was both surprised and somewhat pleased to find a pacing Ethel Muggs awaited them inside their office. The redhead visibly startled as the door shut behind them, but soon settled as she spun around and found the source of the noise. Her hands fidgeted in front of her as she forced a smile.

"Betty, you came. Thank you."

Betty smiled warmly, gesturing to a chair. "Of course, Ethel. You said it was important. I hope you don't mind that I brought Jughead. I trust him completely, and hope you will, too."

Ethel settled into her seat, giving a small nod. "No, it's okay. I know he can be trusted with this."

_Ah, so this is about Chuck_, Jughead surmised. His last conversation with Ethel had revealed a pattern of mistreating women, but Ethel had only been willing to share minimal details of her own experience. Had Betty's overt rejection of Chuck emboldened Ethel to reveal more?

Jughead leaned against the far desk and observed quietly as Betty took a seat opposite Ethel. Betty pulled a folded slip of paper from her backpack and softly requested an explanation.

Ethel began by recounting what she had already confided in Jughead before the talent show: that Chuck had started a cruel rumour the previous year that Ethel had performed oral sex on him in the library during a spare period. Dabbing away tears, she also recounted what she'd heard about Veronica and the "sticky maple" lie.

"That date between them was a month before he and I went to the dance," Betty seethed. "I know that nothing happened between them, because Veronica called me that night and told me how they'd had zero chemistry."

"He doesn't need chemistry. He just needs his disgusting imagination," Ethel muttered. "He has to keep up appearances for his buddies on the team."

"The team? Archie is on the team and he's never said anything about this to me. Jug?"

Jughead shook his head. "Not a thing, and given his vocal disdain for Clayton, I doubt he would keep a secret for the guy."

"Archie's new to varsity," Ethel explained. "They're not stupid. I only know what I know because of Trev."

"Valerie's brother?" At Ethel's nod, Betty continued. "So Chuck and his friends are making up stories to brag in the locker room?"

"It's more than that." Ethel hesitated, glancing nervously between them. "They keep track of it… Like, keeping score."

Betty leaned back in her chair, clearly aghast. "Please tell me I'm not hearing this right. I feel sick."

Jughead moved to his friend's side, squeezing her shoulder to reassure her. "How does Trev know about all this?"

"Trev used to be on the team. He and Jason were close friends, once." Ethel's head bowed, her hands in her lap. "Not to speak poorly of the dead, but Jason was in on it. Trev wanted no part of it. It's why he dropped football."
Betty rose slowly, crossing the room to the window. The window with a view of the football field. Her fingers drummed softly against the sill as she surveyed the students milling about.

"So, Trev overheard a conversation where Chuck, Jason and other members of the team were comparing potentially made-up sexual conquests with a scoring system?" Betty probed.

"Yes. But there's more than that," Ethel replied. "Trev says they write it down in a book."

Betty spun around, her attention focused on Jughead. He was right there with her. Written proof of a slut-shaming scoring system born in some frat movie-infused hell? They could use it to take down players involved—including Chuck.

"Do you know where the book is?" Jughead queried.

Ethel shook her head. "Trev has never told me. I'm not sure he ever will. I'm honestly surprised he told me as much as he has. We don't exactly run in the same social circles."

Betty tucked her hair behind her left ear as she reached for a nearby notepad. "I'm so glad you trusted us with this, Ethel. This sort of behaviour is not okay. Objectifying women, shaming them, making up stories…" She shivered slightly as she jotted down a few lines on the page. "We need to put an end to this."

"Archie's friends with Valerie," Jughead mused. "Maybe he can engage Trev through her?"

"If he even knows for sure where the book is," Betty lamented. "I really want something concrete. Not just for the story, but for Weatherbee."

A soft whisper caught them both off-guard: "I'll go on record."

Jughead studied the shy student seated before him. While she was still slumped down, her chin jutted out just a little bit. There was a glimmer of defiance in Ethel's eyes.

Betty crouched down beside her chair, visibly concerned. "Are you sure, Ethel? I don't mind keeping you anonymous."

"I'm sure," she replied, a little louder now. "The way you stood up for yourself today, I just… I have to do that. I have to stand up with you. He has to be stopped. But you're going to need more for Weatherbee. I already tried talking to him, and he said he found nothing."

Betty embraced Ethel warmly and Jughead crooked a half-smile. He was so proud of Betty for finding the strength to take Chuck on—in grand, public fashion. She had helped Ethel find the strength to do the same. The cocky jock had no idea what he'd unleashed.

"We'll get him," Betty assured her. "All of the players involved will face consequences when I'm done. First things first, I'm looping in Veronica. Ethel, do you think you can ask Trev if he'll talk to me?"

Ethel's curls bounced lightly as she assented. "I have Calc with him last period. I'll ask then."

"Great. Thank you, so much. Juggie, let's go find Veronica."

Ethel rose to her feet, gathering her things. "Thank you for listening. Both of you. For seeing me," she added pointedly, glancing at Jughead.

"No one should feel invisible," Jughead replied vaguely.
The trio dispersed: Ethel, to their right; Jughead and Betty to the left, headed for the cafeteria. As they walked through the now quiet halls, Betty's shoulder nudged his.

"What happened between you and Ethel?"

Jughead smirked as he adjusted his backpack higher upon his shoulder. "You don't miss much, do you, Betty Cooper?"

"That could be debateable, in light of recent events."

Jughead moved ahead of Betty, halting her in her tracks. "Hey, we talked about blaming yourself. As for Ethel, I noticed she wasn't comfortable around Chuck when I first got back. I asked her about it."

It scarcely took a moment for Betty to connect the dots. "You already knew about Ethel, and the scores? Why didn't you tell me?"

Jughead sighed, his past decisions weighing heavily upon him. "Would you have believed me, even if I did tell you? I wasn't sure if it had stopped once you two began dating. I knew he would say that, even if it was a lie. We were just reconnecting and I didn't want to push you away."

Her green eyes darkened as she mulled his words. "I would have listened. But I probably would have believed whatever stupid excuse Chuck gave me. Or put up with it because I was too scared of the power he held over me."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Betts."

"You did what you thought was best for me. Like always." She tugged playfully on the hem of his beanie with a smirk. "Let's go get lunch."

The cafeteria was buzzing upon their arrival, but the intensity swelled at the sight of Betty. Those not privy to the show in the hallways that morning had been filled in by friends and, as Veronica showed them, video captured by several phones. Veronica was particularly fond of one video, which clearly showed Chuck's face as he realized that Betty had her own leverage.

"Poor baby!" Veronica mocked as she replayed the moment. "Not so tough when you're gonna be exposed for being an abusive scumbag, are you?"

"Speaking of exposure, we're working on a story," Betty informed Veronica and Archie. "V, do you remember that date you went on with Chuck?"

"Ugh, unfortunately." Veronica reached for her Diet Coke, taking a sip. "Obviously, given his treatment of you, the thought of it makes me crave a scalding shower."

"Do you remember anyone making unusual comments about it back then?" Betty probed.

Veronica leaned forward, her brow furrowing as she reflected on it. "There was one thing, from Reggie. Something about maple syrup that made no sense to me. Hmm... A few snickers, too, but I assumed it was because the worldly New Yorker hadn't even given up a kiss on the first date." The Latina's gaze narrowed as she glanced between Jughead and Betty. "I'm about to murder Chuck, aren't I?"

Betty recounted their discussion with Ethel, omitting her name and referring to her as a source. It was difficult to tell who was angrier at the revelations: Veronica, who was thoroughly disgusted by the slut shaming, or Archie, for reasons Jughead was certainly not going to call out after their tense chat that morning.
"Oh, I am so glad I helped you with that privileged, rich boy, waste of oxygen this morning!"
Veronica seethed. "But this? Oh, we're going full dark, no stars."

Betty flinched slightly at this, although she maintained composure. Jughead made a mental note to ask her about it later as he noticed Cheryl Blossom approaching their table. Fantastic. The ice queen cometh.

"If it isn't Betty and Veronica, the dynamic duo who have singlehandedly made football season a spectacle—and not because your cheerleading moves are fire, because fixing that perpetual trainwreck requires a miracle."

"And here I thought you liked negative attention," Veronica retorted. "It's the only kind that your endlessly acerbic attitude attracts."

"Seriously Betty, couldn't you have played nice with the captain of the team until the season ends? How hard is it to drink milkshakes and do homework together for six more weeks?"

"If you like Chuck so much, why don't you date him?" Betty glared at the fiery redhead, flipping her hair back. "Isn't that how it goes in the cliché? Cheerleading captain and football captain? Perhaps you're angry that a lowly Cooper landed him before you."

Cheryl folded her arms across her chest, her stilettos clicking softly against the cafeteria tiles as she edged backwards. "You only had him because I didn't want him. Everyone knows that. But fine, you can cheer for your ex until the end of season, with gusto, or I'll cut you from the squad."

"If the goon doesn't get cut first," Veronica grumbled.

"Cheryl? How's Polly doing?"

Betty's question silenced her friends, each anxiously awaiting the answer of the aloof Queen Bee of Riverdale. Cheryl was poised, used to dealing with conflict, but there was a flicker of uncertainty in the twitch of her nose.

"Polly is keeping as well as can be expected, given her loss."

Betty's hands fidgeted with a napkin on the table. "I know we're not friends, but she's my sister. I just want her to be okay. She's dealing with so much loss and pain… Just look out for her, please? For Jason's sake, if not hers or mine."

The Blossom heiress' steely features softened, perhaps caught off-guard by the mention of her beloved twin. "Of course. Polly is the mother of JJ's babies. They have already lost him. Nothing will happen to her."

"Thank you." A beat. "About Jason… There's talk about a playbook that certain members of the football team use to track sexual conquests, not all of which are genuine. Did he ever mention it?"

"Oh, not this Burn Book bullshit again!" Cheryl huffed angrily, planting her hands on the table with a bang. "My brother was the co-captain of the Bulldogs, which means he knew everything about that team. He never would have participated in something so vile, nor would he have allowed it."

"Or maybe he wouldn't have told you, because there had to be at least a few Vixens on the scorecards," Jughead countered.

"Whatever my girls do in their spare time means less than nothing to me." Pivoting to her left, Cheryl placed her manicured hand upon Archie's shoulder. "A word, Archie Andrews?"
Archie hesitated, seeking silent permission from Betty. Given her ongoing feud with Cheryl—and Polly's new living situation—Jughead understood his friend's reluctance to seem friendly with the enemy. But Betty nodded slightly, reaching for her sandwich. Archie followed Cheryl to a quiet corner, where the Head Vixen spoke in hushed whispers to his ear. Archie's expression shifted from puzzled to bewildered to looking for an escape route.

"What does that witch want with him, anyway?" Veronica hissed.

"Mayhem," Jughead deadpanned.

Archie returned to their table slowly, shaking his head as if to clear it. He settled back into his seat and rammed a handful of fries into his mouth.

Betty crooked her eyebrow at him. "Well?"

Swallowing hard, Archie reached for his water. "Cheryl wants me to escort her to her family's annual tree-tapping ceremony."

"And you told her to build the biggest of kites and fly it?" Veronica scoffed.

Archie's guilty expression spoke volumes. Jughead whistled low, waiting for the girls to catch on.

"Archie Andrews, you didn't agree, did you?"

"Okay, I did, but Betty, listen. She offered me a contact for a music instructor, someone really talented who can help me grow."

"So you took a bribe?" Betty seethed.

"No! I mean, sort of, but it's not just about that." Lowering his voice, he leaned in, beckoning them all closer. "Look, she said she trusts me because I backed up her story with Keller. Polly will be there. I figured if nothing else, I can check on her for you, right?"

Betty wavered, although she remained wary. "You'll see Polly? Can you tell her I miss her and I'm worried about her?"

"Of course," Archie assured her. "Maybe I can find out how their search for the twins is going?"

"That would be great, Archie." The warning bell sounded overhead, evoking a chorus of groans from the table. "Fantastic. Time for Chemistry with Chuck."

Jughead grimaced at the thought of Betty having to face class with her abuser. "I'll walk you to class, Betts."

The blonde nodded thoughtfully, gathering her belongings. Veronica leaned over, whispering something in her ear. Whatever it was, it pulled a half-smile from Betty, one she carried through the cafeteria to the southern corridor, where Betty's next class was held. As they walked, Betty's body bent towards his, their connection magnetic: she, the positive; he, ever negative. Their agreement to keep their evolving relationship secret was unquestionably wise, but it pained him to second guess every moment of contact.

"We need to find that book." Her words was hushed, mindful of the busy hallway. "Not just because of my situation, but for Jason. If he wrote about someone in there, maybe that person found out. Maybe they didn't like the team keeping score."
"Agreed. But Betty, you need to be ready for it. Polly could be in there. You are probably in there."

"I know. But it has to end, even if it hurts at first." Betty paused outside her classroom. "You taught me that, Jug."

Jughead felt his cheeks flush and inwardly cursed. "You're going to have to stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Acting like I'm some… I don't know, hero, I guess." He glanced inside, relieved to see Betty's teacher writing on the chalkboard. "I'll be here after class. Stay in your seat until I come for you."

Betty smiled warmly, her lashes fluttering slowly as she studied him intently. "And he says he's not a white knight," she demurred, slipping into the classroom with a small wave.

Jughead stumbled down the hallway, shaking off the tingling warmth in his limbs. As surreal as it was to finally have the attention of Betty Cooper, he needed to keep his head clear. There was a murder to solve, and an angry, unpredictable ex-boyfriend to keep tabs on. For all of his fear that morning, Jughead knew that eventually, Chuck's need for control would consume him. He would hit the proverbial button and risk mutual destruction.

He only hoped Betty would be strong enough to face it.

Chapter End Notes

You didn't think I'd forget about Chuck's show sins, did you? Oh no, he needs to pay for everyone he's hurt. Bughead is on the case.

Up next: a little celebration; a little awkwardness between friends; and a playbook haunts the minds of our core four. Oh, and did you know Jughead's birthday is coming up?

(SHOW SPOILER

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My personal theory is shady guy is the real Chic and how badly will that mess up Alice, hmm?)

Your reviews give me life and I haven't written in two weeks, so tell me: did Veronica and Betty's plan satisfy your cravings for public humiliation? Will Chuck keeps his mouth shut?
Fourteen: Goldmine

Chapter Notes

I am so, so sorry.

There has been a LOT going on, health and personally. Writing just wasn't coming together for me, and I refuse to post sloppy chapters. You deserve better than that. Things are still very busy - I have to study for a certification for work, while shopping my novel to agents and enjoying a very crowded concert schedule - but I'm aiming for biweekly updates for the next few months until things settle down a bit. Bear with me.

Now, let's get some fluffy Bughead moments with a lemon twist. This is a transition chapter, but these two deserve a bit of calm before the storm I'm creating.

Song: Goldmine - Fitness Club Fiasco (remember, this story has a Spotify playlist!)

Disclaimer: They're not my toys, but I enjoy playing with the Riverdale characters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Fourteen: Goldmine

"Of all the hearts that fill this lonely world
I don't know where you came from, but I know it wasn't here...
But there's something in your smile that purges all my doubts."

Goldmine - Fitness Club Fiasco

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to my Fuck You, Chuck Clayton soiree!"

Betty gasped as Veronica threw open the doors to her family's suite at the Pembrooke. The inherently elegant suite had been embellished by, Jughead assumed, the best party faeries Lodge money could buy. Twinkle lights adorned the mini-bar in the corner of the room and the table housed enough cakes, chips and candies to feed the football team. Sky-blue and white chrysanthemums featured as table centre pieces. It was enough to mark the occasion, Jughead mused, without overwhelming the clear guest of honour.

"Oh V, what did you do?"

Veronica chuckled, throwing an arm over Betty's shoulder. "I haven't done a thing! Andre, however, has carefully fulfilled a small checklist of to-do items on my behalf."

Betty flushed, bowing her head. "This really wasn't necessary."

"Betty Cooper, you have just walked away from an abusive asshat. I, for one, would like to toast this wonderful day, and I'm pretty sure everyone here is overjoyed for your freedom. Now, come! Mummy and Daddy are away overnight on business, and Andre has procured a refreshing Riesling for our festivities!"
Veronica busied herself with opening the first of five visible bottles of wine while Jughead nudged Betty gently. "You deserve a celebration after how you took him down," he murmured. "Go with it."

"I guess that scene and what Ethel told us is all a little overwhelming," Betty replied. "But you're right. Veronica wants to do something nice for me. I have good friends."

Jughead cleared his throat playfully, with an exaggerated adjustment of his beanie. "Great friends, Cooper. Fantastic."

Betty grinned mischievously as Veronica handed each of them a glass of wine. "They'll do."

The group gathered closer as each teen found themselves with a brimming glass of wine. Veronica held her glass up high, the picture of a New York socialite.

"To our dear friend Betty Cooper, who slayed her dragon and sent him sputtering to his bro cave. We love you so much, and look forward to more frequent smiles and milkshakes at Pop's."

"To Betty!" her friends echoed, glasses crossing and clinking.

Betty, to everyone's surprise, knocked back half of her glass in a single gulp. "Alright, let's get some music going. I feel the need to dance!"

The next hour passed in a blur, as Jughead hovered around perimeter of their party room: Betty and Veronica, dancing wildly to a Rihanna song; Kevin challenging Archie to an arm wrestling competition and nearly winning, to even Kevin's surprise; and Archie being prodded by Veronica into an "Uptown Funk" sing-along. Mindful of Archie's earlier displeasure and dwelling on his own insecurities, Jughead had maintained a friendly distance between himself and Betty. After all, they hadn't exactly defined what they were to each other. There was definitely attraction, but in spite of Betty's admission the night before, a part of him couldn't fathom what a beautiful, intelligent woman like her would ever want with a broken fuck-up like him.

All of that changed when Betty tugged on his arm, cheeks flushed from three glasses of wine and a solid hour of dancing, and asked him to help her bring out snacks from the kitchen. Obliviously, he'd followed her—he was hungry for something with a little more substance than Twizzlers and cherry tarts—and promptly found himself pinned against the door of Veronica's fridge by a feisty blonde.

"Betty—"

"I've wanted to do this for hours," Betty whispered.

Her mouth captured his in a frenzied kiss and he surrendered helplessly. His hands roamed her hips of their own volition, curving around to grip her buttocks. Jughead groaned, impressed with the results of a year's worth of cheerleading. Vixen, indeed. Not to be outdone, Betty pressed herself against him, hands fisting the back of his flannel shirt until it pulled his arms taut.

He would never, ever get tired of this. He would reel at her touch as if it were the first, each and every time. She was softness and strength, scintillating and sweet. She was a forest fire, the flame to which his moth wings fluttered helplessly. Consumed by raw need, he gently tugged at her lower lip with his teeth, smirking at the pleased purr of Betty's reply. A rumble beneath his spine startled them both, the couple laughing as they realized they'd pressed the ice button on the fridge in their fervor.

"Is that a sign?" Jughead mused.

Betty eyed the ice cubes mischievously. "Or is it a prop?"
Jughead groaned, images of a scantily-clad Betty and all the ways he could melt a cube of ice flooding his mind. "Cooper, you're killing me."

"Well, well! What do we have here?"

The duo spun anxiously, startled by the voice of their hostess. Veronica, clearly bemused, leaned against the opposing countertop as they hastily straightened their respective attire.

"V, we talked about this."

"Oh, we talked about it," Veronica echoed, smirking at Jughead's flushed cheeks. "And did you tell our resident Capote what I said?"

Betty shook her head furiously, her own cheeks stained scarlet. Jughead tilted his head askance, now intrigued. _Betty told Veronica about us? What did she say?_

Edging closer, Veronica toyed with the pearls encircling her throat. "Well, Jughead Jones, I told our Betty that you were certainly an upgrade, and that she should waste no time in—"

"Veronica!" Betty gasped.

"—asking you on a date." Veronica giggled, booping Betty's nose with a well-manicured fingertip. "God, B, what gutter have your hormones dragged you into? Not that I blame you. Mr. Jones does have that James Dean edge about him."

Now it was Jughead's turn to squirm, as Veronica scrutinized him. "Betts is in charge. Of us, of… whatever happens."

Veronica might as well have been cleaning a proverbial shotgun, such was the intensity of her gaze. "I like you, Jones. I like what my bestie has told me about you. But I won't let anyone hurt her, _ever again._"

"I'd rather die," he blurted out truthfully.

Betty's hand reached for his, gripping it tightly. "Oh, Juggie, I know."

"And so do I," Veronica pronounced with a smile. "From the bottom of my heart, thank you for helping Betty find her strength again. As for you two sneaking around…"

Betty shrugged, looking to Jughead for support. "We wanted to keep things quiet. I don't want Chuck to hurt him."

"Let him try," Jughead grumbled. "I have more tricks than a liver shot."

"No, Betty is right. I want that scumbag to know he was dumped for being a sorry excuse for a man. It's all about optics," Veronica added knowingly. "But that is outside of the secure confines of the Lodge home. You're among friends here. Friends you can trust to be discreet."

Betty's hand fidgeted with her blouse, her brow furrowed in thought. "Meaning?"

"Meaning the sexual tension between you two is so obvious, Stevie Wonder just called and asked you two to cool off!"

Rolling her eyes, Veronica ushered them back into the heart of the festivities, a hand planted firmly on their respective backs. To their mutual embarrassment, Veronica clapped her hands loudly, drawing Kevin and Archie's attention.
"If the two of you have somehow missed the giant elephant in the room, Betty and Jughead are smitten with each other," Veronica announced.

"Veronica!" Betty hissed, tugging on her arm.

"I knew it!" Kevin enthused, slamming down his drink.

Ignoring Betty's mumbled protests—and Jughead's speechless horror—Veronica continued. "Obviously, this knowledge cannot leave our inner circle. So not a word at school, no social media, no telling our hook-ups, Kevin, no kidding!"

Kevin's jaw fell slack in a mirror of Jughead's. Archie, already well aware of this development, maintained a stoic, neutral expression. It worried Jughead greatly.

"You two," Veronica continued, wrapping an arm around Betty, "are free to be yourselves here. Which means you can continue to violate my kitchen, but please know it's not the only option you have."

Pivoting on her heel, Veronica made her way to the entertainment system, hell-bent on changing up the music. Noticing her wide-eyed stare, Jughead's shoulder nudge Betty's softly.

"You okay?"

Her hand reached up, twisting her blonde curls over her left shoulder as she forced a smile. "A little mortified, but I'm fine."

"Same."

A knot in his gut, one that had made itself at home the night before in her dimly-lit bedroom, had slowly grown and tangled within. Feeding on Archie's unexpectedly harsh reaction that morning, Betty's visible nerves and his own lifelong insecurities, it seemed palpable now beneath his skin, protruding painfully. His lungs seized as he noticed Archie and Betty exchange a pointed glance.

"Betty?"

"Hmm?"

"We don't have to... I mean, if you're having second thoughts..."

His field of vision hazed and lurched as his doubts swelled. Had he taken advantage of a friend in pain? Had Veronica's unwanted announcement shaken Betty, too?

"Jug?" The concern in Betty's voice startled him. "Hey, it's okay."

She folded her arms around him tightly and he exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He clung to her tightly as she murmured in his ear to breathe, to relax, that she was here and they were okay. We're okay. Was she okay? Archie's eyes... He couldn't understand the darkness there.

"Tell me what you're afraid of," she whispered softly.

*Do you have a year?*

"Losing you," he mumbled.

"Never going to happen."
She was so confident, even as he crumpled beneath the weight of prying eyes and a murder that haunted him whenever he managed to push aside his nightmare visions of Betty dead, Betty beaten, Betty missing, never to be heard from again…

"I'm not with you because I want to hurt Chuck." Her lips grazed his ear, a soft tickle and a warm wisp of breath. "I'm doing exactly what I want to, from now on."

Betty's gentle voice was the salve for a weary heart. Pulling back, he studied her face carefully: her sea-green eyes, the faint twitch of her nose, her warm smile. He knew it then: he was being irrational. Their quiet conversation the night before had been as genuine as any they'd ever shared. Her discomfort wasn't their evolving relationship.

"Did you notice it?" she asked.

"Archie?" At her slight nod, he continued. "Yeah. He saw us last night."

"Oh." Reaching for a nearby glass of wine, Betty downed it in a single gulp. "Should we talk to him?"

"I don't know. Maybe we wait for him to talk to us?"

The music edged louder, making quiet conversation impossible. Veronica's doing, he knew before spying her in the corner of the room, opening another bottle of wine. With a helpless shrug, Betty handed Jughead his own glass of wine.

"When in Rome!" Betty relented, laughing softly. "We'll figure it out tonight. After pizza."

"Is there pizza?" Jughead's stomach growled angrily at the thought.

"There will be now, after Veronica's little stunt."

With a wink and a slight sashay of her hips, she headed for a refill—and apparently, to negotiate a little pepperoni-infused payback.

God, he loved her!

A tapping upon his shoulder tore him from his unhealthy appreciation of Betty's curves. Kevin, it seemed, had a few words for Jughead.

"I knew it," Kevin gushed, echoing his initial reaction.

"Knew what, exactly?"

"You're not the only one who watched Betty fall all over a certain ginger Adonis," Kevin replied slyly. "I had to listen to her complaints for years. And, I have to admit, I was rooting for them, in that picturesque, perfect movie way. Who do you think coined Barchie is endgame?"

Jughead gritted his teeth against the mountain of salt being poured in a years-long wound. "Your point, Kevin?"

"The point is, even though I was being the supportive friend, I could see the way you looked at her. The way the two of you weren't just close friends, but spoke your own language. The way you two always got each other in a way she and Archie never did. And when you left for Toledo, I realized that whatever crush or feelings you had? It was a two-way street. It was Shakespearean."

Kevin gestured to Betty, who was handing Veronica her cell phone with a determined grin. "And
when you came back, it was like this part of Betty she'd buried within herself came tumbling back out. You saved her, Jughead."

"She saved herself," Jughead firmly corrected him. "I just reminded her that she could do it." "

"However we got here, thank you. I mean that." With a sideways glance at Archie, Kevin sighed. "As for the football star, he's lost his identity within your triad as the object of everyone's affections. Give him time."

Jughead tugged anxiously on his beanie, leaning against the wall. "I hope you're right."

"Hello, resident queer? Trust me. I understand guys."

With a soft chuckle, Kevin slipped across the room, goading Archie into another arm wrestling match. Jughead studied his friend—brother, really—as he flexed his muscles and insisted last time, he'd gone easy on Kevin. Kevin had a sound theory, but the fractured foundation of their friendship felt like something deeper. Whatever it was, he would have to find a way to approach Archie without shutting him down. It called for a delicate approach.

Shaking his head, he glanced to the right as Veronica cheered Archie on. This is a job for Betty.

He walked her home that night, despite Veronica's offer to recruit Smithers to shuttle them around. The last thing he wanted was a limo dropping him at the trailer park, and Betty refused to let him walk home alone. Archie, to his surprise and concern, decided to catch a ride later with Kevin. The sheriff's son shrugged and smile, as if to say, I'll work on it. Those worries swirled in the back of his skull as his fingers interlaced with Betty's, tiny fists of thought drumming a frantic beat. It was risky, holding hands in public. He knew this. But the moment her hand had reached for his, he was ten again, leading her through the woods beyond Sunnyside Park to his beloved clearing. In his mind's eye, she was skipping along beside him, urging him to hurry. A secret shared by Jughead was rare, and Betty was tripping over her white sneakers in her impatience for the reveal.

"So, what exactly did Archie see?"

Jughead grimaced, reluctant to release the oblivious bliss of his reverie. "He saw the kiss. Likely both of them."

Betty sighed, squeezing his hand gently. "And we didn't tell him ourselves. I can understand him feeling bothered by that. Was that the impression you got?"

They turned a corner down a side street, Jughead intentionally leading them away from main roads. Betty might be willing to risk being caught, but she was also buzzed on a bottle of wine, perhaps more.

"That was part of it," Jughead ceded. "He also realized I knew about what Chuck did to your arm before your reveal."

Betty nodded thoughtfully, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I'll talk to him about that. I do owe him an explanation for not wanting to tell him."

"There's more to it, Betts. He was asking questions about how long I'd…" He hesitated, his throat dry and gritty like the time he'd fallen face-first in the playground and swallowed a clump of sand.
"How long you'd what?"

Jughead paused beneath a flickering streetlight, lifting their clasped hands between them. "This. How long I'd hoped that maybe there would be this. A moment. Maybe more. Us being… what you call this."

"You mean dating, Juggie?" Betty's eyes sparkled beneath the soft yellow glow. "That's what we're doing."

Jughead swallowed hard. "We're doing whatever you want, Betty. I won't assume anything, or pressure you, or—"

Her lips pressed to his gently, silencing his panicked rambling. His left hand reached up to cup her cheek, drawing her close for a moment, but only just. He broke away despite every fibre of his being craving her touch.

"People could see, Betty."

"Let them."

"They could see and tell Chuck," he pleaded.

This gave her pause, and she nodded sadly. "I don't want him to hurt you."

"Me? Look at what he's already done to you!"

"He attacked you too, Jughead. Because of me." She waved off his protests. "I know. We agreed to let our guilt go. Hold him accountable. And we will. Together. Because that's what we are."

A soft buzz emanated from Betty's bag. Her phone, Jughead realized. She swiped the screen, reading a message with wide eyes.

"Betts?"

"It's Ethel. Trev will meet me tomorrow and tell me they kept the playbook." She texted a quick reply, smiling to herself. "And once I know where it is, I can go after it."

"We. I'm going with you."

"No, you have a different assignment, Mr. Jones. Come on, my mother will start calling if I'm not home soon."

They resumed their walk, past the small park near the elementary school where they'd met. Betty gestured to the playground, smiling softly.

"You need to spend some time with Archie. He doesn't have practice tomorrow, so you can grab food at Pop's and hash everything out. You're both terrible at talking about your feelings, but give it a try for me."

Jughead groaned, his hand swatting against the chain link fence. "Betty, you can't be serious. You're not going after that playbook alone, especially given Chuck's involvement."

"I won't go alone, I promise. But if we're going to move forward from this? If we're going to solve Jason Blossom's murder? We need all hands on deck. We need to be united." She nudged her shoulder against his. "I'll talk to him about Chuck. But you need each other, as much as I need you."
She was right. He knew it. She'd always been the voice of calm wisdom in their group. The one who could find the good in anyone, who could nurture it and preserve it against a world that wasn't kind on the Southside. And if he could manage to confess his feelings to her, surely he could explain them to Archie.

Well, try to, anyway.

They were within sight of her home now, the cookie-cutter house with its perfectly maintained yard as a symbol of the Coopers' superficial perfection. In unison, their hands fell to their sides, cognizant of her neighbours—the Klumps, in particular. One whisper of a cheerleader would circle quickly to the angry ears of Chuck. Betty's pace slowed considerably, and Jughead matched it.

"I wish you could come upstairs," Betty mused.

"I could climb the ladder. I'm quite fond of splinters now."

Betty shook her head, curls shimmering as they tumbled back and forth. "You need to get home to FP. You told me how he's struggling. For your sake, I want him to stay sober."

Jughead couldn't disagree. His father was a strong man, a stubborn one, but there were moments of vulnerability that betrayed the loneliness within. Maybe he'd stop at Pop's on the way home, grab them burgers for a late-night snack over TV.

"I'm going to walk to school with Archie tomorrow," she announced, pausing before her driveway. "Talk things through with him. Get FP to drive you in tomorrow, okay?"

Jughead smirked. "Are you worrying about me in this situation?"

"I can't see you hurt again." Her features clouded as she fidgeted with the collar of his coat. "Just... humor me, please?"

His hand covered hers, squeezing gently. "Okay, I promise. For you."

"Thank you." Reluctantly, she took a step backwards. "Goodnight, Juggie. Text me when you get home?"

"Yeah. I'm stopping at Pop's on the way, so don't panic," he added, realizing Betty was the kind of person who would know precisely how long his walk home would take.

"You just ate an entire pizza at Veronica's!" Betty teased.

He shrugged and smirked. "Yeah, and we walked home. I'm feeling snacky."

Betty's soft giggle warmed his heart. With a slight wave of her hand, she walked backwards up the driveway, never breaking her gaze from him. He, too, couldn't tear himself away from her beauty. Her cheeks flushed from the wine, her makeup smudged from laughing so hard she'd cried—it stole his breath.

"Goodnight," she called softly from her door.

"Goodnight, Betts."

Hands thrust deep in his pockets. Jughead's step was a little lighter as he headed for Pop's. His mind drifted to a childhood memory, one innocent and light. The trio were together on a summer's day, eating popsicles in Archie's yard as Fred filled the small pool he'd bought the year before. Betty's
blonde hair was in a long, French braid, her pink summer dress fluttering as she swayed side to side in eager anticipation.

"It's too hot," she complains. "I hate summer!"

I laugh as she pouts and slurps at her melting treat. "You hate the winter because it's cold. You hate spring because it rains. I think you just don't like weather."

Archie smirks, his mouth full of cherry popsicle. "Jug's right. Summer is great. No school. Just us, hanging out. So what if it's hot?"

"We can't climb trees when it's this hot! Or swing on the swings, because the chains burn you." Betty waves her popsicles like their grade three teacher swings a ruler. "You two are mean, but I'm smart."

I frown, realizing she has a point. I love the swings, but the chains do hurt to hold when it's very hot. And if you can't hold on, you can't rock the tire swing until it's bumping against the frames.

"Alright, kids. It's good to go. Remember to wipe your feet before you get in to keep the grass out," Fred tells them as he turns off the hose.

"Yay! Thank you, Mister Andrews!" Betty cheers.

Popsicles are quickly eaten and Betty pulls off her dress, revealing her favourite blue swimsuit. She beats me into the pool, but only just. Archie takes his time, probably because he owns a pool. Me and Betty? For different reasons, our moms and dads told us no way.

Betty splashes me playfully, squealing as I splash her back. "Juggieeee!"

"Fair's fair!"

Archie drops in beside me and the circle is complete. "This is the best. Just us, hanging out. No stupid teachers. No stupid Reggie." His expression is suddenly serious. "I'm really glad we're all best friends."

"Me too," Betty echoes. "You're the best boys in the world. We have so much fun."

"That's because we aren't jerks," I point out, dunking my head underwater.

"No jerks allowed!" Betty declares.

Archie slaps the water's surface enthusiastically. "Yeah! And if any jerk tries to bother us, we chase him away together."

"We should have a secret signal," Betty suggests.

"Like a Bat Signal?" I ponder aloud.

"Yes! Like, if I tug my ponytail, I'm talking to a jerk."

I laugh. "Betty, you're always tugging your ponytail."

"Then I'm always talking to jerks!"

She sticks out her tongue at me and I flick water at her face. She shakes her head, glaring at me, but I'm not worried. She never stays mad.
“Plus Jug and I don't have ponytails. We need one signal for everybody,” Archie insists.

“Fine.” Betty slumps further beneath the cool water. "What about a friendship signal? Like, I need my friends right now. It can be for jerks, or if you're sad or angry. Like… this!"

Betty places her palm over her heart and pointedly pats it three times. She grins, clearly pleased with her idea. I look to Archie, who seems uncertain. It's a little weird and obvious, but it clearly means a lot to Betty. And we don't have to use it ourselves. We just need to see Betty do it.

“Well…”

“Three pats, three friends,” Betty explains. "You have to see it in a classroom or the lunch room, or —"

"Sure. Arch?"

The redhead shrugs. "Cool."

Betty beams, clapping her hands. "Yay! Now nobody will ever bother us."

Jughead smiled to himself as he patted his heart: one, two, three. Things were awkward, but they would be okay. They shared too much collective history not to be.

Chapter End Notes

Veronica has forced the cat out of the bag because she is Team Bughead like all of us.

Next up: a search for a playbook; Jughead looks to patch things up with Archie; and Betty has some explaining to do to Archie herself.
Fifteen: We Used To Wait

Chapter Notes

Okay, guys, THE FINALE. I both loved it and felt cheated - like it should have been a 90 minute (TV time, not actual episode time) episode because that beginning section was so rushed and we lost out on some potentially amazing moments. Also, much to my surprise considering her now seemingly pointless interference with Bughead, I wanted more Toni-well, more Choni.

Then again, royalty. *swoons and dies*

SO, if you wanted more from that intro, I did post a drabble-y one-shot about Betty waiting for news with a surprise guest. Check my profile. And if you somehow haven't read Mogitz's take, do that, trust me. I've been following her since her Until Dawn fics, and my heart!

Back to our AU, wherein we have a little lemon scented fluff, and fixing some troubles amongst the core four.

Song: We Used to Wait - Arcade Fire
Disclaimer: Not mine, although if it were, someone would have been stabbed in that finale, if you follow me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fifteen: We Used to Wait

"Now it seems strange
How we used to wait for letters to arrive
But what's stranger still
Is how something so small can keep you alive..."

Communication. Connection. I've been thinking about them, about their symbiotic relationship. How one fosters another. How communication has evolved from the time of our parents, from even our elementary school years.

We speak in binary now, in ones and zeroes. We speak in short phrases, text-speak, ever mindful of our character count as we hit send. Sometimes, we can't even be bothered to write it down. We Snapchat it. We share a clip of our lives, captioned cleverly with emojis.

We are always too busy for a real conversation, one with sentences, one where we pour out our hearts and share our secret fears. We seldom make the time.

I miss letters. There's something therapeutic about grabbing a pen and scribbling madly at a piece of paper, front and back if you're really going for it and feel bad about the trees you're killing. You can't see the ellipsis of a response forming—or never being sent—with a letter. You can confess to a letter. You can admit the feelings you can't bear to speak aloud.

You can tear it up, if you still can't stomach someone knowing the truth.
Archie, Betty and I used to write to each other. One of us—usually Betty—would start it, passing it along to whoever was closer in class. We’d each add to it in turn, struggling not to laugh at Archie’s doodles of Reggie. A single sheet of paper would circulate throughout the day: three shades of pen and three sets of penmanship (Betty's being the neatest, of course).

I would always try to be the last to receive the letter of the day. The wrinkled page would be carefully folded, tucked in a back pocket and carried home. It was tangible proof of a bond, a reminder that I had two friends I could count on. It was a record of our hopes, our fears and shared jokes.

When I left for Toledo, I wrote letters to Archie and Betty. Archie, he wrote back once in a while (he preferred the phone), but Betty was faithful for the first few months. Every week, it would arrive: a white envelope stuffed with pastel pink stationery, usually three pages front and back. It was a record of her life without me: her classes; her latest find at the bookstore; a song she’d discovered on the radio. She signed each one off the same way:

Riverdale isn’t the same without you, Juggie. Be safe out there.

Love you, Betty

My letters, in turn, would speak of JB, of our collection of thrift store vinyl. I'd speak of the future, of wanting to be in New York City, wanting to be a writer and maybe a bartender to pay the bills. Collecting stories for my books. Betty always loved that idea. And when I signed off, I, too, always ended the same way:

I miss our book club. Can't wait for you to drive down here with Pop's like you promised.

Love you more than burgers, Jughead

I'm combing through the letters now, having woken up an hour before my alarm. They're one of the few things I brought back from Toledo. I remember digging the pen into the page each and every time I wrote those words. I remember thinking it was okay, that she would never know how I meant them, because she would always tell us she loved us. Betty has always had that open, giving heart.

In hindsight, I wonder: was she playing the same game? Was it all coded communication, to protect ourselves? More pressing to the day ahead, is Archie doing the same?

The day passed far too quickly for Jughead's liking.

FP had dropped him off at school, his mood improved after their late-night burgers and casual banter about movies. His father had slept the entire night, a first in a week, and Jughead was relieved to see that sparkle of peace in his eyes again. They'd run later than intended that morning, having stopped at Pop’s to grab bacon and egg sandwiches to go, which meant no chance to see Betty before classes. It was worth it.

Betty's friends continued to escort her between classes, and aside from a brief staredown with Chuck between first and second period, things were oddly quiet on that front. Archie, too, was noticeably silent at lunch, absently eating his cafeteria mac and cheese as the group chattered about an upcoming Pussycats gig and the Blossom gossip—namely, that the board of trustees did not want tempestuous Cheryl inheriting the maple business.

Jughead texted Betty, holding the phone on his lap. How did your talk with Archie go?

He watched as Betty glanced down at her buzzing phone and picked it up. Biting her lip, she tapped
out a quick reply.

*OK. He's more upset at me than you, promise.*

That still didn't fly with Jughead. Archie had no right to judge Betty for her choices under duress. His phone buzzed again, and Jughead smirked as he read it.

*No liver punches for Archie.*

Clearly, he was wearing his displeasure on his proverbial sleeve. Taking a deep breath, Jughead chugged his Coke to steel himself for the awkwardness ahead.

"Hey, Arch. You don't have practice tonight right?"

The unusually quiet ginger glanced up from his half-eaten meal. "Huh? No, not tonight."

"Did you want to grab a bite at Pop's after school? I could use your help with something."

Jughead kept his expression calm, despite the roiling acid within his gut. Archie hesitated briefly, seemingly perplexed, but ultimately flashed that trademark smile.

"Sure, Jug. Meet me at my locker?"

"You got it." Noticing Betty staring intently at her phone, Jughead tossed a crumpled napkin across the table. "What's going on, Betts?"

"Just making plans to get the playbook."

Archie grimaced, shaking his head. "I really don't like the idea of you going after that right now. Especially with how pissed off Chuck is."

"Agreed," Jughead chimed in.

"I obviously wouldn't go alone," Betty protested. "And I'm not having this discussion with either of you again."

*Ahh. Archie's pissed about it, too.* Jughead was reassured somewhat by the exchange. Betty insisted Archie was more upset with her than anything. Perhaps this was the reason why.

Hoping to lighten the mood, Jughead rolled his eyes. "We've never been able to tell her what to do, Archie. Remember the time she tried to climb that tree by the clearing?"

Betty's brow furrowed. "Jughead Jones!"

"You mean the time she insisted she was too light to break that branch, then broke it as she fell into poison oak?" Archie laughed as Betty threw a handful of French fries at him.

"That was not funny! It was all over my thighs. I couldn't sit for three days!"

At this, Veronica and Kevin burst into laughter, only fueling Betty's indignation. Archie, clearly in the mood for mischief, continued to press his luck.

"Or that time Betty swore she could help fix your sink and got a mouthful of rusty water when she turned that pipe back on?"

"I was eleven years old!" Betty protested loudly. "At least I tried!"
Veronica was laughing so hard, she was wheezing for air. Betty, clearly unimpressed with her friends, rose to her feet.

"If you'll excuse me, maybe I'll go work on an article for the Blue and Gold," she announced in a huff.

"Don't go, B!" Veronica pleaded, reaching for her hand. "These hooligans will stop their shenanigans. Right?"

Jughead, recognizing they'd gone a step too far, tugged roughly on his beanie. "Don't go, Betts. Please?"

Betty hesitated, gripping the strap of her purse tightly. Jughead's hand pressed to his heart, his fingers fluttering: one, two, three. Her expression softened immediately, to his relief.

"Fine. But you two owe me a milkshake. Each."

Archie nodded. "Deal!"

Settling back into her chair, Betty reached across the table and stole Jughead's last fry. "That's what you get for starting it," she teased lightly.

Soft chatter continued, refocusing on the Pussycats' newest song, as Jughead's phone buzzed in his lap. A message from Betty was waiting.

_You surprise me, Jug._

He replied quickly: _How so?_

_The things you remember. You're so observant. It's why you're great at writing._

He watched as the ellipsis pops up, indicating she's typing, but no message follows. He stared at her askance but she shook her head, blushing.

_Tell me the rest later_, he sent back.

_Someday, I will._

A cryptic reply. It haunted him for the rest of the day.

---

Pop's was packed, but he and Archie had years of experience with after-school hangs, and they arrived just ahead of the usual rush. Ordering shakes and a plate of chicken fingers and fries to split, they'd settled into light talk of class assignments and teachers while waiting for their food. Delaying the inevitable, Jughead supposed. It was only when their matching chocolate shakes arrived that Archie's mood shifted.

"Arch—"

"Jughead, I owe you an apology," Archie blurted out.

Jughead was completely confused. "You do?"

"Yeah." Archie hesitated, his hands fumbling with his glass. "Look, I don't have a problem with you and… Betty and I talked this morning, and I get it. She's not just my friend, she's yours. And she put you in a really difficult position of being a good friend to her, while being my friend as well. You
"Oh. Like I said, I just didn't want to push her away from everybody. If she was pissed at me, I wanted her to still call you. And she did, when Polly left."

Archie nodded thoughtfully, taking a deliberate sip of milkshake. "I get it. As for the other thing…” Archie glanced around, mindful of their surroundings. "I'm fine with that. I'm happy for her. I just… Why didn't you tell me?"

It was Jughead's turn to buy time with a slurp of chocolately shake. This was a complicated, messy conversation, particularly in a crowded diner.

"I don't know. I guess… It didn't seem like anything would ever come of it, and our friendship matters more to me than anything. It was all I had to count on before Toledo."

"And that night?"

Jughead hesitated. "I'm not sure what you're asking. That was when it started, if that's what you mean?"

"Yeah, it was. So you weren't hiding it for weeks or anything like that?"

"Is that what this is really about? Thinking we've kept a secret from you for, what, my entire time back in Riverdale?" Archie's averted gaze was all the answer Jughead needed. "It wasn't even twelve hours before you knew. And even if you hadn't asked, we would have talked to you soon after. You're my best friend. Our best friend."

A waitress arrived, bringing a large platter brimming with Pop's gigantic chicken fingers and crispy fries. Archie thanked her and she moved to a nearby table, dropping off a plate of onion rings for a giggling group of pre-teens.

"Of course I would have told you," Jughead continued, absently toying with a fry. "I've never done this. Not for more than a movie or a stupid grade school dance. Fuck, what do you do? I barely get along with people in the first place!" The knot in his stomach was churning, swelling up anew. "I'm going to screw this up, Archie."

"Jughead, relax! It's just—"

"There is no just with her. She's… She's the only woman I've ever trusted enough to even think of trying to… be normal and do this." Jughead crossed his arms and buried his face into the cool Formica table.

"I just mean… There's a reason she's the only one, right? You already know her. She knows you. You don't have to hide anything, or be afraid she'll find out you're not as cool as you try to be. You won't have to explain your family to her, or your dreams. She knows them and she said yes already." Jughead felt Archie's hand upon his shoulder. "Just be yourself."

"Really?" Jughead raised his head, rolling his eyes. "We're going for that cliché?"

"Yeah, it's corny bullshit my dad would say, but that's all she wants. She told me so."

That statement had Jughead's undivided attention. "You talked about me?"

Archie hesitated. "I wanted to be sure she wasn't using you as a rebound. Chuck was a rebound from me, remember?"
Jughead dipped a chicken finger in plum sauce and took a large bite, because if anything called for comfort food, it was this discussion.

"And?"

"And she told me she would never, ever hurt you that way. That she'd liked you for a long time, but had assumed you'd never be interested and moved on from it. She's scared too, you know."

"Of what?"

Archie shrugged and smiled. "Literally everything you're scared of. It's kinda gross, how alike you are. This whole conversation's been a déjà vu nightmare."

They ate in silence, Jughead mulling Archie's words. Understanding where Archie's hurt feelings had originated from was certainly a weight lifted from his shoulders. That weird almost-jealousy hadn't been about a crush on Betty, but feeling left out of what was once a trio. And somehow, knowing Betty was equally unsure of herself eased his doubts. Normalized them, really.

"Your birthday's coming up," Archie noted, nudging the last chicken finger in Jughead's direction. "Any plans?"

Jughead huffed. "You know the plans. You, me and a Bijou double feature. And we tell no one."

"Dude, your first tip for dating: Betty's your movie buddy now. Also, you can't possibly keep your birthday from her. I'm surprised she hasn't figured it out over the years."

"She knows it's the first week of October," Jughead reminded him. "But she has yet to pinpoint the date."

"Jug, you have to tell her. She's your friend. Your friend," he stressed.

"I hate my birthday. Can't we just skip it entirely?"

Archie chuckled to himself. "You know Ethel helps out in the front office, right? Betty and Ethel are buds now. She'll have her pull your file, if she has to."

"Ugh!"

Their meal devoured and a second round of milkshakes ordered, the conversation drifted away from Jughead and Betty's relationship to Archie's feelings for a certain musician. To Jughead's complete lack of surprise, Archie confessed a crush on Valerie. It seemed mutual, but there was a stumbling block: Cheryl's invitation to the Blossom tree-tapping ceremony and accompanying dinner party.

"Valerie doesn't get it," Archie explained. "She doesn't believe that I'm going just to check in on Polly. Or worse, she thinks I'm doing that because of some crush on Betty."

Jughead winced, the latter concern cutting close to the bone. "And what did you tell her?"

"That she would date a guy to find out something important to Josie, wouldn't she? A friend is a friend. The fact Betty isn't a guy doesn't change things."

"Fair enough." Jughead glanced at his phone. "I'm surprised Betty hasn't checked up on us."

"Yeah, I've been expecting her to 'coincidentally' come to Pop's for a snack with Veronica," Archie echoed.
"Unless… You don't think she went after the playbook today, do you?"

Archie's troubled expression only fueled Jughead's concern. His friend threw down more than enough cash to cover their tab, calling out to Pop Tate in apology. Pop waved them away with a smile, unconcerned about two of his best customers. The two teens rushed outside as Jughead called Betty's cell. The call went to voicemail immediately, sending a chill down his spine.

"Veronica," Archie suggested, calling her immediately.

Straight to voicemail. Kevin, too, went to voicemail.

"Well, she said she wasn't going alone," Archie grumbled. "At least we know who's with her."

It did little to assuage Jughead's concern. "Any chance you have Trev's number?"

"Um… yeah, I might," Archie scrolled through his contacts, humming triumphantly. "Got it. It's ringing…. Trev! Hey, it's Archie Andrews… Yeah, I am looking for Betty."

Jughead perked up, leaning closer to hear the conversation.

"I'm watching the parking lot for them. They should be out any minute," Trev told Archie.

"Can you get Betty to call Jughead when they're out? I'll be with him."

"Sure thing… Wait, there they are! I'll tell her to call you."

The call disconnected and Archie sighed, leaning against a nearby car. "Betty Cooper. Always a step ahead of us."

"I should have known. She was adamant we talk tonight, explicitly because you didn't have practice. It didn't occur to me that she would take advantage of that for her own mission."

Jughead's phone buzzed in his pocket and he glanced at it quickly. One new text message, his lock screen announced. Swiping the screen, he read it quickly and felt his stomach drop.

I need you and Archie to meet me now. Somewhere private.

"Betty," he explained to Archie, as he replied. "Come on, we have to hurry."

"Where are we going?"

"The clearing. We need complete privacy and we're only going to find it in those woods."

Betty and Veronica were waiting at the foot of the pathway when he and Archie arrived. Somewhat breathless from jogging home, he staggered backwards as Betty launched herself into his arms.

"Hey! Betts, what happened?"

"We got the book," Veronica announced. "And we're both in it. But that's not the whole story."

He held her tightly, burying his face in her hair as her hands fisted the back of his shirt. She drew several shaky breaths, steadying herself, before slowly pulling away.

"I have to tell him," she whispered.
It took a moment to register, but Jughead clued in: the secret. The one she'd been keeping from Archie. The real reason Miss Grundy had abruptly ended their affair and left Riverdale. But why would she have to tell Archie now?

Unless... Glancing over at Veronica, he noticed the book she was clutching in her right hand. Unless Grundy is in the playbook, too.

"It will be okay," he promised her. "Come on, let's take a walk."

The four of them trudge down the path to the clearing, Veronica leaning on Archie as her heels sink into the soft mud as they curve downhill to the circle of stones. They settle onto them, Betty sharing a large boulder with Jughead, and Veronica and Archie seated across from them. Betty gestures to Veronica, who nods. It's clear to Jughead that Veronica has come for support, and to help Betty unburden herself.

"So, as you can see, we went on a scavenger hunt tonight. Thanks to Trev, we have the infamous playbook." Veronica waved it over her head with a look of disgust. "It is, as promised, a trashy record of 'scoring' with the women of Riverdale High."

"Chuck was the main player keeping a record," Betty adds softly. "I was apparently worth both a cheerleader and crazy girl bonus."

Jughead's fists curled at his side. "That son of a bitch!"


No, he would absolutely not let it go. But he would focus on Betty. His arm wrapped protectively around her shoulder, as if to shield her from the painful insult from her ex.

"I was the new girl bonus, and also an ethnic bonus," Veronica remarked scornfully. "But our boy Chuck was not the only one keeping tabs."

"Polly's in there," Betty told them, brushing away a tear.

Archie grimaced. "Oh Betty, I'm so sorry. For what they've done to both of you. I assume it was Jason with Polly?"

"Yes. But she... She's not the only one under Jason's name." Betty glanced over at Jughead, who nodded for her to continue. "Archie... I know about Miss Grundy."

Archie's eyes flashed angrily to Jughead. "You told her?"

"I've known since May," Betty quickly clarified. "It's why I stopped coming over. Why I started avoiding you."

Archie's hands twitched in his lap. "I don't understand. And I don't understand what you mean about the book."

"I caught you! I caught you in the music room, and you were clearly not just taking a lesson. I followed you to her house..." Betty bowed her head. "I knew there might be other students she was seeing, but I didn't expect..."

"Jason," Veronica murmured.

Archie rose slowly, connecting the dots. "She... Jason and Grundy?"
Betty nodded. "But Archie, I… There's something else."

Veronica made her way to Betty's side, crouching down to hold her hand. "Betty and I have been omitting certain facts from you."

Archie paced the clearing, his hands thrust deep inside the pockets of his letterman jacket. If Jughead stared closely enough, he swore he could see them fisted within the confines of the fabric.

"You knew about Grundy," he echoed, emotionless.

"I told Veronica about it. About how there were at least two people she was seeing. We confronted her in May. Told her she had to end it, or we'd report her."

"She blew us off," Veronica noted angrily. "But she did leave town."

"Why would you do that?" Archie demanded. "Why? Was this because of your crush on me?"

Veronica rose to her feet, stepping between the fiery ginger and her friend. "Her name wasn't even Geraldine Grundy! She'd stolen a dead woman's identity!"

"Ronnie!"

"B, he needs to know!" Pivoting on her heel, Veronica walked Archie down. "That woman was a predator, taking advantage of you and who knows how many other guys. Her real name was Jennifer Gibson."

Archie leaned against a tree, shaking his head in disbelief. "Betty, is this true?"

"I'm so sorry, Archie. I just wanted to protect you."

"Maybe so, but you had no right to go behind my back and, what, threaten her?" Archie's hand slapped angrily against the rough bark. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

"We were barely talking by that point! I didn't feel like I could. But I couldn't stand by and let her hurt you. I didn't want to call the police, because it would expose you too." Tears streamed down Betty's face as she stood up, meeting Archie's gaze. "Archie, please? Please forgive me?"

"Us," Veronica chimed in. "I was there too. We did it together, B."

Jughead approached Archie slowly, cautiously laying a hand on his trembling arm. "Hey, we've talked about this. About how that whole relationship began. I think you know Grundy was never as committed as you were. And I think you know Betty meant well, even if she should have tried to talk to you first."

"Yeah…" Archie ran his hand roughly through his hair. "But Chuck made that impossible. He likes to destroy things. Hurt people."

Betty shrugged her shoulder sadly. "I know. I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to see what was happening."

"That has nothing to do with strength," Jughead rebutted her.

"Jug is right, Betty. He abused you. And… Even if you did it wrong, it's probably for the best that Grundy and I are through." Archie nodded to Jughead, approaching Betty slowly. "But you have to promise me you'll never do that again. That you'll come to me if you think I'm in trouble."
"I promise, Archie. I've felt awful about it for months."

Archie embraced Betty, accepting her apology as a relieved Jughead looked on. He'd told Betty that Archie would forgive her, but seeing it come to fruition filled him with an intense peace. Betty had spoken true the night before: they needed all hands on deck. They needed the strength of their friendship in a town filled with secrets and lies.

"No more crying, alright?" Archie teased her lightly. "I prefer you smiling, or telling Chuck to go to hell."

"I'll work on it," Betty replied, chuckling softly as she brushed away the last of her tears.

"Speaking of Mister Asshole, what are we going to do with this?" Veronica waved around the playbook. "Pretty sure he wouldn't like being exposed for the misogynistic pig he is."

"True, but the Jason Blossom entries might help us find his killer," Betty countered. "We need to comb through it before we do anything else."

"Being shamed by Jason could have infuriated someone enough to hurt him. I know I feel the urge to bury Chuck for what he wrote about me," Veronica spat.

"Which means if the police find it, Polly becomes a suspect," Jughead reluctantly observed.

"So we keep it to ourselves for now," Archie agreed. "More ammunition if Chuck comes after Betty again."

The group in agreement, they separated: Veronica drove Archie home, leaving Betty and Jughead to the privacy of his trailer. His father was at his meeting, affording them an hour of solitude before his return. It was clear from the weary pace of their return to the Jones home that the evening had taken a toll on Betty. It occurred to Jughead that she'd probably skipped dinner in her eagerness to track down the playbook, and he immediately rectified that. Urging her to settle on the couch, he found a container of potato salad in the fridge and poured a glass of orange juice.

"Betts?"

"Hmm?"

He sheepishly presented her with his offerings. "It's not much, but you need to eat."

Reluctantly, she accepted the glass of juice. "Don't really have an appetite, but I know you're right. Thank you."

Jughead settled onto the couch beside her, leaning into the ragged pillow propped against the arm. *What a day*, he mused, relieved to see Betty down half her juice before gingerly reaching for the salad container. At least their trio was back on solid ground. But this playbook… He couldn't think of it now, or he'd want to hunt Clayton down at school.

The Blossom angle, however, did intrigue him. Had Jason shamed a woman who, like Veronica, would want to go *full dark, no stars*?

Betty glanced over at him, nodding in his direction. "Juggie? Can I…?"

"Always."

Stretching his right leg along the length of the sofa, he gently pulled her close, resting her back
against his chest. His arm wrapped loosely around her waist as she sighed happily and slowly began to eat.

"Did you want some?" she offered.

"All yours," he murmured.

"I like how that sounds," she whispered, tilting her head backwards to see him.

Jughead leaned forward, kissing her forehead lightly. She giggled softly, stretching her hand up to touch his cheek. He leaned into her touch, mesmerized by her, by how she innately understood how much little gestures could mean.

"Eat," he urged her.

"Stop distracting me."

Jughead mulled this for a moment, then grinned. "The quicker you finish that salad, the quicker you can kiss me as much as possible before my dad gets home."

Her cheeks flushed crimson but it paid off: she quickly dove into the potato salad, despite her continued protests that she wasn't hungry. He toyed with her ponytail as she ate, twirling strands about his fingers before releasing them. She pushed her sleeves up to her elbows as she snacked, Jughead noticing that her bruised arm was beginning to heal. A welcome sight, and oddly poetic, given her freedom from Chuck's cruelty.

"I can't eat anymore," Betty protested, waving the nearly empty container at him.

With an exaggerated rolling of his eyes, Jughead relented. "Fine, you can stop."

The container discarded on the coffee table, Betty twisted herself around, half-straddling his lap. Their kisses were soft at first, a teasing taste, but the intensity grew as hands fumbled and wandered between them. Betty's hand grabbed his, sliding it firmly against her breast, and he shuddered as he squeezed gently. Her own fingers, keen to grab, tugged at his beanie, releasing his messy waves.

"Wear it," he murmured breathlessly, breaking away from her soft lips.

Betty tugged it on with a sly grin. "Careful. I might not give it back."

"I don't need it when I'm with you."

She bit her lip, flushing as she glanced away. "Oh, Jug…"

"Hey, no hurting that lip. I like it a lot."

Her fingers laced through his hair, tugging gently as his lips melted into hers. Tangled limbs and tangled tongues and Jughead's body was on fire. He peppered kisses along her neck, groaning as she shifted in his lap and brushed against a growing problem. Her soft gasp of recognition went straight to his groin.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"For being incredibly beautiful? You're forgiven," Jughead scoffed.

She leaned back slightly, her shirt halfway up her stomach now. "I mean, that can't be comfortable…"
His hands cradled her face gently, feeling strangely proud of how well his beanie fit her. "How about you let me worry about that, and we enjoy the last minutes of privacy we have before my dad comes home?"

Betty shivered as his fingers danced along the bare skin of her stomach. Her hands gripped his shoulders tightly as she leaned back, pulling him on top of her. He groaned softly against her pale pink lips, his hand gripping her hip and pulling her heat against him. A rumble in Betty's throat left him reeling.

Too fast. They were moving too fast.

"Betts?"

"Kiss me one more time," she pleaded.

He couldn't deny her, couldn't deny himself as her lips parted anew, her mouth as hungry as his. His heart was racing, slamming into his ribcage, longing to be free, to be with her, to be hers. Reluctantly, his hand slid between them, pressing gently against her chest, willing himself to come up for air.

"We need to—"

"Cool down," she finished breathlessly. "I know."

She straightened her clothes, smoothing her sweater with her palms. Jughead paused briefly, admiring the flushed glow of her cheeks before heading to the bathroom, where it took several splashes of cold water and thinking of disgusting scenes in horror movies to calm things down. Thank you, Kevin, for that tip! Running a hand through his dishevelled hair, he returned to the couch, where he found Betty fluffing the cushions and straightening the throw blankets.

"You know, the place usually looks messy."

Betty shrugged her shoulders. "I needed something to occupy my mind."

"Yeah, but this just looks suspicious." Reaching down, Jughead threw a throw pillow on the ground. "Now that's more like it."

Outside, the familiar rumbling of a pick-up truck signalled the return of FP. The two of them burst into giggles, well aware of how close they'd come to being busted by a no-nonsense biker.

"Guess that's my cue to go home."

Jughead frowned. "Or you could stay a little longer. Watch TV?"

Betty shook her head sadly. "I would love to, but I have a quiz tomorrow in History that I haven't even begun to study for. Raincheck?"

"Definitely."

FP's footsteps plodded up the porch steps and the teens took a step apart in synchronicity. FP, however, smirked as he entered his home, eyeing his son and his guest suspiciously.

"Am I interrupting, kids?"

"Not at all, Mr. Jones. Jughead and I just wrapped up some work on an article for the Blue and Gold." Betty reached for her bag, hoisting it onto her shoulder. "I should head home before my
mother worries."

"Alice isn't exactly the most relaxed woman in Riverdale," FP concurred. "Jughead lend you his thinking cap?"

Jughead cursed inwardly as his father chuckled. Betty was still wearing his beanie. There was no way he was getting around it: FP knew something was happening between them. An embarrassed Betty plucked it from her head, handing it back.

"I was cold," Betty offered weakly.

FP's exaggerated nod made it clear he wasn't buying her explanation, although he mercifully relented. "Need a drive home, Betty?"

"Yes," Jughead answered, as quickly as she answered in opposition.

"Jughead, your dad has had a long day and I am perfectly fine to walk home," Betty protested.

"Jughead's dad is a grown man and a father, and would feel much better about you getting a drive home," FP countered.

"And so would I," Jughead insisted. "Or let me walk you, at least."

Betty, clearly uncomfortable with accepting a favour, fidgeted with her bag. "Or I could call my dad for a ride. He should still be at the Register."

FP grimaced at the mention of Hal Cooper, something Jughead made a mental note of. "Betty, you're part of our family. We take care of our family, alright?"

A frantic glance from Betty was met with a firm stance from Jughead. Realizing she was outnumbered, Betty threw her last card on the table.

"Okay. But only if you let me bake you some cookies as a thank you."

Like father, like son: "Deal! You coming for the ride, Jughead?"

FP's tone left no room for argument. Not that Jughead would turn down a chance to spend more time with Betty.

"Coming," he affirmed, tugging on his beanie.

The drive to the Cooper home was relatively quiet, with Betty lobbing softball questions to FP about his favourite cookies, whether he would be at Fred's Sunday dinner, and, to Jughead's horror, a pointed ask for his son's birthday. FP deflected that one, noting only that it was soon, to Betty's dismay.

Betty, ever the clever one, bid FP goodnight with a kiss on the cheek. Jughead laughed as his father flushed and stammered at the unexpected gesture of affection. Jughead, too, was kissed on the cheek, with Betty promising to see him in the morning for the walk to school. As the door to the Cooper home swung shut behind her, FP revved the engine and made a U-turn.

"I was right," FP crowed triumphantly.

"Right about what?" Jughead deflected.

"You two are subtle as a sledgehammer. You lied to me the night she slept over."
"Dad, I promise, we weren't dating then."

"But you are now," FP concluded.

Jughead slumped in his seat, annoyed at his slip. "Literally since Sunday night. Fine, you're so clever. But Dad, you can't say anything to anyone."

"Why not? She embarrassed to be dating a Southsider?"

"No! Betty's never, ever judged us. And if you were sober, you would have noticed that when we were growing up."

It was a low blow, but his father had crossed a line Jughead hadn't realized he'd drawn: he and Betty versus the world.

FP winced, gripping the steering wheel tightly. "I just know what it's like… to be treated like a dirty secret. I don't want that for you. You're a good kid, Jug."

Reluctantly, Jughead explained their situation with Chuck, pointing out how Betty had been hurt defending Jughead from his unjust arrest. How she'd stayed over because of the abuse she was enduring. By the time they'd reached home, FP was nodding sympathetically.

"I get it. Your secret is safe with me."

"Thanks." A beat. "Your meeting go okay?"

"As okay as they can be, considering." Killing the engine, FP sighed. "I wish I could be around for you more. That I didn't need to go every day."

"You don't need to apologize for that."

"I'm trying, Jug. I really am." FP's voice cracked as he looked away. "I want to be a good dad for you."

"You are a good dad. I'm glad I came home," Jughead added sincerely.

The smile on his father's face was proof his honesty was worthwhile. FP's arm wrapped around him as they headed inside, and for the first time in his life, it truly felt like home. His father headed straight to sleep in anticipation of an early start at the construction site, but Jughead lay in bed, sleepless with swollen lips, smiling as he looked at the pictures he'd taken of Betty over the last few weeks. The photo of her in his beanie, bedhead and bare-faced, was his favourite.

His phone buzzed in his hand and he opened a message from his Muse.

*Your dad knows, doesn't he?*

Jughead chuckled. *He does but he won't tell anyone. I told him about Chuck. Pretty sure he wants to kick his ass. I told him to get in line.*

Betty replied quickly. *Does he like me?*

Jughead rolled his eyes. *Betty, how have you not noticed this town doting on you for your entire life? Besides, you offered food to a Jones. Guaranteed approval.*

Several minutes passed, before a reply popped up. *I didn't notice you wanting to kiss me for five years.*
Let's chalk that up to my defensive anti-social demeanor, he sent back.

And we'll chalk my failings up to perpetual insecurity from a family that expects more than perfection 24-7, Betty replied quickly.

Jughead sighed, flipping through his photos and finding one from the party. Betty was laughing at a joke Veronica was telling, her curls flipped back and her green eyes wide and bright. Hitting send, he added a message.

I'm dating that beautiful, intelligent woman. Me. I'm the one who should be insecure.

Setting his beanie on the bedstand and turning off the late, Jughead chuckled as his phone buzzed twice in quick succession. She'd retaliated with a photo of her own: Jughead, bent over his laptop in the Blue and Gold office, checking over an article on the Blossom case. When had she taken this?

I'm dating an intelligent, loyal, loving guy that I can't believe was single. That's never happening again, world. He's mine.

Jughead knew he was grinning like an idiot, but he couldn't help it. Shouldn't you be sleeping? Or studying for that quiz?

I'd sleep better if you were here, came her response, complete with a series of hearts.

Put your phone on silent, he fired back, counting to ten before dialing her number. Betty answered on the first ring, her voice hushed.

"Jugger?"

"Are you in bed?"

"Yes…"

"Close your eyes," he told her. "Are you comfortable?"

"I'd be more comfortable if you were here to hold me," she whispered.

"Imagine it," he told her. "I'm right there, right beside you. Just like Sunday night. My arm's wrapped around you, keeping you safe. The sheets are soft, but your skin is softer. It's heaven. Your hair is tickling my nose, but I won't move, because your shampoo smells like strawberries and let's be real, I love food."

Betty giggled softly, and he could hear her shifting around in bed. "You do love food more than anyone in the world."

"I'm right there, Betts. Imagine I'm whispering this in your ear, right beside you. Can you do that?"

"Mmmhmmm. I remember Sunday. I remember you being here."

Jughead rolled over, stifling a yawn. "We're both so tired, so we burrow into the pillows together. And I know you're worrying about your quiz, even though you're the smartest person I know, so I kiss your head and tell you that science has proven that a goodnight's sleep is better than another half an hour of reciting facts in your head."

"You know me so well. But you're right." She yawned softly on the other end. "Juggie?"

"Yeah?"
"Will you finally tell me your birthday?"

"Nice try, Betts."

"But I want to get you a gift," she complained sleepily.

"You're my gift, Betty Cooper." He swallowed hard, fighting the unexpected wave of emotions within him. "I don't need anything else."

"You're too sweet to me." Her voice was faint, mumbled and soft. "But I… need to know…"

"You falling asleep?"

"Mmmm."

In an impulsive moment—perhaps a courage fueled by Betty's barely conscious state, he whispered, "It's sometime this week, sleepyhead."

"Hmm. That's soon…"

Her breathing was shallow, her voice muffled against the phone. He closed his eyes, imagining her beside him. How her body would curve perfectly against his. The warmth of her skin radiating through her shirt. Yeah, he'd have to slip out and climb that ladder again soon.

"Time to sleep, Betts," he murmured.

"Night… Juggie…"

Jughead smiled, listening to her breathe for a long moment. "Goodnight, Betty," he whispered at last, ending the call.

Chapter End Notes

Now that's all fluffy and taken care of... it's Jughead's birthday this week in the fic timeline.

(Did it ever bother you that Betty never knew Jughead's birthday in the show, despite knowing the guys her whole life pretty much? I tried to explain it here, that Jughead has literally been evading telling anyone since he was small.)

Review, leave me love, tell me about how the finale made you feel and what you hope for season 3. In the next two chapters, we find out Betty's super secret, the one Chuck knows. Any guesses?
Chapter Notes

Jughead's birthday is here! Not that he's happy about it.

This will be a two-parter, mainly because it got incredibly long. It has everything: angst, fluff, chaos, a special guest star NOT in the episode and oh yeah, Betty's secret is getting spilled in part 2.

Dialogue borrowed from the show is strictly for continuity and context, no infringement intended.

Song: Speed the Collapse - Metric (don't forget, this story has a Spotify playlist!)

Disclaimer: I own my spin on this world; the characters are simply caught in my hurricane of ideas.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sixteen: Speed the Collapse

"But then the storm returned for more
In a comedown of revolving doors
We auctioned off our memories
In the absence of a breeze
Scatter what remains
Scatter what remains

Pushed away I'm pulled toward
A comedown of revolving doors
Every warning we ignored
Drifting in from distant shores
The wind presents a change of course
A second reckoning of sorts
We were wasted waiting for
A comedown of revolving doors..."
Speed The Collapse - Metric

Chaos. From the Greek word khaos, meaning, "Abyss, that which gapes wide open, is vast and empty." We think of it now as disorder of an intense variety. We even claim we can organize it, a petite paradox. And sometimes, we align with it: chaotic neutral; chaotic good; even chaotic evil.

In the last forty-eight hours, I've encountered all three. I've seen what happens when a world that is too strictly controlled is cast aside for a few scant hours. Restlessness sets in. Hard feelings bubble to the surface, as do secrets.
Maybe Riverdale is too far gone. Maybe the death of Jason Blossom has tainted us all with its darkness. Maybe all we have left is a certain slant of light, illuminating us as the ground falls away from beneath our feet.

Fifty-eight hours ago

"Someday, my mother is going to figure out the ladder."

Jughead shrugged, pulling Betty closer. "Guess we better make the most of these stolen moments then."

Her leg hitched over his as she leaned over to kiss him, the sheets rustling softly beneath them. Officially, Jughead was sleeping over at Archie's; unofficially, he had spent the last two hours lying in Betty's bed, the two of them talking softly about things serious and trivial.

Oh, and kissing. There'd been plenty of that. Betty, he'd learned, treated the expression of affection like an exclamation point to her excited thoughts. She wielded it like a nod of her head, agreeing with his wild dreams of moving to New York City, perhaps working at NPR.

He was a creature of caresses, his hands continually seeking out the softness of her porcelain skin. His first order of business: tugging her hair free of its usual ponytail. Betty had giggled, humming happily as he threaded his fingers through the messy waves.

"Jug?"

"Hmm?" He was distracted by her blue camisole—specifically, how it had slid up to graze the underside of her breasts.

"Jughead Jones." Her hand gripped his chin, re-focusing his attention upon her bemused face. "Are you listening to me?"

"I'm sorry, Betty. You're just..." He paused, marveling at the way her lips curled when she smiled. "You're somehow more beautiful than I ever realized. And I consider myself an expert on the subject."

"Oh do you?" Raising her eyebrows, she leaned back onto her elbow, studying him intently. "There's a field of study devoted to me, huh?"

He traced a lazy circle upon her bare stomach, smirking as she gasped. "You could say I'm a pioneer in the field. It's my life's work."

"And what is the thesis of your research, Dr. Jones?"

"That you are the standard for all others," Jughead murmured softly, his lips grazing her cheek. Betty flushed, burrowing her face into his chest. "I'm just me," she protested, quietly adding, "Just a girl who doesn't even know her boyfriend's birthday."

"Still haven't cracked the code, Nancy Drew?"

"It's October 1st or 2nd," she declared confidently.

Goddamn. How had she pinpointed it to two days? Last he knew, she'd only managed to figure out it was before October 7th and after September 27th.

Betty suddenly rose, untangling herself from his embrace. He whimpered in protest as she swatted
his reaching hands away, crossing the bedroom to lean against her vanity table.

"How did you come to that conclusion?" he prodded, rolling onto his side.

"Well, Archie told me you always go to a movie at the Bijou." Betty rolled her eyes as he made a feeble attempt to grab her hand and pull her back onto the bed. "So then, I cross-referenced my diaries for the last five years, and realized it had to be the first day or two of the month, since you and Archie would make plans without me each year around those days."

Jughead was equally impressed and exasperated. She simply would not let this go.

"Betty, it's not important."

"**You** are important to me. And I've decided that my lips are off limits until you stop dodging the question."

Jughead groaned, his head pressing back into her pillow. "That is a cruel thing to do, Lysistrata."

Betty's fingers curled around the hem of her camisole, tugging it from side to side, teasing the prospect of it perhaps migrating further north. Her head tilted to the side, questioning him: confess, or be denied?

*I'm doomed. I'm helpless.*

"If I take off my shirt, will you crawl back into this bed and forget about it?"

Betty hesitated, licking her lips. "I... No. No, I want to know. I've been your friend for over ten years! Archie knows."

"Only because Fred was there when I was born." He grimaced as she very intentionally slid her camisole strap down her bare shoulder. "Betts, please."

Her pale pink lips formed an exaggerated pout. "I want to go to the movies with you. Don't you want me there?"

*I want you, period.* In that moment, he knew he'd lost this fight.

"It's October 2nd, alright? Now, will you please get back into bed? We've lost three minutes of prime cuddling time."

Betty's fists pumped excitedly in the air as she flopped onto the bed beside him. "I win!"

"Personally, I see no value in your prize, but if it makes you happy?"

"Very happy."

Her head came to rest upon his heart, blonde hair splayed across his chest. Wrapping both arms around her, Jughead closed his eyes. He listened to her breathing, soft and steady, a peaceful ebbing like an ocean wave lapping at the shore. He fell in sync with her, complementing her exhales until they moved as one.

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**Twenty-nine hours ago**

Jughead's phone rang seven times before he begrudgingly answered it.
"Hello?"

"Jug, I need a good excuse to leave."

"Archie?" He sat up straighter, putting the TV on mute. "What's wrong?"

His friend's voice was a frantic whisper, one Jughead strained to hear. "So tonight was that dinner Cheryl asked me to. And it's all... It's messed up."

"Messed up how?"

Archie hushed him then, the sound of footsteps carrying over the line. A door shut in the distance and Archie huffed in his ear. "Sorry, Penelope came down the hallway. Anyway, the business stuff is complicated and I have no interest in that. But I need to leave, like now."

Jughead frowned, glancing helplessly around his empty living room. "What are you asking me to do, Arch? Wait, is this about Polly? Is she okay?"

"Yeah, that's not the issue. I just... Look, can you call me in five minutes and tell me there's an emergency with my dad so I can leave?"

"Sure, but why not just go back into the crowd and say that?"

"Trust me, they won't buy it. Please?"

"You owe me some answers for this."

"Just call in five. Gotta go."

The call disconnected and Jughead slumped back into the worn couch cushions. What in the hell was going on at the Blossom dinner? Was Polly okay? Was Archie okay? His mind whirled with possibilities, from the mundane (Cheryl being cruel and catty) to the more sinister (Polly was being kept prisoner at Thornhill). Giving Archie four minutes, Jughead called him back, ready to spring his friend.

"Hello?"

"Archie, it's Jughead. I'm sorry to interrupt your evening, but you need to come home immediately."

"Slow down," Archie convincingly urged him. "What's wrong?"

"It's your dad. He's having this weird pain in the back of his shoulder and he's really pale. He won't let us take him to the hospital, but I think he'll listen to you."

Jughead knew it was a horrible lie, but it was the one thing that surely even Clifford and Penelope Blossom would deem a worthy reason for an early departure. Judging from the trembling reply, his calculated lie was precisely the right button to push to elicit a convincing performance from his friend.

"I-I'll be right there. If he gets any worse, I don't care what you have to do. Get him a doctor, alright?"

"I will, I promise."

"Thanks, Jughead." Two simple words, loaded with meaning, before the line went dead.
Scribbling a quick note for his father and leaving it on the counter, Jughead headed out into the brisk fall air. Knowing the Blossoms, they would send Archie home in a car—which meant Jughead would have to meet him there for answers. It would also prove critical to the lie for Jughead to be at the Andrews house, even if Fred wasn’t. A quick shortcut down darkened alleys carried him to the bridge and he broke into a run at the sight of a nearby cab. Hailing it with a little luck and a lot of frantic waving, he managed to beat Archie home by two minutes.

As predicted, Archie had been chauffeured home by a Blossom minion.

Quick goodbyes exchanged with the driver, Archie led Jughead inside, calling out for his father. Silence greeted them, heavy and haunted. Archie shook himself slightly, as if dispelling the image of his father in pain. In reality, Fred was out of town visiting his parents for the weekend, presumably safe and sound.

"Alright, why did I spend my last ten bucks on a cab to your house?"

Archie pulled the curtains shut, glancing nervously out the window. "I don't even know where to begin, Jug. So much happened over there."

Leaning against the kitchen counter, Jughead frowned. "Start with the least terrible thing?"

"Polly. Definitely Polly." Archie opened the fridge, grabbing two cans of Coke and tossing one to his friend. "I managed to get her alone for two minutes and she told me that she's fine. She only moved in with them to stop them from finding her babies and taking off with them."

The corner of Jughead's mouth tugged slightly upwards. "So the eldest Cooper has a little detective in her, too. Betty will be so happy."

"Over that, maybe." Slumped against the kitchen island, Archie took a long swig of Coke. "Cheryl kissed me in the garden."

Jughead nearly dropped the can he was holding in shock. "What?!"

Archie grimaced, shaking his head. "It was weird, Jug. One minute, we were talking about how much she missed Jason, and the next, she was trying to pin me up against a trellis."

"And?"

"And I shot her down, as nicely as I could. Told her I was sorta seeing someone, and I couldn't betray that person." At Jughead's puzzled look, Archie threw up his hands. "It was a half-lie! I'm into Val. I don't want to screw that up, if I haven't already."

Jughead whistled low. "And how did Cheryl Bombshell take that?"

"Bomb is a fitting choice of words. That's when I wandered off down the pathway towards an older barn and things got worse."

Archie's words tumbled from his lips in a confused flurry: how he'd come across a barn, where Cheryl's parents were talking privately. How mention of Hiram and Hermione Lodge had made him pause just outside the doors. And then, to his shock, he'd heard the familiar voice of Hiram Lodge himself.

"Hiram was not at the party, Jug. He was there for the meeting in the barn."

"But what were they meeting about?"
"I don't know. I heard Cheryl coming down the path in search of me and decided it was better not to be caught. All I know is that before Veronica's dad showed up, Penelope implied the Blossoms were the reason Hiram was in jail before. I circled back to the main house and that's when I called you."

Jughead contemplated this quietly, studying it from all angles. Why do business—and with Hiram Lodge's background, he would only meet the Blossoms for business—with someone you surely knew had played a role in your imprisonment? The Lodges dealt primarily in development projects, like the soon to be completed SoDale complex. What could a maple syrup baron possibly have to offer?

"Maybe I should have listened in on that meeting," Archie lamented.

"No, you made the smart choice. The Blossoms will only slip up if they are confident they're not being watched. But we should let Polly know about this, so she can keep an eye out."

"Should we tell Veronica?"

Jughead hesitated. "You know her better than I do. Can she be trusted with this?"

The redhead was quiet for a long moment, lost in thought. When he nodded slowly, Jughead shrugged, leaving it up to his friend to decide.


Archie shook his head, opening a nearby cupboard in search of a snack. "No way. Like I told Betty, I don't want to be a third wheel. Besides, she's really excited about it. It's the first birthday you've let her celebrate with you."

Gritting his teeth, Jughead sunk into a kitchen chair. "That makes one of us."

"I don't get it. Why don't you like your birthday?"

Of course Archie didn't get it. He grew up with Mary and Fred Andrews, two doting parents who, until a few years ago, were eternally pleasant and patient. They had holiday traditions, annual summer vacations and everything Jughead and his sister had never had.

"PTSD from when I was a kid?" he offered, mulling the best way to explain a family that didn't fit into a neat, happy box. "I don't know. Things were always messed up at home—usually because of my dad—and there was this arbitrary day that we would just get together and pretend that things were great. That we were normal." He swallowed hard, swallowing down the bitterness swelling within. "It just made me feel really lonely."

Archie remained silent, although his pained expression offered a bit of comfort to Jughead. He wanted to understand, even if he'd never known what it was to wish you'd never been born. With a forced smile, Jughead gestured towards the stairs.

"A round of Call of Duty before I head home?"

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**Nine hours ago**

"You would have lost your mind, Jug! I could barely believe it myself. An original pressing of Joy Division's Unknown Pleasures for ten bucks!"
Jughead's eyes widened at this tidbit. "You're joking. Legitimate original pressing?"

"I never joke about my vinyl scores. Dude was blasting some terrible EDM. He'd inherited the storage locker from a dead uncle of his and was selling it off. I just missed out on Ziggy Stardust."

Toledo was such a woefully desolate wasteland of cultural appreciation. Of course someone would be selling off collector's items without knowing their worth.

"If you had managed to score both Joy Division and Bowie for a twenty, I would literally take a bus there to bow down before you in awe."

His heart ached at the trill of laughter over the line. "You really ought to bow down, anyway. I've got mad thrift skills."

"Yeah, but you soured that score of yours by also buying 'Nsync."

"I'm sorry that you're too hipster-emo to appreciate the pop genius of No Strings Attached, but some of us like to just dance once in a while."

Jughead rolled his eyes. "Dancing is for people without dignity."

"I bet you Betty loves to dance," came the teasing reply.

"Jelly, stop. Now I regret telling you."

"Oh, come on! I'm so happy for you. Betty's like, the nicest ever. Remember the time she gave me all her old Sweet Valley High books because we couldn't afford them? Just gave them to me, no take-backs." His sister fell silent for a moment, which usually meant something unpleasant or simply humiliating was about to spill forth. "I'm just glad you're not alone, Jughead. You've always been alone."

"That's not true. I had you. And I've been friends with Betty and Archie forever."

"It's different. You're being brave. Braver than I am, that's for sure."

Brotherly instincts kicked in as Jughead poured himself a glass of juice. "Someone caught your eye, JB?"

"Not really, just… It's just easier not to trust people. At least with Betty, you already trusted her. You're really lucky it worked out."

The hesitation in her tone made him certain there was more to the story, but the doorbell rang before he could probe the matter further. Across the line, he swore he heard his sister clapping.

"That's Betty. I'll call you soon?"

"No, you won't. I'll call you because Grams says I can run up the long distance whenever I want to. Save your money, darling brother of mine. You won't find cheap vinyl in River-fail."

Jughead laughed softly, shaking his head. "Alright. Love you."

"Love you more! Now go! Don't keep your hot date waiting!"

"Goodbye, Forsythia!"

"Farewell, Forsythe!"
Opening his front door, Jughead smiled apologetically at the blushing blonde on his front steps. "I'm so sorry, I was on the phone with Jellybean."

Betty waved him off, stepping inside. "Don't be sorry. How is she doing?"

"She's good. She's been babysitting for the neighbours and spending her cash on vinyl and blue hair dye." Pulling on his Sherpa coat, Jughead glanced at his outfit and frowned. "You're not hiding clothes fit for a four-star restaurant under that coat, are you?"

"Archie coached me on the finer points of a Jughead Jones birthday celebration." She leaned in slightly, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Now, come on! I don't want to be late."

They caught a bus across town, arriving at the Bijou with twenty minutes to spare. Popcorn and drinks in tow, they slid into the centre row of well-worn, crushed velvet seats and stripped off their coats. A lump caught in his throat as Betty shrugged off her jacket, revealing a soft grey sweater emblazoned with a golden crown.

"Do you like it?" she asked nervously as he stood dumbfounded. "Veronica came across it online and helped me order it."

A crown. Just like his beanie. The confusion crashed over him like a wave. The notion that Betty would wear this—that she would even be looking for this—simply did not compute. In the hands of his parents, it would feel false. It would be pure peacocking, in some desperate effort to prove parental prowess. But one of his oldest friends? His girlfriend? This was simply… affection.

"I'm sorry, is it silly? Is it too much?" Betty's words tumbled wildly as she fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. "I just… I thought it would be like celebrating you and—"

He pulled her close, silencing her paranoia with a gentle kiss of her full lips. He had no language for how her gesture made him feel. Actions would need to speak for him.

"Okay," she whispered, smiling as they broke apart.

He settled into his seat first, wrapping an arm around Betty as she leaned into him. Maybe Archie was right. He'd always enjoyed watching movies with Betty. Just because they were dating now, it didn't change that dynamic, did it? As much as he loathed his birthday, he couldn't deny that being with Betty made him feel. Actions would need to speak for him.

"You know, I never pegged you for an American Werewolf girl."

Reaching for a handful of popcorn, Betty chuckled. "Oh, that's where you're wrong, Jughead. I'm all about the beast within."

The lights dimmed around them and Jughead smirked. A reference to the obscure 1982 horror flick? As usual, the youngest Cooper had done her homework.

---

Four hours ago

It was all supposed to be simple, Jughead lamented on the dusty recliner. See a double feature with Betty. Grab food at Pop's after the show. Walk her home and sneak up the ladder to thoroughly kiss her goodnight. Watch the clock strike midnight and be rid of another meaningless milestone. Seventeen years, ticked off the calendar and moving on.

Instead, he was trapped in a nightmare, one born in the bowels of the worst teen movie cliché: the
crashed party.

His hand absentely scratched at Vegas' ear, seeking comfort. Archie's dog licked his palm gently, as if it reassure him. The noise was clearly upsetting his companion as much as it was the supposed guest of honour.

He should have known something was wrong when Betty asked to skip the second film. *Maybe I wasn't ready for a werewolf movie,* she claimed, curling into his side. He pointed out that *The Blues Brothers* was a comedy, one filled with music and Nazis getting their asses kicked. She'd countered by noting that Archie's dad was out of town and her curfew was midnight for this special occasion.

And he'd fallen for it. Of course he had. Because, like any teenage guy, he'd started listening to the wrong head.

Upstairs, something shattered, followed by wild cheers and football player grunts. Jughead slumped further into the chair, willing himself to disappear.

Maybe, it could have been okay. He'd never had a birthday party with friends, had never wanted one, but after the initial shock and discomfort had worn off, maybe he could have obliged Betty and gone with it. But the road to hell was paved with good intentions—as he'd pointed out to her an hour ago—and the bad stars under which he was born were cursing the evening with chaos. Archie, for the first time ever, was completely plastered. Veronica, normally buoyant and eager to spread cheer in a social scene, was sulking in the kitchen with a cup of vodka splashed with OJ. Betty was desperately trying to be a perfect hostess, a perfect friend, a perfect girlfriend, but it all added up to perfect panic.

*There's a cake. She's baked me a cake. And she's singing now, but with the strange, sombre mood and dim lights, it's somehow sinister, like a warning. Happy birthday, dear Jughead. Don't look behind you. Don't answer the door. You will not be right back if you investigate a strange noise.*

*Maybe I'm the one unsettled by the movie tonight.*

"That was haunting, Betty," I mumble.

"Blow out the candles and make a wish," she urges.

*I hate my birthday. I reluctantly comply, whispering it aloud: "I wish it were just the two of us right now.""

*It's not the answer she wants, but surely Archie warned her. He's my blood brother—we did the whole completely unhygienic, cut-the-hand thing in grade six—and I consider this awkward, anxiety-inducing experience to be his fault.*

*I watch Betty cut the cake, her hand trembling as she does so. A part of me knows she meant well, knows that she just wanted to be nice, but I'm not wired for nice. I'm wired for bruises, for drunken tirades and shielding my sister in a closet.*

"Would this be better with ice cream?" she asks nervously.

*I force a half-smile. "Everyone likes ice cream."

Just like everyone likes birthdays. Except me, the town freak, apparently.

*I follow her to the kitchen, hoping to get her away from Kevin, Ethel, everyone. Maybe I can explain the complicated albatross that is a birthday to me. We can pass out cake, fake some laughs, boot*
everyone else out. I can pretend for an hour, right?

As we reach the kitchen, we find Archie and Veronica are commiserating about something. The two of them step apart, clearly rattled by our intrusion.

"We were just coming to get ice cream," Betty explains apologetically. "Everything okay, V?"

It's then that I notice the tear sliding down the Latina's cheek. Her features are pale, and she's clinging to her drink like a lifeline.

"Yeah, it's fine. I'm just not in a party mood like usual."

"That makes two of us."

I wince as I realize I've said it aloud. Betty steps in front of me, ice cream abandoned.

"Whoa, wait. You're not actually upset that I threw you a party, are you?"

Yes, yes I am. And I wish I wasn't. I do my best to be diplomatic, choosing my words as carefully as possible.

"It is nice, Betty. I appreciate it. It's just that I would be happier if it was just the four of us in a booth at Pop's."

Her forehead crinkles as she steps forward, reaching for my hand. "But we always do that. I wanted to do something special."

"Well, the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

It's a little harsh, but I meant it lighter than it sounded. I think I did, anyway. It doesn't matter: a switch has been flipped, and Betty's calm veneer falls away.

"Why is it always doom and gloom with you, Jug? Why can't it just be normal for once?"

Normal. I hate that damn word. And she, of all people, should know that nothing in my life has ever met the definition of normal.

"I'm not normal! I'm not wired to be normal!"

I'm cut off by the sound of the doorbell. I mentally list off the current occupants of the Andrews home, and find there are already people here I scarcely know.

"How many other people did you invite to this thing?"

Betty frowns. "Nobody. It's inner circle only. Your dad declined."

"My dad let you throw this without warning you that I've never had a birthday party in my entire life?"

The doorbell rings again, and Archie announces he'll get it.

"That's exactly why I wanted to give you one!"

She reaches for my hand again, but I push it away. "Did you ever think to ask me if that was by choice? Because it was."
There's a clamor outside the front door. Music. Laughter. Betty hears it, too. The four of us, Kevin, Ethel and the guy Kevin's been cozying up to for the last ten minutes, we're all gathered in the foyer as Archie opens the door, revealing Cheryl Blossom and half the juniors and seniors, easy.

I blink my eyes hard, praying I'm in bed right now. This cannot be happening.

"Did you really think you could have a party without moi?" Cheryl coos.

I think back to last night, and Archie's rejection of her. Hell hath no fury...

"Hey, Archie! Where do you want the kegs?" Moose calls out from the porch.

Kegs. Kill me. I edge backwards, desperately looking to Betty for support. She looks to Archie, our leader. It's his home, his rules, right?

"Screw it! One in the kitchen, one in the backyard!" Archie announces, to rousing cheers.

I slip through the door to the garage, taking Vegas with me. Everyone I trust has betrayed me. I owe them nothing.

The door to the garage slammed open, pulling Jughead from his thoughts. Archie, scarcely able to walk a straight line, was splashing a red Solo cup everywhere.

"Dude, Valerie just got here. Should I go talk to her? What if Cheryl told her about last night?"

Exasperated, Jughead felt his tenuous hold on his temper snap. "Archie, as my blood-brother, it was your sole responsibility to ensure that something like this never happened on my birthday. And now we're in the middle of... of a Seth Rogen movie!"

"This was Betty's idea, alright? I just went along with it."

He rolled his eyes angrily. "It's so not me." And the party crashers were not her idea, Arch. You let them in.

Archie tossed back the cup of booze, finishing it in a single gulp and tossing it aside. "It doesn't matter. You're her boyfriend now, Jug."

"And what the hell does that mean?"

His friend's features clouded over, for a brief moment. "It means you're getting a birthday party, whether you like it or not."

Mistakenly believing things couldn't get worse, Jughead was startled by a knock upon the exterior garage door. The knob turned slowly and it swung open, revealing his father. The one who, according to Betty, had declined the invite. The one who'd told her that he'd never had a birthday party, likely planting the idea in her head.

"Happy birthday, Jug." In his hand was a carefully wrapped box.

"Thanks, dad."

He rose to his feet, unsure of whether he should hug him or beg for a ride home, away from this sea of beer-swilling teens and—oh God, dad. Booze.

FP embraced him tightly, clapping him on the back. "I didn't know you had so many friends."
"I don't. People crashed and… Dad, there's a lot of alcohol here. I'm not drinking any of it, by the way. But…"

FP shrugged the news off. "You're seventeen. Have a beer, if you want."

Jughead tried again. "I mean… Should you be here? Because we can go. I've had my fill of festivities."

"Jug, you can't leave Betty," Archie protested.

"I agree, son. Even if this is… more than you bargained for," FP mused aloud, "she did it for you. And I'll be fine. I won't stay long. Don't want to be that old guy trying to feel young." He waved the box in his hand. "Where can I put this?"

"There's a table in the den," Archie told him.

"Alright. I'll go leave this there and say hi to Betty. Tell her she got her way, after all."

As his father turned to leave, Jughead called out to him. "Dad? Did you tell Betty to do this?"

FP shook his head. "Not my idea, Jug. But that one knows what she wants."

Watching his father head into the main house, Jughead pivoted to confront his intoxicated best friend. "You. Find Betty and get her to meet me here. Now. It's the least you can do."

Archie's mouth open and closed, perhaps realizing that no apology, no explanation, could ever be enough right now. Because Jughead was pacing like a caged animal, wearing a track in the oval rug beneath him. Vegas whined as he glanced between them, unsettled by the anger brewing.

"I'll go get her."

To Archie's credit, it only took him ten minutes to honour his request. Betty's doe eyes were misty as she slipped inside the garage, locking the door behind her. Her hands were fisted at her sides, her makeup smudged in the corners of her eyes.

"Jug?"

The instinct to protect her, to console her, ran deep, but the fury was winning. Maybe he was his father's son, after all. Maybe that same hurricane of hurt lived inside him.

"You know my father has a drinking problem, right?"

"Of course I do. I didn't think people would be drinking tonight. I didn't plan on Cheryl and the rest of the school crashing, okay?" Her lower lip trembled slightly as she studied his face. "This was supposed to be just your friends."

"You and Archie are my friends, okay?" He took a steadying breath, forcing himself to keep calm. "Everyone else, including Veronica and Kevin? They're people that two months ago, I would have actively shunned."

"Why?"

One simple word. One syllable. And within it lay a million reasons why he'd been a fool to ever believe that he could do this. That he could ever fit into her world as more than that strange guy with a love of books and classic film.
"In case you haven't noticed, I'm weird. I'm a weirdo." In his head, schoolyard taunts swelled to a crescendo, echoing his declaration. "I don't fit in and I don't want to fit in. You're the only one who's ever seen me without this stupid hat on since grade four. That's weird!"

The voices grew louder, the taunts fast and furious: Wednesday Addams. Weirdo. Serpent scum. He winced as Reggie's laughter roared in his skull. Betty edged closer and he reflexively took a step back.

"Why are you getting so upset?" she asked softly. "It's just a party, Jug."

"It's not just a party. It's the fact that you don't know, or even care, that this is the last thing I would want!" Her head bowed as the bitterness continued to spew from his lips. "You did this for you. To prove something."

"To prove what?" Betty demanded.

"That you're a great girlfriend. I don't know."

He didn't know. He didn't know why the hell she was wasting her time with him, when he was so obviously not the kind of guy that girls like Betty ended up with. The proof was the tears welling up in her eyes as he kept on talking and hurting her. But the hurricane, it was hungry, and it would not be silenced. Every insecurity, every fear, was bleeding through.

"Doesn't it ever occur to you how different we are? Like, on a cellular DNA level? You're a straight A student, a cheerleader, for god's sakes. You're the perfect girl next door."

"I hate that word," Betty protested angrily.

"I'm the damaged, loner outsider from the wrong side of the tracks," he continued, his chest aching as he recognized his actions for the self-destruct button they were. "Betty, come on. Who are we kidding? We're on borrowed time."

And I'll only ever hold you back from the life you deserve.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

It means I'm the jerk standing here, making you cry. Proving why you should run away.

"I'm not one of your projects, okay? Like solving Jason's murder—"

"No, you're not a project," she pleaded, reaching for his face. "You're my boyfriend!"

His hands caught hers, pushing them away. "Until you're sick of slumming it with me? Or until Archie changes his mind and says he wants to be with you?"

And there it was: the eye of the storm. His greatest fear, laid bare. And in that heavy silence, as Betty rocked back on her heels and glared at him, he knew he'd gone too far. Even if she deserved better. Even if he wanted to lose her before he could never recover from it, he'd done the unforgivable: he'd betrayed their friendship.

Wordlessly, she spun on her heel and stormed out of the garage.

"Betts, I'm so sorry," he whispered to an empty room.

Vegas nudged his thigh gently and Jughead rubbed his head as a tear slid down his cheek. Congratulations, Jughead. You've lost her. All because you're too fucked up to let anyone love you.
He needed to go. Now. Maybe his father was still around for a lift. Reluctantly, he slipped into the house and surveyed the scene. It was chaos: streamers, shoeprints on furniture, spilled bowls of chips and the stench of stale beer. There was no way Archie could clean this up before Fred's return and frankly, he didn't give a damn. His father was nowhere to be seen, although his truck remained parked across the street.

Oh god, please tell me he's not drinking.

Rounding the corner into the kitchen, he bumped into Ethel, who'd tucked herself into a quiet corner with a slice of birthday cake. The relief on her face at the sight of him was almost comical, if his heart wasn't shattering.

"Jughead! Hey, you haven't had a slice of birthday cake. It's bad luck."

"This whole night is bad luck," he muttered. "Have you seen my dad? The only adult at this party?"

Ethel shook her head. "No, but I've been pretty invisible here."

To hell with it. He'd call him outside and hope for the best.

"I'm ghosting. See you in school, Ethel."

He spun around and promptly slammed into Kevin. His eyes were saucer-wide, and a sinking feeling told him it wasn't because the sheriff's son had imbibed.

"Chuck is here!" Kevin hissed.

"Betty?!"

"I don't know where she is."

"Find her," he ordered Kevin.

Jughead pushed his way through the crowd, headed for the front door, where Chuck Clayton was shrugging off his letterman jacket and laughing. Laughing. Like he wasn't a first-class monster who'd abused his last girlfriend and slut-shamed at least three girls in their school. Still seething over his argument with Betty, Jughead shoved him from behind, staggering him forward.

"Get the hell out of here, Chuck," he snarled. "You're not invited."

"Oh yes, he is," came a voice behind Jughead.

Spinning around, he found Cheryl Blossom, arms akimbo, with a sinister grin. "Chuck is my date for the evening, and we all know how terribly rude it would be to deny me my plus-one."

"Your plus-one is a lying—"

"Nuh-uh-uh!" Cheryl's manicured hand slapped across Jughead's mouth to silence him. "Save it for the game."

Caught off-guard, he didn't notice Reggie and Moose grabbing his arms until it was too late. Corralled into the living room, they shoved him against a table as Cheryl called out for the music to be cut.

"Listen up, party people! Everyone has their secrets, and we've done our fair share of sinning. My brother's death has made that clear. So I've decided we need to play a little game to get those secrets
Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Betty, staring frantically at him from the dining room. He jerked his head slightly to the left, urging her to flee.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Secrets and Sins!"

Chapter End Notes

Hell hath no fury like a Cheryl scorned... and Chuck? Well, he's an asshole.

Since everyone was so into my take on Jellybean in my one-shot In Case of Emergency, I decided she would definitely call her brother on his birthday. Check it out if you haven't already, and let me know if you want more JB in this story!

Next chapter: Betty's dark secret is revealed and Jughead confronts demons of his own.
Thank you so much for all of your reviews! Poor Jughead - all he wanted was to see a couple movies and eat a burger. Instead, he got one movie, a party he never wanted, every jerk in school crashing said party, Archie's drunk, a fight with Betty that seems destined to ruin their new relationship and oh yeah, CHUCK is here.

Many asked "Why would Betty throw him a party? Shouldn't she know better?" I asked the same damn thing when the show did it. Betty will explain herself, promise. I'm honestly more mad at Archie because Jughead told him the reason why he hates his birthday and he didn't just tell BETTY that.

Song: Failing the Rorschach Test - Matthew Good Band

Disclaimer: I own nothing. Any dialogue borrowed is for continuity and context and belongs to Riverdale.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Seventeen: Failing the Rorschach Test**

"Hey, Alice - I'm caving in, I'm caving in
I know it's not allowed but sometimes,
I fantasize I'm peeling off my skin
Enough to fill it up again...

Mother told me to be something
So I'm afraid, enough to stay wide awake..."

Failing the Rorschach Test - Matthew Good Band

**Three hours ago**

Cheryl's so-called game was a circle jerk of bullying, as best Jughead could tell. And while he tried to pay attention to the furious opening volley between herself and Veronica—something about Hiram Lodge buying the Twilight?—his sole focus was on Betty.

Betty had been ushered to the front of the crowd by Reggie, insisting she deserved a front row seat. Kevin had protested, but ultimately was overpowered by other Bulldogs sticking up for their teammate. Hands folded in her lap, she sat next to Archie, who was sobering up fast in Cheryl's wake. Particularly as Dilton Doiley decided he wanted to play along.

"I saw Miss Grundy's car by Sweetwater River, the day Jason went missing," he offered up. "I told Jughead this fact, yet it's never been reported in the Blue and Gold. And let's not forget that Archie was also at Sweetwater River that morning."

And there it was: Archie's secret was out. Cheryl, quickly putting two and two together, reveled in the scandalous implications.
"Is that why you became a mediocre musician overnight?"

Archie remained silent, arms folded across his chest.

"Damn, Andrews was banging a teacher?" Chuck strolled across the room, edging closer to Archie—and Betty, by proximity. "You should have shared with the team. We love keeping track of our conquests."

"Classy, Chuck," Veronica spat. "Although half of your conquests are made up, aren't they? And by the way, Cheryl, Archie did share with the team—your precious brother was also hot for teacher. Tell us: we know how much you loved Jason. Did you love him a little too much, maybe? Enough to put a bullet between his eyes with your daddy's hunting rifle?"

Jughead was no stranger to the 'twincest' rumours at school, but even he was surprised Veronica had gone there.

"Now, now, let's not get off-topic," Chuck admonished the crowd. "You see, knowing about Miss Grundy's affairs has shed new light on my secret. Or rather, Betty Cooper's secret."

"Leave her the hell alone, Chuck!" Archie snapped, rising to his feet.

Chuck's hand clamped down on the ginger's shoulder, shoving him back into his chair. "Sit down, Andrews! I think you'll appreciate this sin coming to light." Glancing over his shoulder at Jughead, he smirked. "You may want to take notes for the paper."

Betty was ashen, her eyes glazed over and unseeing. This was it. This was everything she'd been afraid of for months. And, if Jughead was reading between the lines, it had something to do with Miss Grundy's affairs. Had she not told them the truth about last May?

"Look, you may get a free peepshow every night, but you do not know her. Hell, Betty doesn't know herself." Chuck stood over her and Jughead pushed off the table behind him, ready to lunge. "You see, for weeks last spring, dear Betty was acting strangely. Disappearing for long hours after school. Never answering her phone. Claiming she was with Veronica. But one night, I was staring at Veronica and Archie talking at Pop's while sweet, innocent Betty was telling me she was studying at the Pembrooke."

"My friends already know, Chuck," Betty lied. "They don't care."

"Oh, do they know?" Chuck mused. "I doubt you've told them, but even if you have, I'm sure our classmates would like to know why our music teacher quit mid-semester."

Chuck circled the group, studying each of Betty's friends in turn as he continued his story.

"I followed Betty one night to Miss Grundy's house. Veronica was with her. They went inside for ten minutes, and came out angry. Veronica drove off, but Betty…" Chuck laughed, shaking his head. "Betty reached into her backpack and brought out her contingency plan."

"Enough," Jughead snapped. "It doesn't matter what Betty did to her. Miss Grundy was a predator using a stolen identity."

Distantly, he heard Kevin whispering to his boyfriend in shock.

"And Betty—the golden girl, the innocent cheerleader—put on a god-awful, black hooker wig, pulled out a revolver and broke into Miss Grundy's house."
The silence in the room was deafening. There it was: the secret she'd so desperately fought to protect. The truth she never wanted revealed, laid bare in front of half their class. And suddenly, every hint she'd dropped made sense. Betty had committed a crime, but who would prosecute her when the victim was guilty of worse transgressions?

Betty's head hung low in defeat. Archie, stunned by the revelation, silently stared at her.

"I watched her hold a gun to Miss Grundy, screaming at her to leave town or she'd make her pay for hurting Archie. For hurting Polly. No, wait—for hurting her by stealing Jason. You see, Betty seemed to think she was Polly!" Glancing sideways at Cheryl, he shrugged. "She was banging Jason, too. Anyway, poor Miss Grundy tearfully packs a bag and leaves town, never to be heard from again."

Veronica reached out for Betty's hand, but it was shrugged away by the shuddering blonde. Jughead took a step forward, his body shuddering with rage.

"Really, I was kind to date such a crazy girl, especially after all that," Chuck continued. "Who else would want her?"

*Oh, that's it.*

"I would," Jughead announced with a fist to Chuck's jaw. They tumbled to the ground in a flurry, smashing a table in the process. Chuck landed a solid left, but Jughead knew where to upkick and take out the star athlete's knee. Chuck growled in pain as Jughead followed with a clean right hook, but earned a jab to the eye in the process. Distantly, he could hear Betty screaming, but there was nothing but red, nothing but the need to avenge her. Chuck needed to suffer for what he'd done.

"You fighting her battles now, Columbine?" Chuck hissed.

Jughead drove his fist into Chuck's kidney as the wrestling star overpowered him. "Better I hit you than *hit a fucking woman*, right, Chuck?"

Chuck's weight lifted from his frame without warning. Arms reached beneath his own, pulling Jughead from the fray—Archie's, he soon realized. Before him stood his father, furious and dragging Chuck towards the door. Jughead pulled against his friend's grip, cursing beneath his breath.

"Let. Me. Go."

"Not a chance, Jughead. Remember what Betty told me? No more violence in her life."

His father, however, hadn't gotten that memo. Chuck's body slammed forcefully into the doorframe as he dragged him down the steps of the Andrews home. The gossip-hungry crowd followed them, Archie allowing Jughead to move with the fray.

"Fucking snake," Chuck jeered.

"Get out of here," FP snarled, "Before I show you how venomous a snake can be."

Someone tossed Chuck's jacket out onto the sidewalk and he reluctantly retrieved it. To Jughead's shock, it quickly became apparent that the crowd had heard him during the fray. Chuck may have had a juicy story, but it was fast being overshadowed by Jughead's revelation.

Turning back towards the house, FP glared at the gawking group. "What are you waiting for? The
party's over! Get out of here, now!"

The house emptied itself onto the sidewalk, a purging not unlike the one he imagined in Archie’s future. His friend was looking rather green after his night of drunken debauchery. Cheryl Blossom paused on the porch, one of the last to leave. Her shoulders slumped, she looked to Archie, then Jughead.

"Is it true?" she whispered. "Did Chuck hurt Betty?"

"Yeah," Archie blurted out. "And we have the photos to prove it to Sheriff Keller."

The normally confident redhead was visibly deflated. "I didn't know... I didn't know a lot of things, it seems..."

Drawing her faux fur coat closer, she headed off into the night, her crimson hair gleaming beneath the streetlights. Cheryl, Jughead decided, had the right idea. Pulling free of Archie's grip, he stomped down the steps and veered to his right. He'd scarcely made it ten steps before he was clotheslined by a leather-clad arm.

"Whoa! Where the hell are you going?" FP demanded.

"What, you want to give me some advice on my right hook?"

His father stood firmly in his path, body tensed. "I want you to go back inside and talk to your girl."

"His girl. Ha. In all of the commotion, he'd forgotten his grand screw-up in the garage."

"I don't think it's going to work out," he told his father. "Irreconcilable differences."

Jughead veered to his left, but FP was there, matching his movements. "No, no you don't. Don't run away from it. Don't run away."

The sidewalk was barren now: Archie had stepped back inside, either to assess damages or puke out the contents of the liquor cabinet. It was the two of them, father and son. In hindsight, there was a poetic element to FP Jones deciding this terrible day was the right time to be the dad he'd faked being on every birthday prior.

"Look, you've got something good going here. With her. With your friends. Something that..." FP hesitated, running an anxious hand through his hair. "Something... that we never gave you. And before you started walking around with a stupid grin all the time, you would walk around with it whenever you spent time with her."

Jughead glanced over at the Cooper house, staring up at Betty's window. "It's never going to work, Dad. We're from different worlds."

"That's bullshit!" FP grabbed him by the shoulders, staring him down. "You belong here. With them. With her. And if I'm the reason you think it's hopeless, then I won't forgive myself for it."

"Dad—"

"I won't, Jug. And if you really want to go, I'll drive you home. But you won't forgive yourself if you do." His father shoved him gently up the Andrews' walkway. "Now, man up. From what I saw in there, your girl needs you right now."

"I don't know if she's mine anymore," Jughead confessed.
"Your friend needs you," FP amended. "Go."

In his mind, Betty was whispering: "You're my beanie."

Archie was a wreck. Veronica had been dragged by Cheryl for the sins of her father. And Betty… Swiping at a trickle of blood from a cut beneath his eye, Jughead nodded.

"Don't wait up," he told FP. "I'm staying with Archie tonight."

FP nodded firmly. "Go take care of her, boy."

Jughead marched back into the house, taking stock briefly of the damage wrought. He'd owe Archie for the table and vase broken in his fight with Chuck, but it would be a debt worth repaying. The littered floor and furniture could wait until morning. What mattered most was finding Betty.

"Betty?" he called out quietly. "Arch?"

No answer.

He started with the garage, wondering if perhaps Betty had slipped in through the side door to hide from her peers. Vegas glanced up from the recliner he'd squished himself into, yawning once before falling asleep anew. Jughead had turned towards the main house, figuring Betty had retreated to a bedroom upstairs, when a faint noise caught his ear.

"Betts?"

A sniffling drifted from the furthest reaches of the Andrews yard, where the gazebo lay. He treaded carefully, his eyes straining against the darkness. Curled up beside the gazebo, knees drawn to chest, sat a dishevelled, weeping Betty. Unsure of his standing with her after his tirade, he kneeled down a few feet away.

"Hey..."

"Go away," she mumbled. "I know you want to."

"I don't." And he didn't, not anymore. "Can I come closer?"

Betty shook her head furiously. "I don't want your pity, Jug. I deserve to be alone."

"I'm sorry." He crawled across the dirt towards her, resting his hands upon her knees. "I never should have said that to you. And, if you let me try, I'll explain."

"Chuck's right," she whimpered. "I'm crazy. Who would ever want me?"

"Me. More than anything I've ever wanted in my entire life." His hand reached out to graze her cheek, his chest aching at the stream of tears that continued to fall. "I told you the secret wouldn't change how I felt about you. It hasn't changed anything."

He was worried about her, unquestioningly. But the love he felt for her had only intensified.

"I… I don't know why I did it," she confessed, finally meeting his worried gaze.

"You don't have to know why."

She swiped at her tears, sniffling loudly. "I don't want to be with Archie."
"I know you don't. Usually. But I'm broken, Betts," he reminded her, his voice hoarse with fear.

"So am I."

He leaned forward, pressing his forehead to hers. She sighed loudly, eyes closed tightly. His hands found her clenched fists, covering them and squeezing gently.

"Can we be broken together, maybe?"

Overhead, the clouds shifted, casting a beam of moonlight upon them. Wide green orbs bored holes into his soul.

"Yes, please," she whispered.

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One hour ago

"And all this time, I thought you were a lover, not a fighter," Betty gently teased.

"I'm both. I've got layers," he quipped weakly.

After tidying the worst of the mess at Archie's—and leaving Veronica in charge of keeping Archie from drowning in his toilet—Betty had suggested they end the night as Jughead would have preferred it: in a booth at Pop's. They'd quietly shared a plate of fries and matching chocolate shakes, neither inclined to speak of the evening's events right away. Pop Tate, sensing the tension, had given them a wide berth, stopping by only to bring a second round of shakes on the house.

They'd apologized in fragments, snatches of words cut off with I know and I'm sorry, too. At one point, she'd simply kissed his cheek, frowning at the cut she'd patched up at Archie's place. She'd insisted it needed a stitch, but he'd outright refused, settling for tape to hold it together.

Crossing his arms on the table before him, he took a moment to choose his words. He could not hurt her again.

"You were doing something nice," he began, fingers toying with a napkin. "Throwing a party. I know that. I just… When someone does something nice for me, I short circuit. Because people aren't nice to me. And maybe I'm afraid of getting hurt. Of being rejected, for being myself."

He glanced over at her, hoping she understood. Her hand slid across the table and he covered it, relieved.

"I should have told you. About what Chuck saw. I should have trusted you with it. But instead, I let him get away with hurting me to keep it secret and… and threw you this party you didn't even want." She shook her head sadly. "And Archie told me that you wouldn't want a party, but I did it anyway."

"So, why did you?" he asked, leaning closer.

"It's complicated. The simple reason is, after everything you've done for me, I wanted to do something special for you. And when your dad mentioned you'd never had a party before, it just lodged in my head that you deserved to be celebrated. But that's not the whole reason…"

His hand slid across the cool leather of the booth to her knee, his fingertips tracing lazy circles through her jeans. Betty, struggling not to cry, drew a deep breath before she continued.
"Something is very, very wrong with me. Like there's this darkness inside of me, sometimes. I usually try to bury it or do positive things for people to push it down, like your party, but it doesn't always work. And I don't know where it comes from, Jug, but it makes me do these crazy things… like Grundy… or…"

She hesitated, staring out into space. Jughead nudged her with his shoulder, urging her to continue. With a soft sigh, she extended her hands across the table, palms down and slowly flipped them over.

*Oh, God.*

Her beautiful hands, known by him for their soft skin and sweet touches, bore the scars of her private battle. Angry crescent shapes marred her palms, precise replicas of her manicured nails. Some were scabbed over, perhaps a day or two old, but one particularly vivid wound was fresh and still seeping tiny droplets of blood.

His fingers slid beneath hers, gathering her hands in his. Cupping them together, he kissed them with all of the love for her that he possessed. *I won't leave you, Betts. Not unless you ask me to.*

Her lips pressed to his in response, needy and desperate and he met her need, kissed her like they were dying in this fractured town. And maybe it was killing them: the impossible perfect veneer that hid the lies and sickness beneath. He remembered the way she'd recoiled when he called her *perfect* and silently vowed to never use that word to describe her again.

She burrowed into his side and he held her close, listening to her breathe. How had he ever dreamed of walking away from this? They *fit*. And, in ways he'd never fully recognized until now, they were so very much the same.

"Do you think they know about us now?"

Jughead shrugged. "They know how I feel. Do you want them to know?"

Her hands fist in his shirt, tugging lightly. "They already know the secret. Maybe it's time they know everything."

"Everything?"

Betty held up her phone for him. On screen was one of many photos Veronica had taken of her bruised arm. Jughead grimaced at the murky purple-black of her skin.

"*Everything*, Juggie."

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**Now**

He'd resisted the urge to climb the ladder tonight, Betty reminding him that the unexpected, rowdy party had been right next door and her mother would surely be waiting up to interrogate her. Settling for an all-too-brief makeout session in Archie's foyer, he'd stood on her lifelong neighbour's porch and watched her cross the yard to her door. With a small smile and a wave, she stepped inside, leaving him to ruminate.

Betty's self-harm weighed heavily on his mind, as so many moments grew dark in hindsight. The way she'd looped her arm through his as they walked to the Bijou, dodging his outstretched hand; the many times he'd seen her ball her fists when upset; the time when she was thirteen and had dismissed a bloody tissue on her desk as being from a nosebleed. Betty Cooper had been suffering silently for years. But never again, he vowed. She could tell him anything and he would hold that truth for her.
Adjusting a crooked picture frame on Archie's wall, his thoughts drifted to Chuck Clayton. As much as he wanted to see justice served for Betty, he worried about the emotional toll it would take on her to report him to police. It was her decision and he would stand by her, but he wanted to be sure it was because she wanted him to be punished for the abuse—and not to distract from her confrontation with Grundy.

In the kitchen, Jughead found his birthday cake, half-eaten on the counter. He grabbed a fork from a nearby drawer and took a large bite. Angel food cake, he recognized with a smile. Having been distracted earlier, he only now realized his cake resembled a hamburger: Betty had dyed frosting and woven it to resemble meat, and various toppings, including cheese. Just as he liked it at Pop's.

She was too good to him.

Taking another bite, he struggled to remember what Cheryl had said about Hiram Lodge and the drive-in. Had he done more than simply snap up cheap land on the Southside? Had something more sinister taken place? He'd have to ask Betty in the morning what she heard, perhaps jar Veronica's memory.

Speaking of… where was Veronica?

Glancing upstairs, Jughead smirked. *Maybe this terrible day has a silver lining.* It didn't take a genius to see Veronica's interest in the friendly redhead—nor did it take much to notice his lingering looks at Betty's cheerleading companion. Yeah, they'd started off poorly, hurting Betty's feelings in the process, but a year had passed and, as he'd been assured repeatedly tonight, Betty's interest in Archie was dead and gone.

A soft, feminine giggle carried downstairs and Jughead laughed. He couldn't wait for the walk of shame in the morning.

Morning had come far too early for anyone's liking.

Jughead had woken up first, thanks to poor Vegas whining to be let outside. The dog was practically crossing his paws to hold it in. Opening the back door and yawning, Jughead heard soft footsteps on the upstairs landing. It was time for a show.

Settling into Fred Andrews's favourite chair, he waited as a tap turned on and off, the toilet flushed and tiptoed steps came down to the ground floor. There, a mortified Veronica came face to face with an expectant Jughead.

"Veronica, good morning."

"Um, hi…" Adjusting her dress, Veronica flushed scarlet. "So, Jughead, about this—"

"Your secret's safe with me," he interrupted with a knowing smile. "The inner circle is discreet, right?"

Veronica's eyes twinkled with amusement. "It is. Although your gesture of chivalry last night may not have gone unnoticed by the masses."

"Pretty sure they're going to remember the twincest accusation more than anything, but we're not worried."

Her hand clamped over her mouth in shock. "Oh no, I really did say that, didn't I?"
"Don't worry about it. Cheryl actually seemed repentant when she left last night. Perhaps being an agent of chaos is wearing thin."

"Or maybe she'll pick a new target," Veronica grumbled. "My driver is outside. Did you need a ride home?"

"Um, yeah. Let me just get Vegas to come back in."

Veronica opted to wait in the car as Jughead rounded up the relieved retriever. Leaving a short note for Archie, he locked the door behind him and slid into an uncomfortably nice luxury sedan. Veronica's driver made short work of the trip over the bridge to Sunnyside, with Veronica asking questions about Pickens Park and Southside High.

"How did you end up at Riverdale High?"

"Well, it started thanks to a lie," he mused. "Fred and Mary had my parents put their address down when I was enrolled, and no one caught on until grade four. And by then, my test scores were so high, they figured I was better off. So the school ignores the fact I'm in the wrong district to attend, and I don't qualify for a school bus to get there."

Veronica nodded thoughtfully as they turned into Sunnyside Park. "Well, I am glad the Andrews family schemed to keep you with Archie and Betty. You may act like the curmudgeon, but you are a softie, Mr. Jones."

"Thank you, I think? This one's mine." Nodding to Veronica, he headed inside, noting his father's truck was absent. Perhaps he could get a few more hours of sleep before an inevitable father-son chat.

The stench of bourbon as he opened the door quickly dissolved that dream.

"Dad?"

A groan from the living room affirmed his worst fears. Tossing his backpack aside, Jughead rounded the corner and found his father on the floor in front of the TV, an empty bottle beside him. Sloshes of amber-hued alcohol stained the carpet surrounding him, as well as a photo album on the nearby table.

"Jug, heeeeyyyyyyy…. It's not what it looks like," FP mumbled.

"So you didn't have a relapse last night and get drunk? That's a relief." Jughead reached a hand down to his father, wanting to pull him up, but it was batted away angrily. "Dad, what happened last night?"

"I'm not a good father, Jug. No, no, I'm not. Not a good man, either." He rolled halfway onto his side, clutching his head. "I ruined your life. Ruined your childhood and you… you don't know what love is. Because of ME."

Jughead kept his distance, all too familiar with his father's temper when hungover. "Dad, you didn't ruin my life. Maybe it was hard, and maybe I'm messed up, but you were messed up and hurting. And the last few weeks? Last night, when you stopped me from making the biggest mistake ever? You've been trying so hard. I see it."

"I want to… I want to keep you safe. But I don't know how." His father's grizzled features twisted in pain as he began to weep. "I fucked up, Jug. I fucked up."

"Hey, it's okay. Everybody fucks up." He knelt down beside his father, unsure of what to do for him.
"It's okay."

"I miss your mom, and Jelly," he whispered sadly. "I missed you."

"You don't have to miss me anymore. I came home. And hopefully, they will too. But first, we gotta clean all this up."

"Yeah." FP slowly pushed himself up to a seated position, his arm propped against the floor for support. "Gotta clean up. For you."

"For yourself, Dad. You deserve to be happy."

FP huffed. "That ship has long sailed, boy. But you, you are the future. And I have to protect it."

Jughead rose, again offering his hand. This time, his father accepted and he pulled, dragging him to unsteady feet. Rubbing his eyes, FP surveyed the evidence of his bender with a look of deep regret.

"Need a shower," he murmured.

"Yeah, good idea. I'll clean up the living room for you. Um... do you remember where your truck is? Because it's not outside."

"The Wyrm. It's fine." FP staggered down the hallway, pausing at his bedroom door. "Jug?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you... I need a meeting."

Jughead nodded. "Of course. Just get cleaned up and we'll go together."

"Alright."

As the bathroom door shut, Jughead slumped to the ground. Chaos, it seemed, wasn't through with him yet. Happy birthday, Jughead Jones.

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Chapter End Notes

Before anyone asks: FP did NOT fall off the wagon because of the party. We'll talk to him about it in a couple of chapters. Man, my heart hurts for writing all of this. But at least Bughead are hanging on.

Next time: Veronica reveals what's got her down; the Homecoming Dance brings a storm of its own.

Let me know what you think of Betty's secret, Bughead, or just random Riverdale thoughts.
Eighteen: What a Good Boy

Chapter Notes

An extra-long chapter awaits you, dear readers! We have a lot of ground to cover before the next one, so enjoy.

Poor Jughead. His birthday was the literal worst. Don't you think he deserves some happy time with Betty? I definitely do. Let's get a little fluffy with our sleuthing.

Song: What a Good Boy - Barenaked Ladies - REMEMBER, THE WHOLE SOUNDTRACK IS ON SPOTIFY

Other songs mentioned in this chapter: Free Fallin' - Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers; Love Will Tear Us Apart - Honeyroot

Disclaimer: I own the original spin on this AU, but I'm just borrowing the Riverdale characters, sadly. Any dialogue borrowed is strictly for context and continuity.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Eighteen: What a Good Boy

"We've got these chains hanging 'round our necks
People wanna strangle us with them before we take our first breath
Afraid of change, afraid of staying the same
When temptation calls, we just look away...
"

What a Good Boy - Barenaked Ladies

In the opinion of our town's leaders, Riverdale's greatest struggle in the wake of the Blossom murder has been its inability to reconcile the town it once was with the town it has become. The loss of innocence, the cries of this was never supposed to happen here that the elite rally around.

The truth is, Riverdale hasn't changed. Only the illusion of the wholesome American town has crumbled and blown away. As Cheryl so aptly reminded us at my disaster of a surprise party, we are a town of sinners and secret-keepers. We're simply more upfront about it now.

It's hard to relinquish the dream of a bright future, the white picket fence and fulfillment of a good job. We're trapped inside those psychological prisons from the day we're born.

"What a beautiful girl; she's going to be a heartbreaker."

"What a strong little boy; he's going to be fearless."

Our parents tell us we can be anything when we grow up, if we only work hard enough. They tell us this because they want to believe it will be different for us. And we bend over backwards to be that golden child, to embody the failed dreams of those who created us.

There is no freedom when we're folded into impossible boxes, our limbs bent over themselves in ornate origami poses.
If Jason's death teaches us nothing else, it is that the shackles of societal expectation will kill us all, in the end. Until we shed their veneer, we will never be more than a cookie-cutter lie.

Life had been a whirlwind since turning seventeen: his father's relapse and subsequent detox had only been the prelude. By Monday morning, Riverdale High was abuzz over two Instagram accounts: the personal account of Veronica Lodge, and the brand-new, unofficial account for the Blue and Gold.

**Sunday Night, 10:45pm**

*Veronica Lodge (QueenVee) posted 4 photos: Full dark, no stars. That's how badly Chuck Clayton battered my bestie, and that's only the start of his scumbaggery. Ladies, beware! If he doesn't get bored and slut-shame you first, you can look forward to psychological and physical abuse. Hey Notre Dame, is this what you look for on your team?*

**Monday Morning, 7:32am**

*Riverdale Blue and Gold (RHSbluegold) posted 8 photos: Our top story tomorrow – what's a "new girl bonus" and why are the female students of Riverdale being scored by the Bulldogs? We have their secret playbook of conquests, real and imagined – see for yourself.*

When Betty had decided the school should know everything, she'd unequivocally meant it.

By nine in the morning, the students of Riverdale—particularly the women—were demanding answers from a football team scurrying for cover. By ten, Betty and Veronica had been called down to Weatherbee's office. By eleven, the intercom began calling for each member of the team, one by one. Chuck Clayton was the first and by all accounts, he'd never returned to class. Archie, too, had been called, shortly before lunch; Chuck, they'd learned, had spilled the story of his affair with Grundy in a desperate attempt to distract the school administration, to no avail.

Betty had hidden away in the Blue and Gold offices at lunch, Jughead keeping her company. While the student body was primarily supportive, the commotion and questions were proving too much for her to bear. The pressure only intensified when Kevin messaged their group chat as lunch period drew to a close:

*Chuck's being held at the station. Betty, my dad wants you to give a statement after school.*

"Do you want me to come with you?"

Betty hesitated, fidgeting with her backpack strap. "No, Jughead. I think I'll go with Veronica, if that's okay?"

He swallowed hard, fighting that familiar insecurity that ate away at him. "Okay."

"It's not because I don't need you there," she blurted out. "Because I do. I'm terrified, Juggie. I don't want to see him."

He circled the table between them, arms outstretched. She fell into them eagerly, resting her head upon his shoulder.

"I don't understand, Betty. I'm here for you."

"I know you are. But I don't want Keller to harass you, and I don't want Chuck to see you. I don't want his anger fixated on you. Ugh, this doesn't make sense."

In its own way, it made sense to him. She wanted to protect him, even if it caused her pain.
"It's okay, I get it. Sort of." She laughed quietly into his shirt. "But I want to see you afterwards. I don't want you to be alone."

"Are you sure? I mean… how is your dad doing?"

"He's okay. He's actually staying with his sponsor for a few days. He comes home for dinner with me, but that's it. Says he doesn't want his failure to derail my life." Jughead sighed deeply, shaking his head. "I told him it's ridiculous, but this is how he wants it. Long story short, I'm alone after seven."

The warning bell sounded as Betty pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Then I will come and keep you company. Oh! I can bring your birthday gifts with me."

He'd forgotten about the birthday gifts until she'd reminded him. Hadn't his father brought a gift to that ill-fated party?

"Yeah, that's a good idea."

"He says, with the good humor of an undertaker," she teases lightly. "Come on, Jug, we're going to be late for class."

He spent the walk home from school scrolling through the comments on Veronica's Instagram. Ill-advised, perhaps, although they mostly restored his faith in humanity. Jughead suspected the immediate condemnation of the coach's son by Cheryl Blossom had something to do with the masses falling in line. Several students were calling for his expulsion, which Jughead secretly hoped for. To his horror, two other students had come forward with stories of Clayton's temper and "mind games" he'd played with them. While neither had accused him of physical violence, neither had dated him for long (one had mentioned a month; the other had said she'd broken up with him after a few weeks).

Chuck Clayton had a taste for mistreating women, he thought bitterly.

His phone pinged in his palm as a private message came in from Veronica herself. He swiped to open it, and was immediately intrigued.

*QueenVee: Might want to swing by this profile.*

Clicking the link, he found a locked down Instagram profile for *HeyThereJuliet* with 8 followers. The profile picture: Betty at age ten, dressed as Nancy Drew for Halloween. Chuckling to himself, he requested to follow and waited no more than a minute for approval. A quick refresh, and he found himself speechless.

Betty had insisted she would reveal *everything*, but she'd chosen to keep certain things to herself. There were seven posts already, all from the last two weeks. Each was an image of the two of them—a snapshot from Veronica's party; a selfie she'd talked him into at the Bijou; sly shots of them working on the paper that were surely taken by Veronica or Kevin. Two were photos from their childhood years: Betty in a tree, peering down at Jughead; and his personal favourite, Betty baking cookies with Mary Andrews while he and Archie looked on.

Her profile bio, however, left him a grinning idiot. It was a quote from *House of Leaves*, the book he'd gifted her before moving to Toledo:

*You shall be my roots and*
*I will be your shade,*
*though the sun burns my leaves.*
As much as he loathed social media (he only had accounts to follow certain authors, artists and journalists), he immediately liked every single post.

A knock on the door shattered his reminiscent reverie. Tossing his phone on the couch, he opened the door and found Betty waiting for him. Her eyes were swollen and red, but the jut of her chin was pure defiance. In her hand was a large canvas tote bag, which he immediately took from her and sat aside.

"Juggie," she murmured happily.

"Come in, it's cold," he urged her.

As she stepped inside, he noticed her right hand curling into a fist. Taking it in his own, he gently unfurled her fingers and kissed her palm. Her lips formed an 'O' of surprise.

"He doesn't get to hurt you anymore," he reminded her gently.

"I'm sorry. I-I didn't notice… Can we sit?"

"Of course we can."

They settled into the worn sofa, Betty tucked beneath his arm as she recounted her afternoon at the police station. Between the photos, Veronica's statement and the damning playbook, it hadn't taken much to convince Sheriff Keller of the abuse. It had definitely helped that his own son had seen the bruises in person. By the time she'd left, Chuck was being charged with assault.

"They've suspended him for two weeks, but Sheriff Keller is filing a protection order on my behalf," she explained. "Veronica also requested one, and when we texted Ethel, she said she was considering it."

"So, what does that mean for you?"

"It means that if it's granted, Chuck Clayton cannot come back to Riverdale High. He'd have to transfer to Southside or take online classes. Typically, public institutions can't enforce them, but in a town this small, where we all share classes, it's impossible to honour the order and grant him access."

He rubbed her arm gently, kissing the top of her head. "I am so… proud feels paternalistic, but I'm at a loss for words. I can't imagine how hard it was for you to let Veronica post those photos, let alone talk to Keller."

"It was hard," she admitted. "I just… Is it okay if we stop talking about it? I don't want to think about him anymore."

"Absolutely, Betts. Or should I call you Juliet?"

Her quiet giggle sent his heart into a tailspin. "V and I didn't want to distract people from the more important matters at hand, but I wanted to be able to share things that make me smile in a safe, small circle of friends for now. Is that okay?"

"I admit, it's a little uncomfortable to be the centre of attention, but that's me short circuiting. I assume it's just the usual suspects?"

Betty sat up, reaching for his hand. "Of course. And if you're never comfortable, then I'll never share anything beyond my little secret space. It's just that you're an important part of my life, Jug. You make me happy, and I haven't felt that in a long time."
"I may know a little something about this happiness thing you speak of," he quipped, toying with her ponytail.

"Speaking of happy things, are you ready to open your presents? Because I cannot wait for you to see mine."

"Betts, you didn't have to get me anything," he protested.

"That's the point, Jughead: I wanted to." Retrieving her bag from the front door, Betty skipped back to him. "Here. Let's see what you got."

He began with Ethel's gift, assuming it would be the least personal and logically, the least likely to evoke messy emotions. Inside her gift bag, he found a flash drive resembling a magnifying glass and a coffee mug that read *I'm silently correcting your grammar*. He laughed approvingly, scarcely noticing the photo Betty snapped of him.

Kevin Keller had opted for a little humor and history, gifting him a copy of Dwight Garner's *Read Me*. A collection of print ads for books, Kevin had cheekily inserted a Post-It note flag on the page bearing an ad for Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Jughead suspected Kevin had gotten an assist from Betty, but he'd never let on.

Veronica's envelope contained a gift clearly intended for two: a couples package at the spa just outside of town, and a voucher for a one-night stay at the Five Seasons. Betty flushed, furiously texting Veronica as he suggested they hang onto that for a special occasion in the future, perhaps when Alice Cooper was not in town to break his legs.

In keeping with his new passion, Archie had opted for the gift of song: an iTunes gift card, and a copy of Tom Petty's *Full Moon Fever* on vinyl. "I told him I'd left this one behind with Jelly, but I kind of regretted it," he explained with a smile.

"Do you have a turntable?"

"Dad does, over there." He waved across the room to the far corner. "It's not much, but it does the job."

Betty busied herself with playing the record as Jughead found a package wrapped in silver paper with an ornate blue bow. Free Fallin' began to play softly throughout the trailer.

"This song reminds me of you," he mused aloud.

"Because I'm a good girl?" she scoffed at the lyrics.

Setting aside her gift, he rose to his feet. "Well, yeah. But being around you messes with my head in weirdly good way. Like a free fall."

He took her hand, impulsively twirling her around. Betty laughed and threw her arms around his neck.

"V was right: you are a closet softie."

"I don't know." They began to sway to the music, off beat but neither caring. "I guess you remind me that there's good in the world. That we should kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight, as an old Bruce Cockburn song goes."

Betty pressed onto her toes for a soft kiss. "Maybe we should make that the motto of the Blue and
"Gold."

"Maybe…"

"And maybe you should open my present now?"

"Alright, alright." Reaching for the package, he gently shook it. "Is it a pony?"

"If it is, I don't think it's doing so well after being wrapped for three days." Betty sat down beside him, bouncing in her seat. "Open it."

Carefully slitting the paper, Jughead unwrapped what felt like another book to him. As he turned the cover over, he gasped. No way. How did she do this?

"Betts…"

"It's the first edition," she blurted out. "I checked it out carefully."

In his hands, he held a first edition of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*.

"It's what brought you back here, partially. It's how we happened. Do you like it?"

"I… I don't know what to say. I love it, Betty." She embraced him warmly, jittering with excitement. "Thank you."

"I'm so glad you like it," she gushed. "It took a bit of work to get it here on time. And now..." Betty reached into the bag, pulling free a familiar box. "There's one left."

"My dad," Jughead remembered.

Betty squeezed his leg gently. "You should see what he got you. I mean, he's good with gifts." She tapped his beanie, smiling warmly.

Drawing a deep breath, Jughead lifted the lid off the box and glanced inside. A lump formed in his throat as he recognized the contents.

"Juggie?"

He gently lifted his familiar friend free of its confines, setting the box aside. "It's my stuffed animal. Hot Dog." He smiled as he made him nod, his shaggy ears flopping about. "He kept him."

Betty snuggled closer, staring at the well-loved toy. "He's so sweet, Jug. Like you."

"I slept with him every night until I was like, eight. We never had a dog of our own, but Hot Dog… he was mine."

They sat there for a long time: Hot Dog resting upon his knee; Betty curled against him; and Tom Petty playing softly in the background. Jughead's opinion of birthdays hadn't necessarily changed—they were pointless milestones that were filled with insincere platitudes—but the kindness he'd been shown this year would never be forgotten.

"Principal Weatherbee is an unreasonable jerk!"

The door to the Blue and Gold office slammed behind Betty as she stormed into the room, startling her waiting group of friends. A concerned Jughead patted the chair beside him and she slumped into
the seat, arms crossed.

"What's wrong, B?"

"Oh, nothing, if you ask Weatherbee. Apparently, despite agreeing to it prior to the relaunch of the Blue and Gold and oh, I don't know, charging my ex-boyfriend with assault, Weatherbee won't let me back out of running the Homecoming committee!" Betty tightened her ponytail with a furious tug. "So if I fall asleep in class for the next week, you know why."

Veronica slid a communal bowl of M&M's across the table. "Do you need help? I'm great with decorating for a soiree, as you know."

"Thanks, V, but Weatherbee barely agreed to let me delegate work to Ethel." Grabbing a handful of candy, Betty rolled her shoulders. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

Jughead's hand reached under the table, squeezing Betty's knee gently. She managed a half-smile for him, which he'd accept.

"Let me preface this by stating that this is incredibly uncomfortable for me to speak about, and that anything I tell you? I'm certain of it." Veronica glanced anxiously at Jughead, which unsettled him deeply. "I assume we all know about Daddy's transgressions in New York?"

Betty's notebook was open now, her pen in hand. "We know of it. Riverdale certainly loves to talk."

"Well, Cheryl's little accusation at Jughead's party seems to hold water. More than I care to consider. Do you remember when the drive-in closed down? The final show?"

Archie nodded. "Yeah, we were all there. Except Jughead, of course."

Salt in a wound. Jughead shrugged it off, his only consolation that the final film at the Twilight had been Rebel Without a Cause. Betty's suggestion, from what Archie had relayed weeks ago. He couldn't help but recall her letters from last year, asking about classic drive-in films.

"I didn't understand it at the time," Veronica continued, "but that night, my mother slipped away to the back of the lot and handed this man a bag of what I assume was cash. When I asked her about it, she said it was for construction work the man and his friends had done."

"But you're thinking it was connected to the purchase of the property now?" Jughead mused.

"Yeah." Veronica's hands fidgeted on the table in front of her, her gaze fixed upon them. "The man I saw was your dad, Jughead. I recognized him at your party."

The sinking feeling in his gut? He'd been waiting for it, ever since he'd stepped off the damn bus from Toledo. Gritting his teeth, he pushed aside his feelings of disappointment. Because Veronica had called this gathering to discuss the Blossom case, and right now, he wasn't able to connect those dots.

"Are you sure, Ronnie?" Archie asked.

"Definitely. I wish I was wrong. I'm sorry—"

"Don't be," Jughead dismissed her. "This was, what, a year ago? My father wasn't exactly winning awards for his parenting, or his life choices in general."

"What does this have to do with Jason Blossom?" Betty asked.
"That's where I come in," Archie explained. "Veronica told me about FP and the drive-in, and it reminded me of what I'd seen at the annual Blossom dinner."

Archie quickly recapped the events of that October evening, skipping over Cheryl's advances entirely. The omission intrigued Jughead, particularly as he wasn't sure whom Archie was protecting: Veronica, or Betty. While he'd heard little of what was said between Hiram Lodge and the Blossoms, he'd heard an earful about their role in Hiram's New York arrest and subsequent incarceration.

"I really don't like the fact Polly is still there, even if she doesn't trust that family," Betty looked to Jughead, her concern apparent. "And given what the Blossoms said about Hiram, it gives him one hell of a reason to hate them."

"It gets worse," Archie lamented. "Ronnie did some digging last night."

"My parents were out, so I pulled out a box of their financial papers. The Blossoms were paying Lodge Industries seventy-five thousand dollars every month for decades. Payments that stopped one month before Jason disappeared." The normally cool and collected Latina was trembling. "What does maple syrup have to do with real estate?"

"That's what I've been asking myself since I saw that meeting," Archie agreed.

"And if there's anything I do know about my father's business dealings, he plays dirty. He wouldn't attack Clifford or Penelope if things went south. He'd go after what matters most to them."


Betty rose slowly, picking up her pad of Post-Its. "Veronica, I hate to admit it, but that's definitely the makings of a motive to kill Jason." Scribbling on the pad, she reluctantly tacked up two new names on the murder board: Hermione and Hiram Lodge.

"It's sad, isn't it?" Jughead gestured to the board. "Your parents are the only ones not on the board, Archie. Fred Andrews may be the last decent man in Riverdale."

He noticed Betty and Veronica exchanging glances and raised his eyebrows. Betty shook her head slightly, unwilling to explain. That was fine: his father could explain this to him. Tonight, over dinner.

"Ugh, it's almost time for class and my stomach's in knots just thinking about this," Veronica muttered, reaching for her coffee. "How do you two do this every day?"

Betty glanced over at Jughead, shrugging her shoulders. "I don't know. We just have to."

"One more thing: I get the sense that Daddy is looking to buy more property on the Southside, although I'm not sure what or why. I've never had access to the inner sanctum. Maybe that purchase has something to do with the Blossoms?" Veronica suggested.

"We'll look into it. Maybe Mayor McCoy can help with that," Betty wondered aloud, her pen scribbling furiously.

_Southside property tied to the Blossoms_, Jughead pondered. _Payments from the Blossom maple business to a real estate developer not known for clean dealings. FP, collecting cash from Hermione Lodge as the drive-in shuttered down._ It wasn't quite adding up, but Jughead could smell the corruption a mile away. Had this been one more terrible thing his father had done while drunk and alone in Riverdale?
Archie and Veronica rose from their seats as the early bell sounded, Archie reaching down to hand Veronica her book bag. Betty paused her note-taking, noticing the giant elephant parading through the room. Her expression was one of curiosity, and it did not go unnoticed by their departing friends.

*You're not fooling anyone…*

Veronica broke first, her confession tumbling out in a hurried mess: "Archie and I kissed. Twice."

Jughead studied his girlfriend's reaction, unable to fully fight off the lingering insecurities he harboured. Betty, to his surprise, looked… disinterested?

"Okay. Are you two seeing each other?"

"We aren't. Not yet. But we've talked about it," Archie replied quietly.

"But we wanted to talk to you first, B," Veronica explained.

Betty bewilderment caught them all off-guard. "Guys, I'm with Jughead now. I appreciate you both wanting to talk to me, but this isn't last year. If you two like each other, you should go for it."

Betty's hand came to rest on his shoulder, her fingertips massaging away the ever-present knot in his muscles. He exhaled loudly, awash with relief. Not that he should have expected any other reaction, but old fears died hard. Veronica and Archie were happy as well, the latter blushing slightly.

The peal of the warning bell sent the pair scurrying out the door, leaving Betty and Jughead alone in their office. Betty began packing her books up, smirking to herself.

"Were we that obvious after our moment, as you like to call it?"

"Definitely."

"You knew already, didn't you?" Betty prodded.

Jughead shrugged. "I may have caught Veronica doing the walk of shame after my party."

With a toss of her ponytail, Betty zipped her backpack. "I'm not surprised. There was always something lingering there between them. But they're loyal friends. You okay, Jug?"

"With Veronica and Archie? Of course."

"I meant your dad," Betty clarified, reaching out for his hand. "The drive-in… Did you know about that?"

"Not a clue," Jughead admitted grimly. "But I'm not entirely surprised, particularly after what he told us about Jason."

"If you need to talk…"

"I know. Come on, we're going to be late."

His calm façade may have fooled Betty and their friends, but Jughead was consumed by terrible possibilities. So much so that they walked to class, fingers interlaced, oblivious to the whispers spreading through the hallway.

He couldn't ask his father about the drive-in.
With FP still staying with his sponsor, their time together was a scant hour over burgers, club sandwiches or fried chicken from the next town over. For three days, he'd promised himself after the initial greetings and praise for the day's meal, he'd steer the conversation to the bag of cash FP had collected from Hermione Lodge.

For three days, he'd been unable to pull the proverbial trigger.

His father was staying sober, but his emotional state was erratic at best. He broke into tears each night, seldom explaining why. Silences were filled with stories from Jughead's childhood and his father's, the latter far more revelatory. Once or twice, he'd mention Alice Cooper as part of his high school social circle, albeit only in passing.

Jughead sensed in his father a fear of time escaping. His speech was rambling and rapid-fire, scarcely allowing his son a word between stories. It shook him, although he dutifully feigned obliviousness.

Today, however, the topic at hand was his in-progress manuscript for his book on the Blossom murder. Having taken the week off to straighten himself out, he'd spent the afternoon reading Jughead's work. And while he praised the calibre of writing, FP was adverse to Jughead's ongoing investigation with Betty.

"It's excellent, Jug. Me, I can barely string two sentences together, but you… You always had a gift. But why something so morbid? Why Jason?"

"I don't know. It's like he chose me." Jughead stabbed absently at his macaroni and cheese, fork frozen in his hand. "I'm telling the story no one else can tell, from the outside looking in."

"And you're telling it well, but Jug, don't let this be the only story you're telling. It shouldn't even be the most important one," FP insisted. "There are other stories waiting for you."

"Like Hiram Lodge's shady business dealings and sudden interest in the Southside?"

Jughead's phone vibrated on the table beside him. Glancing down, he noted the call display with trepidation: Riverdale Register.

"You gonna take that?"

"Um, yeah, sorry." Jughead swiped the screen and took a deep breath. "Hello?"

"Jughead, it's Alice Cooper."

"Um, hi Mrs Cooper. Is Betty okay?"

"My daughter is just fine and, from what I understand, being escorted by you to the Homecoming Dance tomorrow. Is that correct?"

"It is. Is that… a problem?"

Alice laughed, but the sound of it… it was off. Forced, somehow.

"No, no. But I do feel that now you're seeing our daughter that we should get to know you and your father better. Perhaps dinner tomorrow, before the dance? I'll make a peach pie."

"Dinner tomorrow? I'll have to ask my dad if he's available. He's been working late this week," Jughead lied.

"For Fred Andrews? I'll take care of that."
"Who's that?" FP whispered.

"Alice, can you give me a moment? My father's just walking in the door."

Placing the call on mute, Jughead filled his father in quickly. He immediately suggested excuses for not attending, but FP Jones waved them away.

"No, we're going. It'll be nice to catch up with Alice and Hal," he mused, in a tone that suggested quite the opposite.

It all felt like a terrible social experiment, but Jughead unmuted the call and confirmed their attendance with a delighted Mama Cooper. The call ended, Jughead slid his phone away from him and studied his father.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yeah, Jug. Alice is right: if you two are going to be together, they should know you. Now, about this dance of yours… What are you wearing?"

"I'm not sure. I was going to swing by the thrift store in the morning to see what I can find—"

"No, not a chance." FP reached into his back pocket, withdrawing his wallet. "You're gonna go out right now, hit that clothing store near the Bijou. Rick won't rip you off. Grab a suit." His father counted out several large bills, passing them across the table.

"Dad, no way. I can't accept that."

"Every man needs a suit. I pulled a lotta overtime recently, ain't no skin off my bones. Take it."

"Thanks, Dad." Jughead reluctantly slipped the cash inside his wallet. "Will you, um, drive me there?"

"Yeah, boy. Finish up your food and we'll head out."

A dinner with the Coopers. A dance with Betty. Suit shopping. Who was he now? One thing was certain, he decided as he ate the last of his chicken: suit or no suit, he was wearing his beanie.

"Betts?"

"Yeah, Juggie?"

"Can we never do a family dinner again?"

Betty groaned, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "My mother was rotten, but my father truly took the cake, didn't he?"

"Pie," Jughead corrected wryly. "Peach pie. Which I never got to taste, thanks to our parents."

Threading her arm around his elbow, Betty laughed. "Don't tell my mother, but my pie crust is superior. I'll make you a pie of your very own, promise."

The night had started off beautifully, in Jughead's opinion: dressed in the suit his father had picked out for him, he'd rung the Cooper doorbell. To his surprise, Betty had answered the door; to the amusement of his father, his jaw had literally fallen open. Dressed in a silver off-the-shoulder dress reminiscent of a Disney Princess, her hair falling in large, looping waves, Betty was stunning. She
blushed at his utter inability to speak, although she managed the moxie to reach out and physically close his mouth with her palm.

His father had shaved his beard for the occasion, something he hadn't seen since his childhood. His eyes twinkled as Alice noted the change, complimenting his cleaned-up look.

Hal was conspicuously absent for the meal, something his father took strange delight in. The conversation had flowed easily, for the most part. It was only when the subject of the drive-in came up that things took a decidedly awkward turn. A seemingly innocent question about Jughead's past employment there became a pointed query about his father's interest in the Twilight and with that, it became obvious that Alice somehow knew about FP's rumoured cash collection from Hiram.

Before a visibly agitated Betty could step in, Hal came home early from whatever function Alice had clearly expected him to be at until late. And then, all hell broke loose.

Passive-aggressive jabs flew in all directions. There was no love lost between Alice and Hal, leaving Betty torn between them, stabbing her half-eaten dinner angrily with her fork. The icing on the cake: his father entering the fray, cheerily recounting his own Homecoming dance.

"Castles in the clouds. Your mom ever tell you about that night, Betty?"

"Just that she and dad were Homecoming King and Queen," Betty had replied nervously.

"Well, let me tell you a fun story. Fred and me, we were all set to play at the dance. While I was loading in our gear, I heard these voices."

At this, Alice had visibly blanched.

"It was your mom and dad," FP had continued. "Arguing about… well, it sounded like life and death to me."

At this, Alice's fork dropped loudly to her plate. "Shut up, FP."

"Happy to oblige, if you are." His father's eyes had narrowed then, the icy stare of the drunk father who'd rage into the early morning hours every weekend. "I don't care if you like me. But don't jerk me around, Alice. Not in front of my boy."

Betty had promptly announced that they were running late for the dance and with that declaration, offered the Jones men an escape route. Her parents remained at the table, animosity lingering as Betty cheerily slammed the door behind them. Jughead had never been so grateful to have had the foresight to solicit his father as their chauffeur.

"You ready for this?" Betty asked, shattering his reverie.

This, as in an official date in the public eye of Riverdale High. Adjusting his beanie, Jughead shrugged.

"As long as you're not expecting to watch me to whip or nae nae, I think I can handle it."

Betty's lips curved into a mischievous grin. "It's a retro theme, Jug. You're even safe from Despacito."

"Sanctuary!"

Stepping inside the crowded gymnasium, Jughead was struck by two observations: the decorations
were elegant, to Betty's credit, given the forced blue and gold motif; and half their class was fixated on their entry.

"Are they expecting the Time of My Life dance from us?" he joked nervously. "Because nobody puts Betty in a corner."

Betty scanned the room, reading between the lines. "Ahh. Well, they clearly are jealous of me."

"Jealous of you," Jughead echoed in disbelief.

"Mnhmm. They're wondering how they never noticed those gorgeous eyes of yours. And you look incredible in a suit." Toying with the lapel of his jacket, she winked. "Let them gossip about this."

Her grip tightened on his jacket as she pulled him closer and he crashed into her, a wave to her shore. Shimmering like the moon in her gown, she became his gravity and he surrendered to the taste of her lips and the sinful darting of her tongue. His hands slid around her waist, marvelling at the curve of her hips and the silky barrier between them. A forced cough behind them left them fidgeting and embarrassed before a bemused Fred Andrews.

"Keep it PG-light," he whispered, patting Jughead's shoulder as he passed.

Betty gestured to the dance floor, giggling as they fell into an easy sway to a soft, piano-driven ballad. "Of all the people to interrupt us…"

"I think it was worse than being caught by my father." A familiar lyric caught his ear and he tilted his head towards the DJ booth. "Wait… is that?"

"Joy Division cover? Mnhmm." Betty hummed along, with the verse, singing softly with the chorus: "Love, love will tear us apart again…"

"Since when do you listen to Joy Division?"

"Since you told me you liked them."

How was this real? How was he here, holding onto a woman so full of grace and kindness? Betty's arms wound tightly around his neck and he clung to her, burrowing his face against her cheek. His eyes closed and for a fleeting moment, they were elsewhere—a rooftop patio in New York on a summer's night, perhaps. It was the two of them against the world. The scent of vanilla and lavender dusted her pale skin as they swayed beneath the stars. His heart pounded beneath his ribs, a Morse message for hers to decode.

"Thank you for coming tonight," she murmured. "I know dances aren't exactly your scene."

"Wherever you are, that's my scene, Betts."

Over her shoulder, he spotted Archie and Veronica rushing into the gym. Something about their body language seemed off, although Jughead couldn't quite put his finger on it. He nudged Betty, who frowned at the sight of them.

"They're late! They're supposed to perform in five minutes!"

"Not your problem," he reasoned. "You were decorating committee, not the master of ceremonies."

"Still, what could have possibly kept them? We were an hour late because of my nosy mother. What's their excuse?" An exasperated Betty threw her hands up. "Whatever. You're right. It's not my
problem. But that might be."

Jughead followed her gaze, noticing a solitary Cheryl Blossom beckoning Betty from the rear corner of the gym. Where's Polly? The last he'd heard, the two of them were planning on attending as a duo.

"Will you mind terribly if I leave you here to go talk to her?"

Jerking his head towards the refreshments table. "There's a cheese platter and chocolate chip cookies over there. I think I'll manage."

Her lips grazed his cheek as she headed to Cheryl. Feeling his cheeks burning, Jughead made his way to the punch bowl and knocked a cup back. Shockingly, Reggie and his goons hadn't managed to spike it yet. Grabbing several cubes of Havarti and a cookie, he leaned against the wall and surveyed the room.

Betty was right: enormous social gatherings were decidedly not on his list of enjoyable uses of his time. Given his disastrous birthday party, that malaise had only grown. The milling about, the preening, the anxious singles hoping for a Hollywood love connection—it was exhausting and performative. From a writer's standpoint, however, it was a microcosm of student life, and therein lay value. Who was avoiding whom? Who was self-medicating to meet social norms? And why did Cheryl show up alone, keen to talk to Betty? A glance towards them suggested a tense conversation, but not acrimonious.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Riverdale High's Homecoming celebration!"

Jughead's focused turned to the stage, where Mayor McCoy had taken the podium. Rambling on about reunion-related blah blah, the mayor made her overly enthusiastic introduction of Archie and Veronica's performance. Archie, dressed in a red suit jacket, seemed to be soothing his stage fright by deliberately deflecting attention to his clothes. Veronica, clad in a glittering black dress, refused to be outdone—or have her New York pedigree forgotten. Breaking a sweat immediately under the bright lights, Archie tossed his jacket aside and reached for his guitar.

"Alright, this one's a classic," Archie mumbled, nodding to Veronica and the house band.

The opening riff immediately connected with the adults in the room and Jughead, thanks to his mother's music collection. He had to admit, Archie and Veronica had chosen well: Kim Wilde's "Kids in America" was a fitting choice for tumultuous teens. The coy flirting of the duet betrayed the blossoming relationship between the two of them however, and the gossips ate it up.

Taking a bite out of his cookie, Jughead smiled. Archie's jitters were a distant memory. His smile and playful solo evoked the confident showmanship of a star.

It was only when the song wrapped up and the applause deafened him that Jughead realized Betty hadn't returned to his side. Puzzled, he searched the crowd for a glimpse of silver, the warm honey of her hair. Cheryl was also gone, which concerned him deeply. Was Polly okay? His phone had no texts, no missed calls—no trace of his girlfriend.

In fact, the only person he could find was Kevin. Tapping his shoulder and interrupting a dance with the still nameless boyfriend he'd seen at his birthday party, Jughead leaned in to be heard over the music.

"Have you seen Betty?"

"You all need tracking devices, I swear. She went out the east door, chasing after Veronica."
"Thanks."

_Huh. Is she really that mad they showed up late for their song?_

Winding through the swaying crowd, he pushed through the double doors into the corridor beyond. Voices drifted towards him, a garbled murmuring, but one fragment caught his attention:

"…arrangement with my dad…"

A glance to his right located his missing friends: Veronica and Archie bore guilty looks, while Betty's body was wound taut. Whatever they were discussing, it was upsetting Betty. Given all she'd been through recently, Jughead was not having it.

"What did you two do?" Betty demanded.

"Um, guys? Betty?" The trio pivoted in his direction although none of them could look him in the eye. Edging closer, he thrust his hands into his pockets. "What's going on? Why do I suddenly feel like I'm left out?"

Betty returned her attention to Veronica and Archie. "Do you want to tell him, or should I?"

Maybe he didn't want to know. Maybe he should just turn back around, wander into the gym and listen to another 80s one-hit wonder.

"Tell me what?"

Archie stepped forward, moving past Betty. His hands shook lightly at his sides as he met Jughead's concerned gaze.

"We went to your dad's trailer tonight," Archie began.

"To search it," Veronica chimed in.

"Why?" A loaded question, he knew. "Why would you guys do that?"

"My mom put them up to it." Betty heaved a sigh, shaking her head angrily. "She was convinced he was hiding something about Jason Blossom."

"But we were wrong," Veronica added regretfully. "All of us. We didn't find a thing."

His every instinct was to flee, to storm out of the damn school and never return. This was betrayal.

"Jughead, we only did it to prove—"

"What?" Jughead snapped. "That he's not a murderer? You went behind my back, Archie?"

"Jug—"

"Save it." His tone left no room for debate as he studied the faces of those whom he thought he could trust. "You've known my father your entire life. I would never do this to Fred."

Rocking on his heels, Jughead's mind whirred with scenarios as to how this idea came to fruition. For starters, how had they even known that they wouldn't be home tonight? Unless… _Damn it, no."

"How did you know to go tonight?"
"We knew you'd be at dinner with…"

Veronica's voice trailed off as he turned his back on them. *No more secrets. No more lies.* Betty had promised him that. And yet, two plus two was quickly adding up to four, and her reluctance to speak ironically screamed the truth.

Betty had known this would happen.

He'd taken four steps before the clicking of Betty's heels echoed after him. "No!"

He spun around, willing himself to listen, despite all of the evidence at hand. "Is this why your mom invited me and my dad to dinner? So these two could break into our home while she interrogated him?"

"I knew *nothing* about what these two did tonight," she protested. "But yes, that's clearly why she invited you."

Her green eyes were misted over as her hands fidgeted at her sides. He wanted to—needed to—believed her, but there was something bothering him. A nagging doubt, poking into his brain, shifting synapses until…

*The look Veronica and Betty exchanged in the office.*

"You suspected she was up to something. No, you *knew* there was another motive to that dinner invite, didn't you?"

"There's always another motive with her, Juggie," she replied tearfully.

"Why didn't you warn me? Don't you understand how fragile my father is right now?" Her hands reached for him and he recoiled, shaking his head. "No, we're not done talking. You can't make this go away."

"I'm so sorry." Her voice cracked as she bowed her head in remorse.

He spoke in hushed tones, wrestling with the hurt he felt versus the instinct to protect her. "You told me you believed him when he said he was innocent at our trailer. Wasn't that good enough for you?"

"It was. I told her earlier this week that I had no doubts about you, or FP. Jug, please, *please* believe me."

"You should have warned me," he emphatically rebuked her, to which she nodded. "I need to go. I need to think."

"Okay." Her hand swiped at the tears tumbling down her cheeks, smudging her makeup. "Can I come with you?"

He would never run away from her. He'd promised himself after their birthday blow-up. But the anger was roaring within him and he needed to shield her from the blast.

"I need to calm down," he whispered. "I'll call you before I go to bed. But I can't be near any of you right now."

Her teeth sunk into her lower lip as she reluctantly assented. "I understand."

"Jughead?" Archie stepped forward timidly. "Don't hold it against her. Veronica and I did this. Not Betty."
"Oh, I know. And I won't forget it."

His hands slammed violently into the crash bar of the school entry doors, propelling him into the cold black of an October night.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I was mean to Juggie again. I'm sorry! This is a rough season for him in the show, too.

As always, I eagerly await your reviews and theories on what comes next.

Next chapter: Jughead comes to an important realization; the Jones household is rocked by a revelation; and a cameo appearance you likely won't expect. See you next week!
Nineteen: Lovers In A Dangerous Time

Chapter Notes

I think it's unanimous: poor Jughead! Man, everyone is furious with Archie for this latest betrayal, and upset with Betty too.

I wish I could tell you the hits will stop coming, but Jughead has a few challenges ahead. We will definitely address Betty, Archie and Veronica's actions over the next two chapters.

Song: Lovers in a Dangerous Time - Bruck Cockburn
Disclaimer: Not my sandbox, I just build sandcastles in it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nineteen: Lovers in a Dangerous Time

"Nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight
Got to kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight…"
Lovers in a Dangerous Time – Bruce Cockburn

At first, Jughead allowed himself to drift.

His feet carried him forward, without any destination beyond south. Away from the pristine houses and their faux perfection within. Away from the bullies, the elite wielding their social power like a bat to his ribs. Away from the lies of his friends.

Goddamn it, Archie!

The one person in the world he should have been able to rely on to have his back had utterly betrayed him. And for what? For his girlfriend of a week? Kicking roughly at a pile of leaves on the Mantles' yard, he rounded the corner to the main street running the length of the town. Archie had no common sense when he was enamoured with a woman. Dating a teacher? Check. Getting wasted because Valerie wouldn't talk to him? Check. Breaking into his best friend's house to prove his father a killer? Check, check, fucking check!

A sudden brisk wind assailed him from behind and he drew his suit jacket closer around his frame. Archie could have asked him. Did he not recognize that when it came to FP Jones, Jughead was harbouring no illusions about the man's character? Hell, he'd left behind the one beautiful, hopeful thing in his world, his tether to sanity, to ensure his mother and sister were far from his father.

Betty. Jughead winced, remembering her tears and how her limbs had trembled at his departure. At least she'd had the courage to ask her questions to his face. She had sworn she believed Jughead's father—believed in his opinion of his father, at that. He wanted to believe she hadn't known of the break-in, but she was no fool. And that look… that stare between her and Veronica the other day… It haunted him. It nibbled at the frayed strands of his hope, unravelling it before his feet.

She knew something would happen. Maybe not the details, but she knew her mother was up to no good.
Pausing on the bridge between north and south, Jughead leaned on the metal railings, staring into the murky waters below. Herein lay the hypocrisy of his heart: while he could not deny his anger at Betty, wasn't he sentencing her for parental crimes—the one thing he'd railed against in his own life?

_We're not our parents, Betty. We're not our families._ Hadn't he assured her of this in the eye of her personal hurricane? He believed those words, didn't he? Glancing up at the sky, the stars twinkled wildly, as if laughing at his folly.

In his pocket, his phone buzzed three times, rapid-fire. There was no need to glance at the screen. It had to be Betty. Ignoring it, he pushed onwards to Sunnyside.

The park was quiet, save a small group of teens loitering near the entrance. Their Serpent jackets offered practical warmth against the chill, although they seemed oblivious to the shifting weather. One of them he recognized immediately as Sweet Pea, the guy who occasionally sold him pot. The names of the other two escaped him—he'd always kept his distance from the gang—but he knew the pink-haired girl was in the trailer seven lots down.

"Jones, what's the occasion?" Sweet Pea jeered.

"Not tonight," he muttered, pushing past them.

"Hey, hey! Just because you're Serpent royalty doesn't mean you get to be a bitch," the second guy called out, baring his teeth in a hiss.

Jughead's fist curled at his side, knuckles crackling like electricity. The pink-haired teen stepped between them, hands upon her hips.

"Sweets, Fangs, knock it off!" she snapped. "I know you Neanderthals never learned basic shit like social skills or body language, but take a clue: he's having a night."

Jughead halted in his tracks, stunned by her defense. He'd maybe said hi to her three times in his life, more not to be rude than any real interest. She eyed him head to toe, taking in the faint spatter of mud along the hem of his pants from trekking home and the tension in his shoulders.

"Like we aren't all having a night," one of them—Fangs?—grumbled.

"Yeah, we all live in a shitty trailer park, congratulations. Here's some candy for your pity parade," she quipped, whipping a Starburst at his head.

Jughead ducked his head as handful M&M's whipped by—faulty aim from the shorter of the guys. The girl laughed, nailing him in the nose with a lemon-coloured square and darting into the trees. She cast a pointed look in Jughead's direction, her intentions clear: she was distracting them so he could flee.

_Thanks,_ he mouthed before creeping away.

The light was on in the trailer and the green truck was parked out front. Holding his breath, Jughead unlocked the door and stepped inside with a silent prayer.

_Please be sober, please be sober…_

"Jug? That you?"

His father glanced up from the TV, setting aside a bowl of pretzels. Before him sat an open can of Coke. To Jughead's relief, his eyes were bright and alert and the stench of whiskey was absent. One
positive thing to come of the night, he supposed.

"Hey, dad. Whatcha watching?"

"True Lies. Haven't seen it in ages. But that can wait." FP reached for the remote and hit pause. "You're home way too early for Homecoming."

Slumping into a chair, Jughead shrugged. "Guess I'm not cut out for teen movie staples. Or being a normal teenager."

His father's gaze was piercing as he leaned forward. "I know you better than you think, Jug. Something upset you. Ain't no way Betty wanted to leave early."

"She stayed, I bailed." At his father's worried look, he threw up his hands. "Look, I don't want to talk about it. I needed to go."

"Alright, Jug."

His father hit play on the DVD, sinking back into the couch. On screen, Jamie Lee Curtis was interrogating Arnold Schwarzenegger while he rolled on truth serum.

"Have you ever killed anyone?" she asked.

"Yeah, but they were all bad," Arnold replied.

Yeah, this was uncomfortable, even within the confines of a classic action comedy. Shrugging off his suit jacket and loosening his tie, Jughead found himself drifting to the dilemma he'd pondered on the bridge.

"Dad?"

"Yeah, Jug?"

"How… I mean, is it possible to be more than your upbringing?"

FP again hit pause on the film. "I don't know what you mean."

Jughead tugged his beanie down his forehead, skirting his eyebrows. "I mean, is it possible to be a person and be seen for just yourself. No small town biases, no marker of where you grew up, no…" He hesitated, reluctant to hurt a wounded man. "No parents. Just you."

FP mulled this for an uncomfortably long minute, running his hand through his hair. "I don't know. I mean, I grew up on the Southside, same as your granddaddy and same as your mom. And I raised you here, you and Jelly, until…"

"Your dad was a Serpent too, right?"

FP nodded. "Snake blood runs deep. But I made that choice for my family. To protect them, keep them safe. Keep 'em fed. You hear me, boy?"


"No, you don't. Can tell by the sour look on your face." His father rose from the sofa, crossing the room to pick up a familiar stack of pages. "This? This is you being more than Forsythe Pendleton the Third. This is you choosing another life. The life we wanted for you when we fudged your enrollment address."
"This is my address. I'm still just Southside trash to this town, dad. They don't give a shit what I write."

"So make them!" His father slammed the pages into his lap, the edges fluttering against the elastic binding them. "You listen to me, Jug: I will never let you sit back and bear my crosses for me. You are not me. That's all I've ever fought for. Don't you dare give in."

Jughead blinked away tears, dumbstruck by the passion in his father's voice. He knew, deep down, his father loved him. He'd felt it, in small moments scattered like pennies in a wishing well. But here and now, his conviction was fierce. He sensed that this was the Serpent king whispered of around town.

"You promise me, Jug. You will be more than this."

"I promise," he mumbled, his hands digging into the arms of the chair.

A hand clapped firmly on his shoulder, squeezing it emphatically. "Good."

A brisk knocking on the door startled the two men, each looking to the other for answers.

"You expecting company?" FP whispered.

Jughead glanced quickly at his phone, scrolling through his texts from Betty. None of them suggested she was coming over. He shook his head nervously as a second knock echoed through the trailer.

"FP Jones! Open up."

Sheriff Keller? Jughead glanced over at his father, seeking guidance. His father hastily thrust Jughead's manuscript into his hands, jerking his head towards the bedrooms.

"Hide that in your schoolbooks," his father hissed. "It's going to be okay, Jug."

But nothing was okay. The police didn't show up at your door, banging on it like this, unless things were very much not okay. As Jughead quickly stuffed his belongings into his backpack, he made a split second decision he would later be grateful for: he tossed his backpack out the bedroom window, letting it drop onto the overgrown grass below.

He heard the front door swing open and his father's brash voice: "Sheriff Keller. Is there a reason you're disturbing my peace?"

"Since when do you know anything about peace, FP?"

Snide judgment, as always. Kevin was a solid guy, but his father was a typical small-town cop, assuming the worst of people based on stereotypes and biases. Jughead changed quickly into a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt, his suit left crumpled on the floor, as the men continued to talk in a hushed murmur. By the time he stepped out into the living room, beanie slung low, it became clear that this was far more than the routine drive-bys of his childhood.

For starters, Keller had brought all three of his deputies with him. And then, there was the paperwork his father was examining with a wary eye.

"What's going on, Dad?"

"That's what I'm figuring out," FP replied angrily, scanning the page.
"Everything is in order," Keller insisted.

FP sneered. "Yeah, I bet it is. But it's my legal right to review this and ensure you and your men carry it out exactly as it's worded. No extracurricular snooping. Would make the evidence inadmissible, right Sheriff?"

Evidence? What the hell? And then it clicked: a search warrant.

"My father's done nothing wrong. What garbage reason did you dream up to come searching our home?"

Keller's body tensed as FP waved him off. "Jughead, let me handle this, please." Tapping the document against his denim-clad leg, FP shrugged. "You're not allowed to seize any electronics or communication devices. They have to be specified for removal. Learned that from TV."

"I suppose not," the sheriff reluctantly conceded. "But if our tip is right, we won't need them. I'll have to ask you and your son to step outside."

Jughead's instincts screamed protest, but his rational side took his father's lead and stepped out into the cool night, Sherpa jacket in tow. With the officers distracted inside, Jughead tucked his backpack inside the shed—another omission his father was happy to point out on the warrant. His father remained silent, albeit calm, which reassured him. If his father wasn't worried, it meant there was nothing to find.

Glancing down at his phone, he re-read the seven unanswered text messages he'd received since leaving the dance: apologies he didn't care to hear from Archie and Veronica, and a series of pleading missives from Betty.

Juggie, please, talk to me. I had no idea they were going to do this.

I swear, I just thought my mom was going to grill FP. And I should have told you, but you were so happy about her inviting you that I didn't have the heart to hurt you.

Juggie, please, answer me?

Please just text me that you got home safely, okay?

I'm not going to sleep until I know you're okay, Jughead Jones. I will walk over there if you don't answer me.

Her final message gave him pause, particularly in light of their current situation. The last thing he wanted was for her to witness this new shame. Hey, Betts, sorry I ignored your texts. The cops are tossing our home because of some tip that my dad killed Jason. Any ideas where that came from? But, I mean, it's not like it's the first time. We're literal trailer trash, right?

"Could these guys hurry up?" FP muttered. "Fred's got me pulling overtime tomorrow morning."

"Again?"

"SoDale is a beast." His father's hands fiddled with his wallet, rotating it corner by corner. "Money's good. Money takes care of you. Money takes us to Toledo."

Jughead froze, his phone nearly slipping from his grasp. "I'm sorry. Toledo?"

"Family should be together. We're divided and that ain't right. You said it yourself, Jug. This place
sucks you in. We're living out the sins of the fathers, over and over. Maybe it's time we break the cycle."

"Betty. I can't leave her."

There was too much at stake now. Jason's unsolved murder, Chuck's assault charges, Polly's search for her lost twins... Even if their love was doomed—and Jughead desperately wanted to believe it could survive anything—he would not leave her to face so much darkness alone.

"Yeah. Yeah, I thought you'd say that..." A commotion within the trailer piqued FP's curiosity. "What the hell's got them so excited? They find my porn stash or what?"

"Ugh, Dad."

FP smirked, nudging his shoulder. "Teasing you. But seriously, what's the action in there? You see anything, boy?"

Jughead craned his neck, struggling to see through the small gap between the door and the frame. Keller had something in his hands, but it was impossible to discern the shape with such a limited field of view.

"Not sure, but Keller's holding something..."

A flurry of incoherent voices swelled within the trailer and the door flew open, revealing Sheriff Keller. In his hand was a green metal lock box, one Jughead had never seen before. Steely-grey eyes focused on his father as the Sheriff made his way down the front steps.

"I have to tell you. FP. When we got that call, I figured it was a prank. I certainly never expected to find... Well, I suppose it's not smoking, but—"

With a flick of his wrist, Keller opened the box, revealing his treasure: a revolver, nestled within a rag inside its metal coffin. The same caliber, Jughead realized, as the weapon that had killed Jason Blossom.

"You're going to have to come down to the station, FP," Keller continued, waving to the deputies now flanking him.

The next five minutes passed in a dizzying blur: Jughead shouting that it was a mistake; the click of the cuffs upon his father's wrists; the blood-red glare of the cop cherries casting a haze over his father's ashen face. An officer's arm wrapped around his chest, threatening to arrest him for obstruction. A cacophony of voices and a flurry of movement until Jughead was shoved against the trailer, pinned like a butterfly, arms and legs splayed as he was checked for weapons of his own, then released.

As his father was shoved inside the back of Keller's cruiser, the world snapped into sharp relief as FP's voice rang out: "Don't stay here alone!"

Tears streamed down cheeks, angry and hot, as he watched what he knew to be injustice. Because he'd seen his father's face as that damn box opened. His father had always been a terrible liar. FP Jones was genuinely surprised by Keller's convenient find.

Ten minutes more, and he was alone, standing inside the eye of the hurricane that had ripped his world apart. Clothes were thrown all over their respective bedrooms. Cupboards were open, couch cushions flipped and discarded. The front closet stood open, shoes spilling forth from it like the vomit
that spilled from him as he understood that this was no nightmare, no story he was crafting. His
father had been arrested, in possession of a gun his every instinct told him would prove to be the
weapon that ended Jason's life.

Slumping to the floor after rinsing his mouth, Jughead hugged his knees to his chest, desperately
rewinding every conversation with his father for the last few weeks. Had he missed some tell-tale
sign of trouble? Had his father learned to lie, after all? Was he wrong about his father's innocence?
And who had called in the tip? Archie? Veronica? Alice Cooper?

Inside his pocket, his phone began to ring. Glancing at the display, his heart stuttered. Betty. His
thumb hovered over the screen, debating whether to decline the call, or answer.

"Don't stay here alone!" his father echoed in his skull.

His thumb slid over the screen and he pressed the phone to his ear as his body shook with silent sobs.

"Jug? Are you there?"

A soft whimper was all he could manage. Her voice was sweet mercy.

"Juggie, what's wrong? Are you okay? I'm so sorry. For everything. I don't know what they were
thinking—"

"Betts." It was a prayer through cracking lips.

"Juggie, you're scaring me."

He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat, swiping at tears. "Need you."

"Where are you?"

"Home. But it's not home…" Glancing around at the tossed trailer, he closed his eyes against his new
reality.

"I'm on my way over, okay? I'm coming right now. Are you safe?"

"Yeah."

He heard a shuffling across the line, the jangling of keys. "I will be there in twenty minutes, Jug.
Take a deep breath for me, and hold on."

The phone fell from his shaking hand with a soft thud against the carpet as he folded his head into his
lap and held on. For her.

Time slipped away from him, minutes and seconds without meaning. There was only before the
arrest and after the arrest and Betty is here. Her horrified gasp as she entered through the ajar front
door alerted him to her arrival. He gasped for air, marveled at how oxygen itself seemed richer in her
comforting presence.

"What happened in here? Where's FP?"


She kneeled before him, her emerald eyes searching his, and the irony of this role reversal from just
last week was almost enough to make him smirk. Almost. Her hands cradled his cheeks, brushing
away tears with delicate fingers.
"Why was he arrested?"

He shook his head furiously, unwilling to speak of it. Not yet. To speak it aloud would be to give it a certain gravitas that sickened him.

"Okay. You don't have to tell me right now. Do you think you can get up?"

Her hands took his and he allowed her to pull him to his feet. Her arms opened wide and he fell gratefully into her warm embrace. The wreckage of his life surrounded them, but with her, the horror fell away. She hummed softly, rubbing his back as he willed himself to breathe.

"I'm here, Juggie. I won't ever leave you."

"Promise?"

It was a childish request, but she didn't hesitate: "I swear it."

A faint knocking at the door startled them, the couple breaking apart to find a slight woman with cotton-candy hair standing at the threshold.

"Oh my god… Jughead? What happened?"

"A night," he mumbled sadly.

Betty edged forward, placing herself between him and the unexpected guest. "I'm sorry, who are you?"

"Toni. Topaz. I live down the way and…” She looked to Jughead, swinging her Serpent jacket in her hand.

"She's a Serpent, Betts," he explained quietly.

"Oh! Alright, then."

Both women seemed perplexed: Betty, at the youthful gang member before her; and Toni, at his open disclosure in front of a Northsider.

"Um, anyway… I saw FP and came over to see if you were here." Toni shrugged her shoulders, glancing at the dishevelled state of the place. "Do you need any help?"

"No. Thanks, though," Jughead added, remembering her earlier intervention.

"Actually, we could use a little help, if you don't mind," Betty spoke up, reaching for her bag. "Would you mind running an errand for me?"

Jughead frowned. "Betts, what are you—"

"Sure thing," Toni replied. "Anything you need."

"He needs to eat," Betty explained, pulling a wad of cash from her wallet. "Could you maybe run to Pop's and grab a few burgers and some fries? Please grab one for yourself, if you want."

"I'm not hungry," he protested.

"You will be," Betty insisted, returning her focus to Toni. "Do you mind?"
Tossing her pink hair over her shoulder, Toni nodded. "I'll get Sweet Pea to run me over. Back in a flash."

"Thank you."

Betty handed her the cash, watching her cross the road diagonally to rap on a trailer door. Satisfied with this, Betty shut the door as gently as possible and returned her attention to a baffled Jughead.

"Don't argue with me on this, Jug. You're very pale and I'm worried you might go into shock."

Was he pale? He felt nauseous, true, but shock seemed a stretch. At the same time, he didn't care to argue with her. They'd fought enough in recent days.

"That's really nice of her to check on you," Betty mused. "Are there a lot of Serpents in the park?"

Jughead swallowed hard, a wave of vertigo striking him. "Um, yeah. Pretty much all of them."

"At least they can keep an eye on you until FP returns, I guess." Tugging her loose waves into a ponytail, Betty surveyed the damage from Sheriff Keller's search. "First things first, I tidy this up. Grab a seat in the kitchen, Juggie."

"Betts, I can help."

"I know you can, but you shouldn't have to do this." She stepped closer, her hands squeezing his shoulders reassuringly. "You have done so much for me, Jug. So much I can never fully repay you. Please, let me take care of you this time. You have to admit it's a refreshing change," she joked weakly.

He relented wordlessly, pressing a kiss to her lips before staggering into the small kitchen. Slumping into a chair—his father's chair—he rested his head upon the cool Formica table and waited.

"I really thought our first overnighter would be under better circumstances."

Betty laughed softly as she burrowed into his chest. "Me, too. But we haven't done anything the easy way, have we?"

Jughead shrugged, his arm squeezing her gently. "I don't know. Being alone with you... It always feels easy. Comfortable."

"I'll concede on that, Jughead Jones." She pressed up onto her elbows, leaning to kiss his cheek. "I have to admit, your bed is much more comfortable with you in it."

"Thank you for staying. But are you sure your mother won't mind?"

"A certain Vixen owes us both after tonight. Mother dear thinks I'm at the Pembrooke, safe and sound."

While Jughead wasn't quite ready to forgive Veronica and Archie for violating his trust, he was grateful she'd immediately volunteered to cover for Betty. Jughead was hardly a stranger to looking after himself, having been a latchkey kid since age seven. But watching his father cuffed and caged in the back of a cruiser had left him unmoored.

His father and his girlfriend had both proven wiser than himself: the former in his assertion that being alone was a terrible idea; the latter, with her insistence that Jughead try and eat.
Toni had dutifully returned with burgers, fries and a chocolate shake in tow and the familiar smell had soothed him immediately. With a sincere thank you, they'd retreated to a now tidy living room (how Betty had cleaned the place in a half hour, he'd never know). Betty had scarcely made a dent in her food before he'd inhaled his burger, to her amusement. To silence her giggles, he'd graciously shared his shake with her, prompting Betty to check him for a fever.

Betty Cooper was the only person he'd ever shared food—or a bed—with.

His fingers danced along the soft skin of Betty's arm, tracing her elbow and swinging up to her shoulder once more. Her honey waves spilled over the worn fabric of his favourite S shirt, unruly and untamed. He swallowed hard as her bare thighs shifted beneath the blanket, rubbing against his own skin. Maybe he should have worn pants instead of stripping to his boxers.

"None of this makes sense," Betty whispered. "I believed FP. I believe you. And I don't believe your father is a stupid man."

"Because only stupid people commit murder?" he replied bitterly.

"No, Jug." He could hear the eye roll in her tone. "But I sincerely doubt the leader of the Serpents would leave a murder weapon lying around in his trailer for over a year."

Jughead frowned, running his free hand through his tangled hair. Yeah, hearing it out loud, he had to agree it stunk. Just one more reason of many that this warrant seemed all too conveniently timed.

"I know my father, Betts. I saw his face when Keller opened that box." He shook his head, as if to erase the memory. "He had no idea what that box was doing there. Hell, I've never seen that box. This place is hardly Thornhill."

Her hand slid across his chest, fisting the flimsy material of his shirt. "What if… never mind."

"Spill it, Poirot," he goaded her.

"Well, it's all about the MOM, right? Means. Opportunity. Motive. Let's assume FP is being set up. What's the motive? And who would have the means?"

Jughead's eyes widened. "The killer would have the means, presuming he never ditched the weapon."

"He or she," Betty corrected him. "And the killer's motive would be to deflect suspicion from their own guilt."

"Unless FP is guilty himself," Jughead mused sadly. "What if the surprise was because he'd ditched the weapon a year ago? What if he just wasn't expecting it to resurface?"

Betty tugged herself free of his grip, sitting up beside him. "No, don't do that. Don't give up on him, Juggie."

"He wanted me to move on to another story," Jughead continued, laying out his case. "He says the recovery of Jason's body scared him straight, but what if… What if murdering him was the actual impetus for the change?"

Betty's brow furrowed. "But why would he kill Jason? It makes no sense!"

"Maybe Jason screwed him over on the heroin. Maybe he tried to make his getaway cash faster. Or maybe Veronica is right. Maybe Hiram Lodge did hire him due to some grudge with the Blossoms."
"You don't believe that, Jughead," she insisted. "You're afraid of it being true, but you don't believe it."

"You think you know me so well," he spat angrily, rolling onto his side.

"I do. I do know you." She slid back beneath the thin blanket, curving her body to mirror his. "I know how your eyes twinkle when you've hatched a plan. I know the difference between your thoughtful silences and your angry ones. And when your words start spilling out almost too fast to follow, I know you're afraid."

She laid her right hand between them, palm up. He studied her scars, relieved to see the scabs had healed and fallen away.

"We all handle fear differently. But pushing everyone away—me, Archie, your father—is just as destructive as this. And you told me that I shouldn't let the things that hurt me dig into my skin anymore. So don't hide from me. Or FP."

His hand covered hers, fingers interlacing. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Get me. Just... know me," he whispered.

Betty smiled warmly. "Years of study."

"If there's anything Betty Cooper excels at," he teased, silenced by a finger pressed to his lips.

"I excel at everything," she purred.

Looping his arm around her waist, he pulled her on top of him. Her giggles of protest pulled the first true smile from him since his father had been taken away. Delicate palms cupped his cheeks as she straddled his hips and leaned forward. Their mouths, hungry and hot, met in a frenzy of tongue and a gentle clash of teeth as they grew a little too eager. His hands slid down the curve of her hips and he groaned at the realization she was wearing his t-shirt and only his t-shirt. Her hips rotated roughly against his groin, a painfully perfect friction against the thin cotton sheathing him.

"Betts—"

"I know," she murmured huskily into his ear. "Clothes stay on."

"I want to. But tonight..."

She pulled back slightly, fixing her gaze upon him. "I know. And I feel the same. But to be fair, you did start it this time."

"I can't argue with that." With one long, lingering kiss, he cupped her ass with his palm. "But dear God, you need to put something on or I'm going to need to sleep on the couch."

Twisting her hair over her shoulder, Betty flushed. "I only have the pair I wore here, so..."

"Boxers, top drawer," he offered.

As she slid off of his hips, his body ached at the loss. His groin pulsed with fierce need and a desire to discover every inch of her flesh with his tongue, but it couldn't be now. If the worst were to happen and his father went to prison, he didn't want their first time—his first time altogether, truth be told—to be marred by the evening's events. She deserved for it to be about them, and them alone.
Besides, being antisocial and dating challenged had a critical downside: Jughead didn't have a single condom on hand, something he clearly needed to remedy in the very near future.

Betty hooked a leg of his black boxers over her right foot, leaning forward to step into them with her left. "Better?"

"I wouldn't say better. Let's go with more appropriate."

Her fingers released the waistband of the boxers with a light snap of elastic. "The way these hang on me, I'm not sure they're covering all that much."

"The illusion is enough," he assured her, eyeing her up and down. "Have I told you how sexy you look in my clothes?"

"Juggie," she demurred, "I thought we needed to cool off."

"Alright." Drawing a deep breath and holding it, he willed himself to push aside all thoughts of her cheerleading-sculpted body. "C'mon back to bed."

A shrill chime from his dresser caught Betty's attention. "One sec." Glancing down at her phone, she immediately began tapping away at the keys.

"Betty?"

"One sec," she repeated, hitting send. "Okay, we need to be up early."

"Why?"

Betty settled on the edge of the bed as her phone chimed again. "Because Polly has something to tell us about Jason's murder. Something huge. She'll meet us at Pop's for breakfast. Jug, maybe she'll have the missing piece to help exonerate your dad."

"You think so?"

"She says she's scared of the Blossoms." Betty sat her phone aside and slid beneath his waiting arm. "Whatever she knows, it's serious."

"Alright, then you'd better stop seducing me so we can at least try and sleep."

Her fingers poked at his ribs, tickling lightly until he squirmed. "Don't mess with me, Jones."

"Goodnight, Elizabeth," he stressed, burrowing his face into her hair.

With one last, soft giggle, she settled down beside him. "Goodnight, Forsythe."

And although Betty soon slumbered, Jughead lay awake, stroking her arm and breathing in the scent of her shampoo. He had to believe his father was innocent. He felt that truth in the marrow of his bones. Betty's arguments about motive, about the foolishness of being caught with a weapon now, it all added up.

And yet, as the moon cast its beams through the slats of his blinds, he couldn't help but sense that the worst was yet to come.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks to the reviewer who wondered if the Serpents might make an appearance earlier in the timeline because of the twists! I decided I like the idea and worked a brief moment in. You'll see the Serpents again before the fic ends, promise!

Let me know how you're doing. My heart hurts for Jughead. Is FP guilty? What has Polly discovered?
Betty took good care of our Jughead, which is probably a good thing. He's going to need support through this final stretch. It's all going to unravel over the next couple chapters.

And now, let's see what's happening with Polly.

Song: Liar - Neverending White Lights

Disclaimer: I don't own Riverdale, alas, or I'd make this hiatus shorter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Twenty: Liar

"There's nowhere left to hide
There's nowhere left to run
And it's all gone
It's all gone
And I'm a liar just like you and that's OK
And I'm guilty just like everyone today…"

Liar – Neverending White Lights

Innocence. Riverdale once touted it as a defining trait of its residents. A community of hardworking, upstanding people, innocent and carefree. Never mind the blatant blind eye such delusions turned towards the Southside. Riverdale prided itself on being a place of purity and light, of truth and trust.

But we're all liars in this town. We're all hiding one truth or another. And as sure as a decomposing corpse will float, buoyed by the toxicity within, our secrets are pushing to the surface.

I'm Serpent royalty, the son of a gang leader. Betty's darkness is a whisper in high school halls. Archie's affair with Miss Grundy is common knowledge. And Veronica? The Lodges are fooling no one with their fresh start, save that the setting for their treacherous dealings has changed.

We lie to protect ourselves. We lie to be loved. We lie out of love for another.

What kind of liar is my father? I'm not sure I want to find out.

"Polly said she'd meet us at Pop's at nine. She told the Blossoms she's feeling too sick to attend church this morning."

Jughead huffed. "The Blossoms attend church? And they don't catch fire when they step inside?"

"Miracles do exist," Betty spat disdainfully. "All I know is that Polly needs to come home now. Especially after what Cheryl said at the dance."

"Yeah, we never did talk about that little tête-à-tête. What bombshell did the Queen Bee drop on
Betty's grip on his hand tightened. "I asked her where Polly was, since she'd told me that she planned to bring her as her date for the evening. She said Polly wasn't feeling up to it, but the way she said it worried me, Juggie. And then she told me that being the mother of Jason's children would only shield her for so long from her parents' self-serving ways."

"Well, that's not ominous." Jughead's thumb traced reassuring circles on the back of her hand. "Have they had any luck in finding the twins?"

Betty shrugged. "Cheryl didn't say. I'm hoping Polly can tell us."

An overcast sky greeted them as they trudged across the bridge dividing north and south in search of answers (and, for Jughead, pancakes). He nudged the zipper of his Sherpa coat higher, guarding against the morning chill.

The foggy streets were a warning: _turn back, go inside. Something wicked this way comes_. He felt it in his bones.

Pop's was quiet, the church crowd absent and the weather keeping most families inside. The tinkle of the bell above the door pulled the friendly owner's gaze from the plate he was garnishing and earned a warm smile.

"Morning Jughead, Betty. Coffee to start?"

"Always," Jughead replied, rubbing his weary eyes.

Jennifer, the usual weekend waitress, fetched the coffee pot as the couple settled into what was becoming _their booth_. Once, it had been Jughead's booth for overnight writing and, years ago, for avoiding his inebriated father. Now, it was a place with happier memories: straws tossed playfully; fries shared; a stolen kiss or two.

As Betty peeled off her coat, Jughead's breath hitched. Dressed in yesterday's jeans and a black tee and green plaid flannel combo she'd pilfered from his closet, she was somehow _more_ alluring.

Noticing his stare, Betty flushed and fidgeted with her still damp ponytail.

"What?" she murmured.

"Just don't ever become a lumberjack, alright? No one would ever get any work done, aside from you."

Jennifer arrived with their coffee, pretending not to notice Jughead's approving gaze and Betty's crimson cheeks. Offering menus, she quickly departed, sensing the couple needed a moment.

"So you're saying I should ditch all of my pink sweaters and go full grunge?" she teased.

"I'm just saying, you're a pair of eight-hole Doc Martens away from me taking you back to the trailer and not emerging for a good twenty-four hours." Shaking his head, he drew a deep breath to steady himself. "You're always stunning, Betts, but in these clothes, you look… at ease. I like it."

"I think there's a sociological theory willing to explain why wearing your clothes makes me even more attractive to you," Betty mused, ripping open a packet of sugar. "But I am more relaxed this morning. Probably because I slept better than I have in a really long time. Unlike you," she added worriedly. "Your eyes are so dark."
"I'm okay," he lied, sipping his coffee. "Just couldn't shut my mind down right away."

Betty mercifully didn't pry, turning her attention to the menu before her. Jughead stared at the options, although he already knew what he wanted: the same special he'd ordered on his first morning back in Riverdale. It reminded him of his father, whom he never realized how much he could miss until FP was dragged away from their home.

What a difference ten weeks had made.

Jennifer took their orders: a special for Jughead, and a Belgian waffle with fresh fruit and whipped cream for Betty. As she departed, Jughead's phone buzzed in his pocket. Glancing at the screen, he groaned. *Archie.*

"You have to talk to them sometime, Jug."

"I have bigger problems right now than my best friend betraying me," he snapped.

Betty nodded, reaching across the table. "I agree. And I'm mad at them, too. I'm mad at myself for not putting the pieces together and warning you."

"It's okay. We talked it out." His hand met hers, covering it with a light squeeze. "I don't know why I didn't see Mama Cooper's little interrogation coming myself."

"I'm not going to excuse them, but if you can understand that I didn't want to hurt you, that I care about you… maybe you can hear them out?"

Betty the peacemaker. She'd always hated it when Archie and Jughead fought. Hell, she'd never tolerated them raising their voices when she was little.

"I'm not talking to them without at least two coffees and breakfast," he grumbled.

"Of course." Her lips curved into a soft smile as she studied his features. "And you should make Archie sweat a bit. Don't let him off too easily."

"Punish Archie, huh? But not Veronica?"

Her gaze averted to the empty creamer cups on the plate beside her. "Veronica has told me enough about her father and what he's done to understand how needing answers could drive her to do desperate, inconsiderate things. If I thought my father were as bad as hers, I'd probably stop at nothing to get the truth."

Betty's phone chimed beside her and she glanced at the screen. "Veronica."

"A two-pronged attack," Jughead surmised.

"Breakfast first," she insisted. "And then we'll decide what to do about those two."

There were universal truths Jughead could rely on in this world. First and foremost, that Pop Tate was the best cook in the town of Riverdale. The second truth: that a Cooper was always early to any appointment. He'd scarcely finished his eggs and first pancake before a dishevelled Polly Cooper entered the diner.

"Betty!" she called out in relief.

"Polly?" Recognizing her sister's distress, Betty slid out of the booth and hurried to meet her with a warm embrace.
Dressed in a loose black sweater and rumpled jeans, Polly Cooper was far from the polished, perfect image that Alice demanded from her daughters. Her eyes were rimmed in violet, her skin ashen. Betty nudged her into the booth, settling in beside her.

"You hungry, Pol?"

Polly shook her head sadly. "No. No, I couldn't eat."

"Milkshake?"

Polly vehemently shook her head. "No, definitely not. Not after…"

"After what?" Betty prodded gently.

"Coffee?" Jughead suggested quietly, to which Polly nodded.

Refills and a fresh cup for Polly secured, Betty shoved her breakfast aside, her sole focus on her troubled sibling. With every chime of Pop's doorbell, Polly started, glancing at the new arrival. It worried him deeply.

"I'm coming home," Polly began at last. "Better the devil you know…"

"Okay. Do we need to go get your things?"

Polly shook her head. "Cheryl will bring them later. We made an arrangement."

Betty's arm was wrapped protectively around her sister's shoulders. "What happened, Polly? Did they hurt you?"

"Did Archie tell you my plan?"

"Yeah, he told us."

A nervous Polly slowly recounted her weeks at Thornhill, beginning with the meetings with a private investigator. At first, Polly had been hopeful that their mutual interest in recovering Jason's children would at least reward her with her babies. In the meantime, she had planned to dig up enough dirt to ensure that she, not Penelope and Clifford, would gain full custody of the children. Mindful of Penelope's nosiness, she'd maintained her notes in a document stored in her iCloud account, leaving nothing in writing.

At first, there was nothing significant, beyond what Jason had told her and Cheryl's guarded remarks about a loveless childhood. "I actually worked to befriend Cheryl," Polly explained. "At first, it was to get evidence that the Blossoms were abusive parents, but I actually found myself really fond of her. Away from school and the in-crowd, she's a sensitive, thoughtful woman. I worry about her a lot, especially now I'm leaving her there alone. But I have to get out of there, Betty."

"What changed?" Betty asked quietly.

Finishing her coffee, Polly continued. As Cheryl had told Betty, Polly was to accompany her to the Homecoming Dance. It was meant to comfort them both in the absence of Jason.

"His two favourite girls united, Cheryl called it. I suggested that given the retro theme, we look through Penelope's jewellery for something cool to wear. I needed an excuse to enter their room, maybe see if the investigator was making more progress than they were telling me about. What we found was a lot worse."
“My mom and dad would freak if they knew we were in here,” Cheryl purred. “So let's take our sweet time.”

Polly's eyes scanned the dressers and makeup vanity, looking for documents, notepads, business cards—anything of use, really. Of course, the Blossoms were far too tidy for that. Noticing a series of creepy white heads adorned in bright red wigs, Polly shuddered.

"How many wigs does your dad have?"

"One for every mood!" Cheryl's fingers danced along the lid of her mother's assortment of ring boxes, plucking the centre one for examination. "Supposedly Clifford's hair turned white overnight after he saw the ghost of Grandpappy Blossom. Now me, I love a silver fox, but us Blossoms live and die by our red curls."

Polly wandered the length of Penelope's clothing rack, contemplating the boxes on the shelf above. Could she cook up a bullshit reason to dig in? If anything telling about their possible involvement in Jason's death were in this room, it would surely be hidden up there amidst unwanted Louboutins?

"He tried dyeing it once, but..."

Cheryl's voice trailed off and Polly froze. Had she noticed that her houseguest was about to open Mommy's bedside drawer? Turning around, she found Cheryl studying the contents of a blood-red ring box.

"Cheryl? What is it?"

Turning around slowly, Cheryl held out an all-too familiar item. "It's my Nana's ring," Cheryl whispered.

Polly knew that. She'd worn it, the night that Jason had gotten down on one knee and promised to love her and their unborn children forever. He'd kept it for her, was supposed to give it back to her on July 4th. But then...

"Nana gave that to Jason. He proposed to me with that ring. So how does your mother have it?"

Polly reached out for it, but Cheryl was faster, edging backwards with a furious expressing. "Hands off, Gollum!"

"The only way your mom could have that ring is if she or your father got it from Jason." Hot tears welled up in Polly's eyes as she backed Cheryl up. "And he wouldn't have given it up, not over his dead body!"

Polly's hand flew out, reaching for the ring—her ring!—but Cheryl grabbed her by the wrist, bending it down at an awkward angle.

"Polly, you may be the mother of Jay-Jay's babies. And my parents rightfully believe if you aid them in their mission to retrieve their heirs, that it will benefit their case. But do not, for one second, believe that guarantees your safety in this house."

Betty's eyes widened as Polly dabbed at her eyes. "Oh my god! Do you understand how significant this is?"

"Where's the ring now?" Jughead asked.

Polly shook her head. "Cheryl returned it to the box, I think. I was so scared I fled the room, locked
myself away until dinner. My memory gets hazy after that… Betty, I think they drugged me."

The strawberry milkshake was a frequent offering from Penelope since moving into Thornhill. Once or twice a week, the mistress of the house would arrive at her bedroom door, that familiar container from Pop's in tow. After the distressing find in that ring box, Polly was definitely interested in comfort food. What followed next had left Polly certain that her life depended on abandoning her mission.

At first, she'd blamed the emotional events for her drowsiness. It was only when her arms turned to Jell-o that she began to question the drink she'd eagerly devoured. Slumped on her bed, sounds muffled as if underwater, she'd overheard snippets of an argument between Cheryl and her parents. Jason throwing the ring at Clifford. Penelope lamenting that nothing remains lost. Something about the proof being gone. And then, there was darkness.

"I woke up in the middle of the night, still in my dress," Polly murmured. "I texted you and confronted Cheryl. She agreed that I should leave, that she… That she owed it to Jason to keep me safe."

"And the ring? Does Cheryl have it?"

"She says it's gone, but I don't believe her." Polly leaned her head upon Betty's shoulder, clinging to her arm. "Mom and Dad might be perfection-driven monsters, but they would never stoop this low."

"You're coming home, Polly. Mom will be so happy to see you."

The sisters embraced tightly as Jughead's phone pulsed once, then twice. Examining the messages, his eyes widened.

Archie: Jughead, my dad just told me about FP. Are you okay? I know I let you down, but I'm here for you.

Veronica: Jughead, I know you hate me, but I heard about FP and it's all lies. He didn't do it! Call me.

Archie: Your dad's being framed! Where are you? I'm at the trailer.

"Um, Betty?"

She glanced over Polly's shoulder. "What is it?"

He held up his phone, letting her read it. Kissing her sister's forehead, she gently pulled away in search of her own phone. Scanning her messages, she nodded.

"I've got the same thing here from Veronica. What do they mean?"

"Is everything okay?" Polly asked.

Betty hesitated. "They arrested Jughead's dad for murdering Jason last night. But he didn't do it," she added quickly. "Veronica says she knows it's a set-up."

"I agree. The Blossoms… they did something. They know something." Polly wrapped her arms around herself as she began to tremble. "They know why he's dead."

The bell of Pop's tolled once more—this time, for Jughead.

"I knew he'd be here!" Veronica called out, clearly relieved.
Jughead's body tensed as Archie and Veronica approached their booth. Their body language screamed anxiety and, in Archie's case, genuine guilt. And as much as he wanted this information on his father being set-up, the knife they'd planted between his proverbial shoulder blades at the dance remained firmly lodged.

"Jughead, we screwed up," Archie began. "And I will be apologizing for a long time."

"We both will," Veronica echoed.

"Breaking into your dad's trailer was wrong, but at least some good is coming of it," Archie continued.

"Good? Pretty sure my dad was arrested for murder last night," Jughead snapped.

Veronica nudged Archie aside, holding up her hand to silence him. "Look, Kevin called me this morning and told me Sheriff Keller found a lockbox in your closet with a gun."

"Yeah, I know. I was there. I watched them cuff my dad and drag him away, proud of themselves for it."

Veronica's hands slammed down on the table, startling Betty. "There was no lockbox when we searched the trailer."

"We looked through that closet. We took everything out of there," Archie elaborated. "Someone must have put it there after we left, Jughead."

"Your dad's being framed," Veronica concluded sadly.

Jughead's mind was reeling. His father's face as the box was opened by Keller. His own struggle to recall seeing the box, despite frequently digging through that closet for the mop, a coat, or mementoes of his mother and sister. Polly's disturbing experiences with the Blossoms. FP, accepting cash from Hermione Lodge.

His father was a patsy.

"Are you sure about this?" Betty asked. "There's absolutely no way you missed it?"

"We're not talking about the Vogue closet, B. I would bet my trust fund on it. Whatever Sheriff Keller is saying he found? It wasn't there."

"I'm just making sure, because people will challenge it. Did you tell Keller this yet?" Betty demanded.

"My dad doesn't want me to," Archie replied bitterly. "He called my mom and she said that since we entered the trailer illegally, nothing we say is admissible in court, anyway."

"And I can't even bring this up to my parents because what if they're the ones that did the framing?" Veronica whispered.

"Okay, I don't have any memory of that lockbox being there, either," Jughead told them. "What if we tell Keller that I gave Archie permission to search the trailer because I was worried he was doing something illegal?"

"That doesn't make FP sound much better, Jug," Betty noted sadly.

"We have to try. I have to try." Throwing down a handful of bills on the table, Jughead grabbed his
coat. "I'm going to see my dad, and Keller."

"I'm coming with you," Betty insisted.

"No, take Polly home. I want you two safe under the watch of Alice. Something I never thought I'd say," he noted wryly.

"I'll go with you," Archie offered. "How I know the box didn't exist, it doesn't matter. I know it's bullshit and I'll tell Keller that."

Reluctantly, Jughead assented. Keller believed the Jones family were liars, pyromaniacs and now killers. He'd need the unblemished reputation of the Andrews name on his side.

"I'm coming with you," Veronica told Betty. "I can't see my father right now. Not if he's behind this. He's done some terrible things, but if he..."

"I know, V. Jughead, call me," Betty pleaded.

"I will." He leaned over the table, kissing her gently. "Text me when you're home safe."

"Promise."

"I've got my dad's truck," Archie announced.

"Good. Let's go."

The drive to the station was silent, the low hum of the radio the only sound. Jughead ruminated on Polly's story, mulling the reappearance of Nana Blossom's ring and her subsequent drugging by Penelope. Clearly, the Blossoms were afraid of what Polly knew. But was it because they'd had a direct involvement in their son's murder? Or had Hiram taken the Blossom heir out as Veronica feared, and sent the ring as proof of the deed? More importantly, where was the ring now?

As Archie parked the truck around back, he thumped the steering wheel lightly with his palms. "I don't want us to be fighting, Jug."

"Then maybe you should try not stabbing me in the back."

The redhead sighed, turning in his seat. "Okay, I'm the first to admit that I say and do things that upset people, even if I don't mean to. Like when I rejected Betty because I knew I wasn't good enough for her and broke her heart. Or when I stopped calling you in Toledo because..."

"Because why?" Jughead prodded angrily. "Why did you stop calling? I thought we were brothers, Archie. Lifelong friends, cradle to grave. Isn't that what you told me when we were twelve?"

"I did say that. And I meant it, Jug."

Jughead rolled his eyes. "Out of sight, out of mind, then?"

"I was angry at you!" Archie's explosive reaction startled Jughead. "Angry that you left me alone here. Angry you left Betty, who was barely talking to me anymore. Angry because I was so confused about everything with Grundy and I had no one I could talk to about it." Archie's head bowed low, his body shaking. "And yeah, maybe you didn't deserve that anger, but it doesn't change how much I needed my brother."

"And like I didn't need you?" Jughead snapped. "Do you even know why my mother left? Did you ever stop to think that being a social misfit in Middle America would translate into a lonely life?
Have you ever asked me why I came back?"

Archie's head snapped up, the hoarseness of Jughead's voice betraying his unspoken wounds. "Jug… You're right. But you've never really told me anything, even when I ask, so I waited for you to say something. Maybe I should have asked anyway."

Tugging on his beanie, Jughead gazed out the passenger window. "And maybe I should open up more. Or try to, I guess." His hands fidgeted in his lap as he stared at the steely grey building before them. "I'm scared, Arch. Of what my dad did that would make someone frame him. Of what will happen if he goes to jail. He has priors… I can't go back to Toledo."

"That's not going to happen. We're going to get this murder charge dropped." Pocketing the keys, Archie swung open his door. "We're going to tell Keller you asked me to search the trailer for hidden booze after your dad's relapse. That's how I know the lockbox was a plant."

Jughead's head spun in Archie's direction. "That… isn't a bad idea."

"Once in a while, I have a good one." Archie smiled sheepishly. "Let's go."

The deputy at the desk was reluctant to call for Keller, eyeing the teens with skepticism. It took Jughead demanding to see his father and pointing out that he'd yet to be granted a lawyer, as was his right, for the deputy to abandon his game of Candy Crush and head down the corridor to the Sheriff's office.

A weary and grim Sheriff Keller soon emerged and Archie rushed down the corridor, ignoring the deputy's demands to wait.

"Sheriff Keller, we need to talk to you about FP Jones."

"What about him?"

"He's being framed!" Archie insisted.

Keller huffed, rubbing his head. "Then why did he just confess?"

Jughead felt his knees buckle beneath him. Confess? But he didn't… He couldn't have done this. The gun wasn't there. And Betty was right: his father had the sense to ditch a weapon, even if he had done it.

"There must be some mistake," Archie persisted. "You must have railroaded him. False confessions happen all the time!"

"Now, wait—"

"Making a Murderer!" Archie blurted out. "I'm telling you Sheriff Keller, that gun isn't FP's! I was in that closet the other day."

"He didn't do it," Jughead mumbled, leaning against the wall.

"I don't know what to tell you, Jughead. But your father confessed to the murder. To disposing of the body. To setting that car on fire. Hell, he admitted to breaking into my house last year and stealing my files."

The look of pity on Keller's face made him sick. Jughead's fists clenched at his sides as he continued to lean on the wall for support.
"Jughead, your father's always been rough around the edges. He got desperate and did something incredibly stupid that ended in murder. And that's all I can say about it for now."

"I want to see him." Keller hesitated and Jughead edged forwards, holding his chin higher. "I want to see my father."

"He's being booked."

"I'll wait."

Keller frowned, shaking his head. "Look, I understand how upsetting this must be to hear. No son should have to hear this about their father. But we are still questioning him, Jughead, and it's going to take some time. Come back after lunch, okay?"

"Fine. I'll be back at twelve-thirty. And if I can't see my father, I'm calling the media."

"I'm sorry, Jughead."

He spun around, glaring at the Sheriff. "Don't lie to me! This is your dream come true. Not only do you get to finally jail a Jones, you get to tidy up this embarrassment of a murder investigation. I saw you gloating last night. You can save your sorries for the campaign trail."

Wordlessly, Keller retreated to his office, leaving Jughead and Archie in the unsettlingly quiet corridor. Archie's hand came to rest on his shoulder, squeezing it gently.

"Let's go check on Betty," his friend suggested.

"Yeah. Yeah, okay."

Jughead staggered out into cold grey of morning, staring blankly at the parking lot. His father had confessed. Innocent men didn't confess, did they? Not unless there were extenuating circumstances. What had happened in the last ten hours to spur his father into this horrible decision?

"Jug?"

"Something's not right," he mumbled. "My father is many things, Arch. But this doesn't add up. He swore he didn't kill Jason Blossom and I believe him."

"Then who's he protecting?"

"I don't know. But we need to find out fast, or my father's going to prison for life."

Chapter End Notes

Poor Polly - she's been through so much already, only to be drugged and betrayed. And FP... I love him, but what on earth is he thinking? (I know what he's thinking and I'm still shaking my head.)

I'd love to hear your thoughts about Polly and whether she will ever see her twins again,
or Archie's lingering anger at Jughead, or how sweet Bughead are together. It's a busy
time of year with Pride and all, but I'll hopefully see you in a week.

Next up: a family secret is revealed and someone atones for their father's mistakes...
Chapter Notes

Thank you for your lovely reviews! I loved hearing your thoughts about Archie and Jughead, as well as Polly.

Archie and Jughead will be okay. We're not quite there yet but it's healing. As for Polly, I promise within the next few chapters, a definitive answer about the twins is forthcoming, one way or another.

Cheryl has a heart? Yes, she does. I've always been a bit irked by how the show writes her vicious when they need a villain, but then want to show us she's just deeply hurt and lashing out in the next. I've tried to make all of her actions fit with the Bombshell we know in season 2. We will see more of her in this story, promise.

Jughead: the poor boy who's been through hell. He's really faced down a lot of demons, and helped Betty with her own. This chapter checks in on him and how well he's hanging on.

Please note: I have played with time and the timeline to make things a little more satisfactory for me (and for things to feel more logical). Assume that the dance took place on a Saturday night instead, and we are on Sunday now.

Remember, you can spin all the songs for this fic on Spotify.

Song: Body of Years - Mother Mother (by eerie coincidence I'm seeing them this week for an anniversary show for the album this song appears on?!) 

Disclaimer: I own my neat way of tying up some loose ends in season one and my even more bonded Bughead. The rest is borrowed from Riverdale. I'm poor, don't sue me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Twenty-One: Body of Years

"All the remains of a cadaver of days,
I keep hidden away, keep them there just in case.
    I wanna visit that place,
    blow the dust from the bones
    off a body of years that I leave all alone…"

Body of Years – Mother Mother

Betty's cryptic text troubled Jughead as Archie drove them to the Cooper home. Her silencing of his phone calls en route, however, set him on edge.

Things are even more sinister than we ever knew, Juggie. But I have more confirmation that FP's confession is a lie.

What confirmation could Betty have found at her home? And what did she mean by sinister? Had
Alice and Polly argued upon her return home, stirring up skeletons in the cardigan-laden closets? Had Cheryl arrived with Polly's belongings, with new revelations about her fishy family in tow?

Signalling for the turn onto his street, Archie exhaled loudly. "Jug?"

"Hmm?"

"Why did you leave Toledo?"

Jughead hesitated, shifting uncomfortably in the passenger seat. His capacity to cope with emotional turmoil had long been exceeded—obliterated, really, in the last twenty-four hours—and poking a finger into a raw, festering wound seemed a recipe for a nervous breakdown.

"I mean, I know why you probably left," Archie babbled nervously, parking in front of his house. "FP's drinking, the fighting—your mom had enough. Maybe she needed you to feel brave enough to go. Or you wanted to make sure she followed through for Jellybean. That's my guess, anyway, but… why come home?"

"My dad asked me to," Jughead replied quietly, his hands fidgeting in his lap.

"He asked for months. Why did you say yes?"

"Archie, now's not the time."

The redhead sighed, turning to face him. "It's never the time. Not in Riverdale. Not anymore. I just… I'm asking. I've wanted to ask."

His friend was sincere; Jughead knew this in his heart. The soft timbre of his voice, the way his eyes were laser-focused upon him… He was asking. And Jughead could choose not to respond, or he could offer an olive branch. They could rebuild what time and misunderstanding had fractured.

"I…" Rolling his aching shoulder, Jughead grimaced. "Let's just say I recognized what Chuck was doing to Betty because I understood it all too well."

Before Archie could step further into the darkness, Jughead threw open the door of the truck and made his way up the Cooper driveway.

The house was eerily quiet, the curtains still drawn. It unnerved him, this shattered perfection. The Cooper home was always awash in natural light thanks to Alice's preference for open curtains secured with a silky sash. We have no secrets, Alice chirped once when Betty complained about the lack of reprieve from a garish summer sun.

His fist hung before the door, frozen in fear. What if they didn't want to be disturbed? Betty had refused his calls. Take a hint, Jughead.

"Just knock."

Jughead startled at Archie's voice. "Jesus!"

Archie shrugged. "Betty wants you here. Judging from the looks of things, she needs you here."

"Okay, okay."

Jughead's third rap on the door was greeted by a jittery but genuinely relieved Betty Cooper. Still dressed in his green flannel and black tee (albeit in fresh jeans and presumably fresh underwear and why am I thinking of her underwear?), she threw her arms around his neck and clung tightly.
"I need to get out of here," she whispered furtively as he embraced her.

"Your mom—"

"Polly will run interference." Pulling away, she reached for her backpack and slung it over her left shoulder. "Hurry!"

As the door shut behind her, Jughead could faintly make out Alice Cooper's muffled voice, demanding to know who was at their door. Betty didn't bother to respond, bolting for Fred Andrews' pick-up. Baffled, but trusting in their best friend, Jughead and Archie quickly followed suit, the latter sliding into the driver's seat and turning the engine over with a shuddering protest.

"Talk to me, Betts," Jughead implored.

"Get in first! We'll talk on the way!"

The front door swung open, revealing Alice in a rumpled housecoat and slippers. Her jaw fell open as they drove away, tires screeching in Archie's haste to comply. They'd seldom seen Betty this worked up, and it was never good news. Jughead's arm wrapped around her shoulder, pulling the shaking blonde against him.

"Everything's fucked," Betty muttered, the curse jarring, given Betty's avoidance of obscenities. "It's a mess."

"Where are we going?" Archie asked.

"Kevin's."

Jughead frowned. "The Keller house? Seriously?"

"Keller's not home and it's the one place my mother won't think to look because of your father's arrest," Betty explained. "Veronica's waiting with him. Kevin is on our side, Juggie. Trust me."

Burying his face in her hair, Jughead closed his eyes. "I'm so not happy about this."

Betty's hands fisted in his shirt as she burrowed closer. "I will buy you a milkshake every day for a week."

"Two weeks," he countered playfully.

"I'll buy the second week," Archie chimed in, turning off the main road and veering towards the Keller home.

"Nice assist, Andrews. Maybe you should play basketball."

Breaking a few traffic laws brought them to Kevin's house in a speedy six minutes. Veronica was waiting out front, pacing in her black ankle boots and plush purple coat. Spotting the truck, she turned towards the home, presumably alerting Kevin. Archie hurried out of the truck and pulled her into a tight embrace. Jughead and Betty remained in the truck, studying the couple.

"He really likes her," Jughead mused.

"There was always a spark between them. Just like…" Her voice faded away into a soft giggle.

"What?"
"It's silly, but we always had our jokes. Nerdy, weird puns that flew over Archie's head. Maybe that was our spark, you know?"

His lips pressed firmly to the top of her head as they curved into a smile. "What happened when Past, Present and Future walked into a bar?"

"It was tense!"

Snickering to themselves, they slid out of the truck to greet an anxious Veronica. Kevin hung back at the front door, unable to look Jughead in the eye.

Sins of the father. Keller might be a dick, but Kevin was not his father. He needed to remember that.

"That thing was heavy, B. I barely managed to drag it out the side door."

Archie frowned. "What got dragged?"

"The murder board," Betty announced, seizing Jughead's hand. "Come inside. We need to put an end to this."

It struck Jughead, as he stepped into the foyer, how utterly normal the Keller home was. This biased life ruiner, this well-meaning but ignorant sheriff, came home to a minimalist collection of hardwood floors, sturdy furniture and a kitchen with an electric range. His bad shoulder ached as he rolled his neck, willing the tension within to release. Just beyond the kitchen counter lay the dining room, where Kevin and Veronica had set up the murder board from the Blue and Gold office.

Betty ran her fingers along the edges of the easel, nodding approvingly. "Thanks for grabbing this, V."

"Of course. Jughead needs answers. We all need them." Veronica tucked her ebony hair behind her ears, glancing in his direction. "Has Betty told you about this morning?"

"No. Betts?"

"It had to wait for a private place," Betty explained quietly. "Grab a seat, everyone. Kev, do you have anything to drink, ideally with caffeine?"

Kevin pushed away from the far wall of the dining room. "Should be some Coke in the basement fridge. I'll load up."

They settled around the table: Betty beside the murder board; Jughead to her left, giving himself full view of the room; Archie to his left; and Veronica beside him. It left Kevin seated directly across from Jughead, an uncomfortable arrangement neither cared for. Coke cans slid across the table in all directions, each teen cracking open their soda in near synchronicity.

"When I got home this morning, my parents were burning papers in the fireplace. Photos, too. If Polly hadn't walked in the door behind me, I think they would have pushed faster, tried to hide it from me. But the distraction gave me enough time to identify the kindling for their little fire." Betty's hand stretched out, gesturing to the murder board. "It was the stolen photos and notes from Sheriff Keller's personal murder board."

Jughead's gaze swung to Kevin. "Personal murder board?"

"This one is basically a reconstruction of my father's board," Kevin explained. "When Jason was first found in the river, he created one in his home office. He'd be in there until the middle of the night,
studying it. On the night the Twilight closed, someone broke into our house and stole everything from his office. Articles, notes, photos… everything."

Jughead's mind flickered to Keller's words not even an hour ago: "Hell, he admitted to breaking into my house last year and stealing my files."

"My dad confessed to that," he murmured.

"But he couldn't have done it, Jug," Veronica interjected. "He was at the drive-in, getting money from my mother."

"And he was there all night," Kevin added. "Because I was hanging out with Joaquin, and they talked several times during the movie."

"There's also the fact that my father's the one who did it," Betty added bitterly.

"Mr. Cooper broke into Kevin's house?" Archie shook his head in disbelief.

"But why would he have kept it for a year?" Jughead probed.

"My parents have been off and on for the last year. He's maybe lived with us for four months of that time, and with everything else that's happened with Polly, I'm guessing he forgot? FP's arrest reminded him of it."

"But why would he steal my dad's files?" Kevin demanded. "And why aren't we telling my dad this right now?"

"Like he'll believe it," Veronica muttered.

Jughead snorted. "He's got the convenient confession of my father, Kevin. It's everything he's ever dreamed of."

Kevin's features scrunched up angrily as he rose to his feet. "Look, I can't even begin to tell you how sorry I am for what's happening to you. I don't know what I'd do without my dad. But you haven't watched this town verbally beat my father down for a goddamn year over this case. You haven't seen him go days without sleeping, forget to eat… He's doing his job, and your father confessed."

"He's covering for someone!" Jughead fired back.

"I'm not disagreeing!"

"Kev, Jug, stop it!" Betty pleaded.

Throwing his hands up, Kevin slumped back into his chair. "I'm just saying that it's not hard to see why a confession would be a relief, even if it all seems too tidy to me."

Betty's iron grip on Jughead's hand silenced any further outbursts. As intense as his indignant rage was, his love for her was stronger.

"My dad didn't kill Jason," Betty continued. "He stole the files because he was afraid the investigation would lead back to Polly. And if it did, he was certain that the darkest Cooper secret would emerge."

She rose to her feet, tugging down her parents' names and photos. Tilting her head, she studied their features carefully.
"Growing up, we were always told to stay away from the Blossom family. Because they were killers. My great-grandfather was killed by Cheryl's great-grandfather during a maple syrup dispute. What my father left out..." Drawing a deep breath, Betty flipped the photos over. "We're not Coopers. We're Blossoms, too."

The silence was a deafening roar in Jughead's ears. Betty is a Blossom. Polly is a Blossom.... OH, SHIT. POLLY IS A BLOSSOM.

"Polly and Jason are related," he concluded aloud.

"It's why they locked her away on the Fourth. Why neither of our families would let them be together." Betty's hand swiped at an errant tear escaping her eye. "Dad figured if Keller knew, he'd assume one of us did it. And he didn't want Polly to be shamed for unknowingly dating her second cousin."

"Like sands through the hourglass, so are the days of our Riverdale," Veronica mused. "But doesn't this give your parents motive?"

"No, they wanted things quiet. Killing Jason would have called attention to the truth, and locking away Polly was an easier way to achieve the desired effect," Betty explained. "The Blossoms, on the other hand..."

"They're in the running, no question," Archie agreed. "I really don't think Cheryl could have killed Jason, though."

"No, me neither," Betty agreed, tugging down her photo. "She's been kind to Polly, and helped her flee. She's just messed up from living with parents with cash where their hearts should be."

Betty plucked the photo of Cheryl from the board, reaching next for a candid of Hermione Lodge. "Hermione was in New York. She couldn't have imprisoned Jason for a week."

Veronica grimaced. "My parents could have ordered it up. Hired someone. Leave them both there."

Archie leaned towards her, visibly concerned. "Ronnie, I know your father has a past, but murder?"

"I don't know what to believe anymore," the forlorn Latina murmured before burying her face in Archie's shoulder.

"That makes two of us," Jughead empathized.

Kevin leaned forward, studying the board carefully. "Really, it comes down to the Lodges and the Blossoms. If FP is innocent, it has to be them."

"My father is many things, but he's a terrible liar. The gun was a plant. He confessed to stealing your dad's files even though he didn't do it. This is why I need to talk to him." Jughead drained his can of Coke, glancing at the nearby clock. "He said to come back in an hour."

"The Lodges and the Blossoms have been meeting." All eyes turned towards Archie as he stared at the board, his arm wrapped protectively around Veronica. "Remember? The night I went for dinner? Hiram and the Blossoms were in the barn."

"That meeting has to be connected to all of this," Betty mused. "But how?"

Jughead looked to his sun, his one constant. Her green eyes were hazy with worry and tears she was choking back, but she smiled at him reassuringly. Forever putting others before herself was Betty's
way. An errant strand had sprung loose from her ponytail, grazing her left cheek delicately.

"That's what we need to find out," he affirmed. "That and what could be worth confessing to murder for."

Kevin's offer to drive Jughead back to the station had been met with protest from four sides until the rationale became clear: as the Sheriff's son, Kevin would have little trouble maneuvering around the station in a search for something useful in proving FP's innocence.

"You need to know what they have, what he's said," Kevin explained. "Then we can rebut it."

Jughead had agreed, with one caveat: Betty came with them. As guilty as he felt about it, given her abusive relationship and family struggles, he needed her beside him. He needed her bright doe eyes, staring at him with a misplaced sense of wonder. He needed her delicate fingers slid between his callused, clumsy digits. The drive was silent, save the soft hum of the radio, but her head leaning against his shoulder was more comforting than mere words could manage now.

Archie and Veronica had taken off in search of Hiram's secrets, courtesy of Fred's keys to the SoDale construction office. Veronica had been evasive, but something about her father's future plans wasn't sitting right with the former socialite. The group had agreed to re-convene at the Keller house, each teen evading their parents for different reasons.

Pulling into the driveway of the police station, Kevin killed the engine and spun around in his seat. "Are you coming in, Betty?"

Glancing at Jughead, the blonde shrugged. "I feel like my presence would hinder both of your respective missions. Unless you want me to come wait with you, Jug?"

Yes, I do. But it was irrational to want that. "No. No, you're right. But where will you go?"

"The Register. Polly will text me if my parents leave the house and I can use their access to WorldCheck and LexisNexis to see what I can dig up about the Blossoms and Lodges."

He squeezed her thigh gently, pressing his forehead to hers. "Be careful, Betts."

"You, too."

With a quick kiss to his cheek, she slid out of the car and hitched her bag over her shoulder. Clearing his throat, Jughead followed Kevin up the steps of the station and towards the visitor's counter. His palms lightly slapped the cool surface as he met the disinterested gaze of the deputy.

"I'm here to see FP Jones."

The officer hesitated, absently fumbling his nametag. Good, it read. The guy was anything but.

"Sheriff Keller told me I could see him now," Jughead added emphatically.

Deputy Good glanced at Kevin, adding one plus one and coming up with a number he rounded to two. "Sign here," he muttered, shoving a clipboard across the counter.

Kevin nodded and hung back as the Deputy reached for a set of keys and gestured to the eastern corridor. Jughead followed in silence, not willing to provoke a backwards glance. After all, Kevin was currently rifling through the visitor's log on the abandoned counter.

The first thing he noticed as they approached the holding cells was the damp and chill. The weather
outside was brisk, but it didn't seep into one's very marrow like this. It struck him that this must have been how Jason's corpse emerged from the river.

His father was in the last cell, he was informed, the Deputy muttering about ten minutes before stepping back to the locked gate to study his cell phone. Jughead closed his eyes, picturing Betty as he forced himself to take a steadying breath.

This was it. He would know the truth—or at least know what was a lie.

His father's eyes widened as Jughead approached the cell warily. Unsure of whether he cared to get close enough for contact, he skirted the distance, keeping just shy of his reach.

"What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question, Dad." Jughead folded his arms angrily over his chest. "You see, I know this is bullshit. You didn't kill Jason. You swore to me that you had nothing to do with it."

"And you believed me? A lying drunk? Boy, you'd better smarten up before the world takes advantage of you."

Jughead frowned, shaking his head in disbelief. It was just the two of them here. Why was his father persisting with this lie. Because it had to be a lie. It was the tiny bastion of hope within him.

"When you called me in Toledo and told me to come home, told me how Fred Andrews had taken you back on and helped you, deep down, I knew it was a mistake." It was a half-truth at best, but the involuntary tear he shed was surely selling it.

"Should have listened to your gut," FP grumbled, leaning back against the cell wall with bloodshot eyes.

He'd come here as a reporter, but the wounded son within would not remain silent. The frayed fragments of what remained of his faith in man snapped. The elevator was hurtling to the ground, swallowing his screams in its swift descent.

"You really had me," Jughead confessed, tears sliding down his cheeks. "The dinners, the AA meetings—it was all bullshit, wasn't it? It was a carefully constructed façade and it worked like a charm. And I was so happy for the first time in so long. You... You paid attention to me."

His voice cracked and he bowed his head beneath the weight of terrifying thoughts and a panicked what now? It was only when his father sniffled loudly that he found the courage to carry on with his plan.

"Be honest: the only reason you read my manuscript was to make sure I hadn't caught on and realized that everything you've told me since my return has been a lie!"

"Not everything, Jug," FP whimpered, tugging angrily at his hair.

"No? So you didn't lie about the lockbox? Or what you told Jason during your first meeting?" Stepping closer, Jughead felt the fury of years of neglect in the back of his throat, bitter like bile. "I mean, you told me you didn't kill Jason, but apparently that was a lie—"

"I DID WHAT I HAD TO DO!" FP screamed, slamming his fist against the tiny cot upon which he sat. "Like I always do!"

Jughead's hands gripped the bars of his father's cage. "Are you even sorry?"
His father rose from the bed, his grizzled features twisted in an all-too familiar anger. It was the rage of his drinking days, the rage that fractured their family and sent them scattering to Toledo. His steps were deliberate and heavy as he approached, his steely gaze sending a shiver down Jughead's spine.

"I'm sorry I got caught," he hissed through the bars. "We done?"

It wasn't a lie. *Oh, fuck. Maybe he did learn how to lie. Maybe he really… No, it can't be true. But it was. Maybe the break-in was a false confession, bundled up in a neat bow for Sheriff Keller's solve rate, but his father's regret was real.

He brushed away the tears as he turned to leave, blinking hard to clear his vision. He'd taken two steps away when his father's voice rang out once more.

"Look at me, Jughead!"

*Go to hell,* he thought angrily. But the little boy within, the one who'd desperately longed for the father he'd had for these last ten weeks, complied. His arms folded protectively around himself as he sniffled—and froze. Because something had shifted in his father's features.

There was a vulnerability there. *Fear.*

"Never come back here!* FP commanded, his eyebrow shifting slightly upwards as he stared intently at his son.

*He's terrified. Was I right all along?*

"You understand?" he added quietly, his voice hoarse with emotion.

*I understand, Dad. You've done something terrible, but you didn't kill Jason Blossom.* He bit the inside of his lip to resist asking the flurry of questions he knew would go unanswered. If FP wanted him to know the true gravity of his situation, he would have told him already.

"Jug?" A quiet whisper, scarcely audible.

"Got it."

With one last look at his father's weary face, Jughead pivoted on his heel and headed for the exit. Deputy Good unlocked the entry gate, shuffling along behind him as he scanned the station lobby for Kevin. His phone vibrated in his pocket and he checked the display. Betty.

*So the Blossoms own property on the Southside, adjacent to SoDale. Meeting explained?*

Tapping out a reply, Jughead headed for the exit. *Definitely possible. Hiram's entire business is shady real estate deals. But what would he need the extra land for?*

Kevin was in his car, drumming on the steering wheel. Seeing Jughead, he waved him over, gesturing to the passenger seat. He quickly complied, eager to escape the haunting image of his father.

"What did he tell you?"

"To stay away," Jughead replied. "It's what he didn't say that matters more."

"And that is…"

"He didn't do it, Kevin. He's lying out of fear of something, or someone. But he won't say a damn
thing." Pressing his head back into the seat, Jughead sighed. "Anything?"

Kevin turned over the engine roughly, the car shuddering in protest. "Your father's one call wasn't to a lawyer, or you, or even Fred. It was to Joaquin DeSantos."

"Joaquin? Who the hell is that?"

"He's a Serpent," Kevin answered softly. "He, um, also happens to be my ex."

Joaquin DeSantos lived in a rooming house at the edge of the Southside, a place where everything was paid in cash and nobody asked questions unless someone turned up dead— and even that didn't raise many eyebrows. Kevin had filled Jughead and Betty in on his short-lived and ill-fated romance with the Serpent en route. They'd met at the final showing at the Twilight, a brief argument turning into a heated makeout session behind the concessions. They'd seen each other for four months, primarily hanging out at Joaquin's place or the back row of movies. He'd talked him into attending last year's homecoming, but it proved the beginning of the end. DeSantos couldn't—or wouldn't—be the relationship guy, uncomfortable in the polished world of the North and with Kevin's father. They'd hooked up off and on for several more months, but Kevin had ended it, too heartbroken to pretend it was just sex. Eventually, Joaquin had moved away from his garage apartment to the rooming house, hawking most of his music gear and belongings, for reasons Kevin had never managed to pry loose.

"When did you two last talk?" Betty asked as they pulled into the parking lot.

"Hmm, ran into him by the river maybe two months ago?" Kevin frowned, staring at the decrepit building before them. "It was a short conversation. Turned him down for a hook-up."

"Sounds like this conversation is going to be pulling teeth," Jughead mused.

"Maybe he won't be thrilled to see me, but he always respected FP," Kevin countered. "Saw him as a father figure, from what he told me. You're probably the only person who can get him to talk, Jughead."

The trio headed inside, ignoring the greasy man at the front desk who was openly reading a well-worn copy of Hustler. Betty's arm looped through Jughead's as they took the stairs to the third floor at Kevin's direction. The stairwell was dimly lit, the jaundiced light revealing sticky spots and stains that none of them cared to identify or acknowledge. A pile of ash and cigarette butts were clustered in the corner of the third landing, as if some strange form of half-assed housekeeping.

"He's in 20," Kevin murmured as they entered the third floor corridor. "Or was. Hopefully still is."

It was the fourth door on the right. Kevin knocked while the others hung back, silently agreeing that they should let him take the lead. A second knock earned a rustling of sound behind the door before a chain slid and it opened.

"Too busy for a party, Preppie," DeSantos snarked.

"It's important," Kevin insisted. "I think you know why we're here."
Joaquin shrugged, leaning against the door frame. "I got nothing to say about anything in this town. Or anyone."

"That's not what my father said," Jughead chimed in.

It was a risk, implying his father's blessing, but Jughead couldn't bother to give a damn. If Joaquin knew why his father was willingly copping to a murder he didn't commit, he wanted that information. Needed it, if he was honest with himself. DeSantos tilted his head askance, fixing his gaze upon Jughead.

Unlike his father, he had a poker face. Jughead nodded firmly, the gaze returned with resolve and a hint of impatience.

"Get inside," Joaquin muttered.

Joaquin's home was scarcely a bachelor apartment, more an unusually large bedroom with a tiny half-bathroom. A wood-framed chair with multicolour pinstripe cushions was nestled beside a tiny desk bearing a laptop that was at least five years old, and an acoustic guitar was propped on a stand beside a tiny bed. Of particular interest to the group were the half-packed suitcase and duffel bag on said bed.

"Going somewhere?" Betty asked.

"Could use a vacation, not that it's your business," Joaquin snapped. "Make this fast, alright? I've got a bus to San Junipero in six hours."

"We know FP used his one call from jail on you." Kevin took a step towards Joaquin, edging the biker towards the window. "Why did he call you?"

"It was basically just a warning," DeSantos breezed, running a hand through his hair. "Told me to lay low. Which I am."

"Nobody uses their one call to tell someone to lay low," Betty countered.

Placing a hand on her shoulder, Jughead stepped in. "Look, I need to know everything. I need to know the score so I can take care of my sister and my mother. My father sent me here." Swallowing hard, he laid his fears bare. "Did FP kill Jason?"

DeSantos slumped onto the edge of the bed. "Yeah, he did."

Betty's gasp rang in his skull as his vision blurred. But at the jail... No, he didn't murder him. Maybe he was forced to kill him. His teeth dug into his cheek, the sharp pain restoring his focus.

"I mean, I think he did?" Joaquin added nervously.

"Wait, you don't know he did it?" Kevin asked.

"What makes you think he did it?" Betty pressed.

Jughead, still reeling, scrambled for another line of questioning. "Did you see him pull the trigger?"

"No! God, no."

Okay. There was still hope to be had. If he'd learned nothing else from the last few months, it was that everyone was evasive in this town and every side of this story was half-true at best.
Crossing his arms over his chest, Jughead continued. "Then why do you think he did it?"

Reaching for an open beer bottle on the windowsill, Joaquin drained the amber liquid. Still holding the bottle, absently passing it between his hands, he unfurled his story. The late night call on July 11th. The request to meet FP in the basement of the Whyte Wyrm and strict orders to tell no one.

"The basement of the Wyrm is off-limits to everyone except the Serpent King," Joaquin explained. "But that's where I met him. And then I saw it. Jason's body."

Jughead felt Betty's hand pressed against the small of his back, steadying him. "Was there a gun?"

Joaquin shook his head. "Not that I saw."

"And did my Dad ever say he'd killed him?"

"No, but I knew better than to ask and FP… FP is a closed-lipped guy. He says as little as possible. It's why we get along."

Kevin leaned against the far wall, visibly blanched. "Oh my god…"

Betty shot Kevin a stern, silencing look. "What happened next, Joaquin?"

The young Serpent sighed, recounting his horror at the bloody scene and what he was asked to do. Wrapping the body in sheet plastic and shoving it inside a deep freezer. Mopping up blood and burning bloody rags and mops to ensure the evidence was gone. The trip to the river to dump the body, how awkward it was to move a frozen corpse. And while Jughead was disgusted to hear the details, he was somewhat consoled by Joaquin's brief mentions of his father's discomfort with the operation.

His father was not a cold and calculated killer. Something wasn't right, and Betty felt it, too.

"Joaquin, we know FP has done work for Hiram Lodge in the past. Is it possible that this was one of them?" she suggested.

Joaquin frowned, contemplating this for some time. "Hmm. There was this conversation I heard between FP and Mustang—"

"Mustang?" Kevin interrupted.

"Another Serpent. Only other guy who knew about the clean-up job. I didn't hear the entire thing, and I never asked. All I caught was Mustang talking about some rich guy having a job and FP blowing him off, not wanting to hear whatever it was."

"And where can we find Mustang?" Jughead asked.

"In the cemetery," Joaquin replied. "They found him dead of an overdose about three months after Jason's body turned up. Needle in his arm."

Rising to his feet, he pushed past Kevin and grabbed a beer from a mini-fridge. Popping the top with a magnetic opener, he knocked back half the bottle and gestured to Jughead. Shrugging his shoulders, he accepted the open brew and took a swig of his own.

"Something funny about Mustang," Joaquin continued. "They found this fancy bag under his motel bed. Initials on it were HL."

"Hiram Lodge," Betty whispered.
"Or Hermione Lodge," Jughead added.

"Bag was full of cash," Joaquin muttered. "More than I've ever made running jobs for the Serpents. Now, I've humoured your little Scooby-Doo interview, but I have to pack."

"Is this your polite way of kicking us out?" Kevin sneered.

"Like you have any right to demand manners after cutting me loose," Joaquin snapped.

"Come on, Kevin," Betty insisted, nudging her friend towards the door. "Thank you for your time. Joaquin. It means the world to Jughead."

Jughead nodded, draining the beer in his hand. He had answers, now. Maybe he didn't care for all of them. Maybe he had far more questions now. But he had a better sense of his father's involvement in the Blossom murder than ever before.

They'd scarcely made it to the stairwell door before a voice rang out behind them.

"Jughead!"

He spun around, finding a visibly worried Joaquin peering out from his apartment door. The Serpent beckoned him closer and he complied, holding up a hand to prevent Betty and Kevin from following. Somehow, he sensed this message was for him alone.

"What is it?" he murmured.

Joaquin glanced warily at Kevin and Betty before continuing in a frantic hush. "Look, there's something else. But I honestly don't know if it will help your dad or make things worse so you may not want to tell Kevin."

"Understood."

"FP's call… it wasn't just a warning to lay low. He told me to abandon Plan B. Said it was too dangerous. It's why I'm leaving town. I'm done living in fear over shit I didn't do."

Jughead's brow furrowed. "Plan B? What is Plan B?"

"FP always told me that if shit went sideways that I should go retrieve Plan B and I'd know what to do when I saw it. Gave me GPS coordinates." With this revelation, Joaquin slipped him a scrap of paper. "Again, I don't know if it will help FP or hurt him. But as his son, you're Serpent royalty. I think this is why he sent you to me."

Jughead pocketed the paper carefully. "Thanks, Joaquin. I needed this."

"Be careful. This town's dangerous now." With a broken smile, he jerked his head down the hall. "Look after Preppie for me, will ya?"

"I promise."

Joaquin retreated into the apartment, the deadbolt clicking into place. Shoving his hands deep inside the pockets of his Sherpa coat, Jughead rejoined Betty and Kevin at the stairwell.

"What was that about?" Kevin demanded.

"Gave me his number," Jughead lied. "Asked me to call him if FP was cleared."
"Huh."

Kevin pushed through the door and led the retreat down the stairwell. Jughead caught Betty's suspicious look, but he shook his head quickly, dissuading her. He trusted her with his life and would fill her in privately. But Kevin was ultimately the sheriff's son and letting him in meant trusting him with his father's fate. If his father was guilty, then he could rot in jail. But if it was as muddy as he suspected, he wasn't keen to share anything that might help Keller's case.

"Where to?" Kevin asked as they stepped outside.

"Can you drop us at my trailer?" Jughead asked. "It's been a long night and a longer day already."

"Sure thing."

Betty patiently waited for the two of them to reach the trailer and its privacy before bursting with questions about Joaquin's private words for Jughead. He'd readily shared the slip of paper and the biker's cautions, studying the coordinates with a mixture of curiosity and dread.

"We should see where these lead to," Betty suggested.

"Yeah, I guess we should."

To their mutual surprise, the coordinates mapped them to an all-too familiar place: the lonely stretch of road where they'd found Jason's getaway car. Jughead's stomach turned as a sickening truth revealed itself.

"My dad burned the car, didn't he?"

Betty grimaced. "It's not proof, but it would be one hell of a coincidence otherwise. And it fits. He hid Jason's body in the river because it had already been searched. If you were going to hide something else, why not somewhere recently searched by police?"

Slumping on the sofa, Jughead buried his head in his hands. "I don't know what to do, Betts. Or say. I just… I'm done."

"Oh, Jug…" She settled beside him, her arm wrapping around his shoulder. "I don't think any of us can know the anguish you're dealing with, the anger and the confusion. But you're not alone. You have me."

"I know. And I don't know what I would do if you weren't here. Lose it, probably. Leave town…"

Her head leaned against his, the soft blonde hairs tickling his nose as her ponytail swung between them. "It's okay not to be okay."

"I… I'm not okay, Betty…"

Her lips pressed to his cheek as a tear slid down his cheek. His father was in jail. He'd cleaned up a murder that he'd maybe committed, but he'd confessed to a break-in that he was innocent of. FP hadn't murdered Jason out of his own interests; he felt it in his bones. But maybe Hiram Lodge had made an offer that a desperate drunk couldn't refuse.

"I know you, Juggie. You believe in honesty, in integrity. But you also believe in loyalty." Betty's soft words soothed the frustrated child within him. "You'd do anything to protect those you love. And you love your dad."
He did love him. His dad was horribly flawed, but he'd been dealt a shitty hand in life and forced to play it out. Betty's arm tugged on him, pulling his head into her lap and he slumped willingly, legs dangling over the end of the couch. Her soft fingers tugged his beanie off and ran lightly through his hair, drawing soft circles upon his scalp. He closed his eyes and drew a shaky breath.

"We already know FP didn't do this. I don't believe he killed Jason. But he's definitely covering for the person who did it. And maybe this Plan B is the proof of that. Or maybe we're both wrong and FP did it. But that doesn't feel right to me."

"I don't know what to believe," he admitted sadly.

Betty continued to massage his scalp, focusing on his temples. "Would you rather spend your entire life not knowing what to believe, or know the truth, even if it hurts? That's the choice. And whatever you decide, I am with you. If you want to leave whatever this is hidden away, I will take this secret to the grave."

His eyes fluttered open, finding a concerned Betty Cooper staring down at him. "You're incredible, you know that?"

Betty's cheeks flushed as she mumbled something dismissive. His hand reached up, catching hers tangled in his hair. Pressing it to his chest, he sighed.

"You are. You have no idea how much better my life has been because you've been a part of it. But someday, I'll find a way to prove it." Squeezing her hand, he continued. "You're right, about the choice I have. And since you know me so well, what should I do?"

"The truth. You need it."

"I do. Even if I don't want it." Beneath his shoulder, he felt a vibration. "Your phone?"

"Sorry."

He reached beneath his arm, tugging it free of her jeans pocket. "It's okay. I know Polly might need you home soon."

Betty scrolled through her messages, eyes widening. "You've got to be kidding me! Juggie, read this."

He took her phone, scanning the message on the screen. It was from Veronica, and it only muddied the waters further.

*Found out why Daddy might want more land in the Southside. He wants to build a private prison!* Scrambling to sit up, Jughead passed the phone back. "Is this a joke? There's no way to fit an entire prison on the Southside, even with the Blossom land."

"You'd need more. Much more," Betty agreed. "What's adjacent to SoDale?"

"Southside High. The Wyrm…. And here. The trailer park. Jesus, Betty, how would he pull this off?"

"What if the Blossom land and name is leverage to buy up other properties?" Betty suggested. "If the key to your real estate empire was land held by the Blossoms, how far would you go to get it?"

"Call Veronica and Archie. They need answers as much as we do, now."
"Archie?"

"Fred isn't just handling construction for SoDale. The Lodges bought 15% of Fred's company to keep him afloat. Archie told me that when I first got back," he explained. "If the Lodges hired my father to kill Jason Blossom, it affects all four of us."

Betty tapped out a reply as Jughead reached for his beanie and tugged it on. He needed the strength of the Serpent King more than ever. Whether the secret stash Joaquin alluded to sealed his father's fate or set him free, he had to hold it together, or at least try to.

"They're on their way," Betty informed him. "You sure about this?"

"As sure as I am about you."

A soft kiss was shared, his hands cradling her face protectively. He was steadying himself before unearthing secrets kept for over a year. And while his stomach turned with the possibility that his father was a hired gun, knowledge was power. If there were people gunning for his father—people who might just turn their attention to him now—he needed to know about them.

The lives of those he loved might just depend on it.

Chapter End Notes

For those following along, we're mid Anatomy of a Murder right now. And while key facts may not change, I have my own twists and new revelations coming in the next few chapters.

As I work through the final stretch, if there's anything you want to see in the final four chapters, now's the time to ask! I can't make any promises, but I've already worked a few reviewer ideas into this story, so it never hurts to tell me.

See you next week, and for all my Canadians, enjoy the long weekend.
Twenty-Two: Whisper to a Scream

Chapter Notes

Welcome to this week's installment of Gaslight. Thank you for the kind reviews, kudos, faves and follows.

My favourite takeaway from last week was, "If FP is scared, then I'm scared." I couldn't agree more! The next two chapters will unfold the truth about Jason's death and the fall-out for Bughead, Varchie, Polly, Cheryl and FP.

This week's song is a fave of mine for writing scenes where everything goes to hell - I recommend the Soho cover, but the original by icicle Works is classic.

Song: Whisper to a Scream - Soho

Disclosure: So Riverdale is not mine, nor is any dialogue borrowed for context. I do own my own "remix" of the existing canon. So broke, don't sue, thank you.

Shallow hole. Shallow grave, Jughead mused, for the secrets of the dead.

"Is that…"

"Yeah," Archie confirmed, poking it with his sneaker. "Looks like Jason's varsity jacket."

They'd followed the GPS coordinates to the unmarked road off of route 40, where a battered sign for the Blossom Maple Farms once stood. Now, the charred remains of wood were the only proof of its existence. The four of them had split up, taking each cardinal direction and pursuing an unknown item known only as Plan B. It had been Betty who'd found it, nestled beneath a nearby maple tree: a cluster of stones and an unusually large pile of leaves for land that was no longer maintained. Brushing it aside, she'd found the freshly disturbed dirt and beckoned her friends to her side.

Three inches beneath the surface, they'd unearthed it: a cheaply made, navy blue duffel bag. Inside it, the familiar blue and gold of their school colours.

"Well, add torching Jason's getaway car to my father's list of confirmed crimes," Jughead spat, shaking his head.

"I'm so sorry, Jughead." Betty's hand reached for his, squeezing it tightly. "But maybe he did it with
good reason."
"There is no good reason," he countered. "But why would Jason's jacket be leverage for protection? This is just more incriminating evidence."

"DNA?" Veronica suggested.

Archie frowned. "Yeah, but how much of that is intact after it being buried underground? This duffel bag isn't waterproof."

"Jason wasn't wearing it when he was killed. It was already packed inside the getaway car," Betty added, crouching down and tugging on a pair of cotton gloves. "V?"

Veronica handed over the large garbage bag she'd tucked inside of her purse. "Is there anything else in there, B?"

The jacket was moved aside and Betty shook her head. "Doesn't look like it."

Bagging the entire parcel carefully, she passed it to Jughead and ran her fingers through the dirt to sift it. After several passes, she rose to her feet and dusted off her jeans. Jughead absently knotted the bag, his mind racing through his father's growing list of sins. Torched the car. Took money from the Lodges for an illegal job. Dumped Jason's body in the river. Only thing he was innocent of at this point was stealing Keller's files.

"There must be something we're not seeing," Betty insisted. "We need light. A place to go."

"Jughead's trailer," Veronica suggested.

"Could be cops watching," Jughead replied quietly. "I want the truth, but I'm not about to hand Keller the proverbial switch to dad's electric chair."

Veronica frowned, drawing her coat tightly around her frame. "My place is obviously out, now that my father's shady dealings are tied to this."

"I'm a runaway, so my place is out," Betty reminded them.

Archie leaned against his truck, arms folded. "I'd suggest my place, but what if your mom sees us?"

"And Kevin's place is out, leaving us standing here in a forest." Veronica's arms swooped around them. "I also doubt Pop's would be cool with us unpacking murder evidence in the corner booth."

Somewhere safe. Somewhere with light. Somewhere... Of course. Jughead's body was jittering with energy as he realized where they could go.

"You up for a little break and enter?"

The beauty of a small town was the misplaced belief that no one would dare sully its good name with misbehaviour. That doors could remain unlocked—or, in this case, broken window locks could remain that way for years.

Jughead had first discovered the faulty window latch three years ago. The fighting had just begun at home—the full-blown, dishes thrown, screaming kind—and he'd taken off because he had exams the next day and couldn't focus. Pop's had been a perfect place to cram, but come three-thirty in the morning, he was passing out in the booth and being gently urged to go home. He wasn't sure why he'd bothered to try and break into the school. Convenience, maybe, of being right where he'd be
writing his finals at ten. The window had been a lucky break. Ditto his hidden closet beneath the
stairs.

Betty had the keys to the Blue and Gold office in her bag, which made things easy, although he'd
certainly learned how to pick a lock thanks to his father's tendency to lose track of his keys while on
a bender. With a flourish, he slid open the window to the weight room adjacent to the gym and made
the short drop to the ground.

"Arch?"

It was strategic, beckoning his athletic friend to descend next: the two of them could ensure their
girlfriends made it safely to ground. Archie hit the floor with a soft thump and held his arms out to
guide Veronica to safety. Jughead held out a hand for Betty, but earned only a garbage bag for his
trouble.

"I'm not an amateur, Juggie," Betty lightly teased, dropping inside with a grin.

"That was the sexiest break-in I've ever seen," Jughead blurted out, immediately flushing crimson as
Veronica giggled.

"You're welcome," Betty demurred.

Jughead and Betty took the lead, cutting through a side corridor past the science labs that would
bring them to the office as quickly as possible. While there was no overnight security or caretaker on
weekends—Jughead had spent many nights sleeping at school prior to the Toledo move—no
assumptions were made. Betty drew the blinds quickly inside the office, waving off any instincts to
use flashlights.

"One light, closest to the hallway," she hissed. "Cars driving by will notice too much light in here."

"Got it!" Reaching for a nearby desk lamp, Veronica pulled it to the floor and flipped the switch.
"We'll sit on the floor, just like preschool."

"Excellent, V!"

The group settled on the ground as Betty opened the garbage bag carefully, gloves in place, and
unzipped the duffel bag within. Beneath the light, the jacket seemed so… innocent. Unimportant.
The garish yellow 'R' was blemished by dirt, but otherwise, it was just a varsity jacket. A jacket with
the name Jason stitched upon it.

"If Jason wasn't wearing it when he was killed, why would it be important?" Archie mused aloud.

Veronica shook her head slowly. "I don't know… Maybe the killer put it in the car after the
murder?"

"That would make it valuable for DNA, but again, it's been buried and unprotected. It rained,"
Jughead reminded them. "My dad has made some terrible decisions in his life, but even he's watched
enough CSI to know how to protect evidence. It's almost like the jacket's an afterthought to him."

Betty frowned, tilting her head as she ran her gloved fingertips over the white script. "Why would FP
say that Jason's varsity jacket is dangerous?"

Jughead buried his face in his hands, drawing a deep breath to steady himself. "Because it could lock
him up. Throw away the key."
This was it: the moment he'd spent his entire life waiting for. The moment his father truly revealed himself to be the man the town always whispered about. The innuendos, the accusations, the "Serpent Scum" taunts—it had all borne fruit. Deadly, dangerous fruit.

And what would happen to him? To Jellybean and his mom? FP's turnaround and sobriety had been the foundation of a hope of bringing them back from Toledo, away from the bastards Gladys attracted. But now?

A familiar hand clapped him firmly on his left shoulder with a gentle squeeze. Archie, he recognized. A tickle of hair grazed his right cheek as Betty leaned her head upon his right shoulder. He mumbled a thank you as his silent sentinels, his forever friends, were there for him. The Three Musketeers—maybe Veronica could be that fourth that Betty loved to remind them of.

"Oh, Juggie," Betty whispered softly as he began to tremble.

"It's over," he murmured.

"No. No, I'm not giving up." Betty pulled away and he lifted his head in confusion. "I'm not giving up!" she repeated, reaching for the jacket. "Archie, on your feet!"

"Huh?"

"Please," she begged, rising from the ground.

Jughead tapped her knee. "Betts, what are you doing?"

With Archie on his feet, Betty held out the jacket to him. "Put it on," she ordered him.

Archie's expression was a mix of disgust and disbelief. "What?"

"Put this on," Betty insisted, whipping the jacket around his shoulders like a cape.

Reluctantly, Archie complied and slid his arms inside the sleeves. Betty tugged the jacket into place, adjusting the collar.

"You do remember how creepy it was when Coach tried to give me Jason's number, right?" the redhead reminded her.

"Betty, this is weird," Veronica cautioned. "What are you doing?"

"It's easier to examine it this way, and I'm sorry, but the Blue and Gold doesn't have a mannequin for examining the jackets of murdered teens," Betty snapped.

Jughead watched as Betty's palms patted and slid over Archie's chest, shoulders and back, her wide green eyes searching every inch of its surface for… what? He wasn't certain. But he'd learned long ago that Betty could not be dissuaded from pursuing her theories. Her hands plunged into the jacket pockets from behind Archie and she paused, gasping.

"There's a hole in the pocket!" she announced, jostling her left hand within it.

"Pretty common with jackets, Betty," Archie replied.

Betty's focus remained on the left pocket, her hand digging deeper within. "Okay, but I don't know about you guys, but when I get a hole in my jacket pocket, I always lose my Chapstick in the lining."

"Or my Montblanc," Veronica agreed.
Jughead and Veronica rose to their feet now, Betty's face shadowed in the dim lighting as she ran her fingertips along the hem of the jacket. Halfway around the back, she froze.

"What the hell?"

"What is it?" Archie asked, craning his neck.

With methodical manipulation, Betty worked the mystery find around to the damaged pocket. Her hand slipped inside and plucked out her treasure with a triumphant grin.

"Nancy Drew strikes again," Jughead congratulated her, shaking his head in disbelief.

In her hand was a tiny, silver USB drive.

"I suspect this is the real Plan B," Betty declared, gesturing to the office computers. "Shall we?"

Archie yanked the jacket off, dropping it unceremoniously on the floor. "After you making me wear a dead guy's clothes? We're watching it."

Computer booted up, chairs pulled to circle the monitor, Betty handed the drive to Jughead. "You get the final say, Jug."

The gesture meant more to him than he could ever express in language, but if given the chance, he would spend years proving his love and admiration for her in deed. Taking the drive from her outstretched hand, he nodded.

"I know what Joaquin said, but you're right: I need the truth, whatever it is."

Settling into the chair in front of the computer, Betty's hands firmly upon his shoulders, he inserted the USB drive and launched the file explorer. The drive contained a single file, innocuously named Mov07110137. Holding his breath, he double-clicked the file and nervously watched the video player spring to life.

*Please tell me this isn't what I think it is.*

But it was. His heart raced as the image of Jason Blossom appeared, tied to a chair in what he assumed was the basement of the Whyte Wyrm. There was no sound, but he wouldn't have heard it for the rush of blood in his ears. The world receded to white noise as he noticed who was on screen (an unknown man in a Serpent jacket) and more importantly, who wasn't: FP Jones.

The Serpent taunted Jason, slapping him and shouting something in his face. Despite the grainy quality of the footage, Jughead could make out bruises and a cut beneath Jason's eye. The Serpent startled, turning his head towards a door near the top of the frame, and promptly exited through it. Moments later, the door swung open and Jughead braced himself.

*Please don't be there, Dad. Please don't walk in. Please…*

A father stepped into the room, his features cold and uncaring. But not *his* father.

Betty's hands tightened on his shoulders as Clifford Blossom approached his son deliberately, not speaking a single word. Jason's lips moved, perhaps a plea for help, but the Blossom patriarch had his own agenda. Reaching into Jason's shirt pocket, he removed what appeared to be a ring. Nana Rose's ring, Jughead deduced. Jason's head hung low in defeat.

The white noise roared louder as Clifford reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a revolver.
His stomach lurched, yet his eyes would not avert their torturous gaze. The Blossoms had been suspects, sure, but the reality of it? The idea that a father could lift a gun, as Clifford was doing, and aim it at their crying child… The gun fired and he reached up to grip Betty's hand.

_He killed his son. He killed his goddamn son._

Sounds drifted around him as Clifford left the basement and he closed the media player with a heavy heart. The relief of his father not being the shooter did little to ease his horror at what could never be unseen. Veronica was sobbing quietly into Archie's shoulder as the redhead held her, staring dumbfounded at the computer. Behind him, Betty whimpered and he rose to his feet to embrace her.

"How could he?" Betty whispered.

"I don't know. I… I just don't know."

The blonde suddenly pulled away, her hand fumbling in her pocket for her cellphone. Her shaking fingers scrolled through her contacts and selected one, even as Archie questioned her actions.

"You need to get out of that house," she began, and Jughead immediately understood her frantic actions.

_Cheryl._

"Listen to me," she continued, her voice shaky and low. "We found a video tonight. It shows Jason's murder. Cheryl, your dad pulled the trigger. Clifford killed Jason."

A long pause, and Betty began to pace. "I'm so sorry, Cheryl, but do you understand me? You're not safe there. Go to my house. Call Polly. She'll let you in."

"We can go get her," Archie offered quietly.

Betty held up her hand. "Okay, good. Call me when you're safe."

Hanging up, her attention turned to Jughead. "Your father is innocent."

"He must have assumed if Clifford tried anything, he'd silence him with this," Jughead mused. "But something changed."

"Clifford must have upped the ante," Veronica theorized. "I don't know how, but whatever it was, it was enough for your father to confess to a murder."

"When he's free, he can tell you everything," Betty reminded him. "Now, come on. We're going to my house."

Archie hesitated. "Wait, shouldn't we go to Sheriff Keller?"

"And risk him burying this? No way." With a fierce expression, Betty plucked the USB drive from the computer. "We're taking this to my mother first, just in case."

Alice Cooper's anger at Betty's defiance immediately turned to a smug satisfaction in proving Keller wrong. The video safely copied to Betty's laptop and a second USB key, Mama Cooper had driven them all to the police station, where a thoroughly irritated Keller awaited them by the front desk.

"What couldn't you call into the station line, Alice?" he demanded. "My home phone is not for police business."
"Oh, nothing much," Alice purred. "Just video of Jason Blossom's murder that exonerates FP Jones."

Keller's eyes widened, his gaze sweeping over the four teens and settling on Betty's steely features. "Somehow, I sense this was your doing?"

"It's a good thing I did, since you have the wrong man in a cell. Again," she added, jerking her head in Jughead's direction as Alice handed the sheriff the USB drive.

"I need to review this." Keller excused himself and headed down the corridor to his office.

"I should probably get home," Veronica reluctantly informed them, looking to Archie. "Can you give me a lift?"

"Sure. Will you be okay, Jughead?"

"Yeah, go on. And thank you, for everything."

The two friends embraced warmly, the gesture heavy with meaning. It was a mending of strained relations, a mutual forgiveness for errors and damage done. With a reassuring smile, Archie led Veronica away, leaving a trio of journalists awaiting Keller's reaction.

"You still shouldn't have run off today," Alice quietly admonished, "but I'm proud of your dedication to this story."

"Thanks, mom. But it was more than a story. It was FP's life."

"It never made sense. FP killing someone in cold blood," Alice mused.

Jughead decided now was as good a time as any to pry. "You grew up with him. You know him better than that."

"Knew," Alice corrected, pursing her lips.

A door opened and the trio watched a visibly blanched Keller approaching them. Gesturing to the desk officer, he quietly instructed him to dispatch all available officers and back-up from Greendale to the Blossom home.

"My father?" Jughead demanded loudly.

"What about him?"

"Um, he's innocent? Which means he should be free?"

"I fully acknowledge that he didn't kill Jason, but he's not getting out anytime soon."

Betty stepped forward, throwing her hands up. "What?"

"Tampering with evidence, obstruction of justice, perjury—and that's just off the top of my head!" Keller snapped. "Now I suggest the three of you get some sleep, because I will have a hell of a lot of questions tomorrow. But my priority tonight is arresting Clifford Blossom. Excuse me."

Betty's lips parted, as if to protest, but Jughead shook his head to silence her. There would be a fight ahead, and he would need her conviction. But he could sense a losing battle tonight in the sheriff's embarrassment at being wrong. Besides, until Clifford was caught, Cheryl was in danger. Betty had yet to hear from Jason's twin, nor had Polly contacted her.
Alice gestured to the exit doors. "Come on, Betty, Jughead. Let's go home."

"Jughead shouldn't be home alone right now, Mom."

Pivoting on her heel, Alice rolled her eyes. "Betty, do you think I'm a fool? Of course he can't go home. I'm certain Fred Andrews will be happy for him to stay overnight."

Close enough to sneak over. Close enough to protect her. Jughead was content with this arrangement. Judging from Betty's mouthed ladder, she was equally in favour.

The Cooper home was lit up in every room upon their arrival. Inside the kitchen, they found Polly and Cheryl huddled over twin cups of hot chocolate. While Cheryl's polished outfit and makeup suggested a cool surface, her shaking hands betrayed the fear within.

"Daddy did a bad thing," she remarked absently. "And now everyone will know about it."

Betty settled into the chair beside her. "I'm glad you're safe, Cheryl."

"I confronted him before I left. I'm a Blossom, Betty. We don't run from our demons," she explained quietly. "He didn't deny it. He left out the back door. And Mommy just sat there, drinking her wine like it was nothing. Like Jason was nothing…"

"Jason was special," Polly tearfully chimed in. "And we will make sure he's remembered that way."

Alice fussed over them quietly, preparing tea for Betty and offering clothing for Cheryl to borrow. Ushering the three young women upstairs, Alice escorted Jughead next door, where Fred was waiting on the porch. Pausing on the walkway, Alice turned to him, visibly upset.

"Betty told me about why she really broke up with Chuck. She showed me the photos." Alice's voice cracked as she bowed her head. "I should have known. I should have protected my baby."

For all of her flaws and demands, Jughead knew that Alice loved her daughters. He'd caught glimpses of it over the years: the time Betty fell from the top of the slide; when she'd had chicken pox that spread to her eyelids, threatening her sight; the time Polly had run away from home. She often smothered them, demanding unrealistic achievements, but when they were truly in need, she was the first to protect them. This rare vulnerability was one of those moments.

"Abusers hide. They deceive. It's what they do best," Jughead reassured her. "And Betty was in denial for a long time."

Brushing aside a single tear, Alice shook herself. "I just wanted to say, I know what you did to help Betty. You and Archie. And I won't forget it."

Okay, did hell freeze over? A compliment from Alice Cooper? He was almost tempted to look for a camera crew, because it felt like a prank.

"Betty's my best friend. I'll always be there for her."

"Good." Forcing a smile, she turned to Fred. "Thank you for waiting up. I didn't think it was safe for him to be alone tonight."

"Of course. Jug's family. Head on in, Archie's waiting for you."

It took half a movie and grilled cheese sandwiches for Fred to head upstairs to sleep, which was just as well, because the Cooper house remained lit like a proverbial Christmas tree until midnight. By
one, Jughead was settling the ladder against the side wall and scaling it to greet an impatient blonde in a black tank top and silky pajama shorts.

"Juggie," she whispered happily as he stepped inside. "How long can you stay?"

"Mom asleep?"

"Yes, but she'll sleep light tonight. Dad's out of town."

"Hmm. An hour, then. Just in case."

They slid into her bed, Betty curving her body against his and resting her head upon his chest. Jughead wrapped his arm around her, closing his eyes and sighing. It was incredible, how grounding she could be. His world was a chaotic nightmare, his future uncertain, but with Betty at his side, he was safe.

"I can't get it out of my mind," Betty whispered. "The gun. The way he just... did it."

"I know."

Her hand fisted in his shirt as she inched closer. "Keller is an asshole. Your father should be home tonight. He did what he did because he was scared."

"He also has priors, so no one will buy that. It pisses me off, and I'll fight it to the end, but a part of me is accepting that he might pay for Clifford's crime. I just wish I knew why."

"Maybe knowing Clifford is arrested will help him open up."

Burying his face in her hair, Jughead hummed noncommittally. Somehow, he sensed he would never get the full story of how Jason came to end up shot in the basement of the Whyte Wyrm. But if he could know the core, know his father's heart and motives, he could find a little peace.

"Juggie?"

"Yeah, Betts?"

"If your dad stays in jail, what will you do?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "Why?"

"I know it's selfish," she murmured, "but I couldn't bear it if you moved back to Toledo. Last time hurt so much."

"I know. It killed me to see you so upset. To cause that pain." He kissed the top of her head firmly, hugging her tighter. "I'm not going back there, unless it's to help Jelly and Mom come back."

"Okay."

"Okay," he echoed as she tilted her face to his, seeking the comfort of a soft kiss.

"Stay until I fall asleep?" she mumbled.

"I think I can do that, considering you're halfway there," he teased lightly.

Limbs entwined, Betty drifted off ten minutes later. Staring at the ceiling, fingers tracing up and down her bare arms, Jughead tried to ignore the soft crying in the next bedroom.
The next week was a blur. An angry, heartbreaking blur.

There was no arrest in the Blossom murder. After all, Keller could hardly read a corpse their Miranda rights. Swinging from a noose in the family barn, Clifford had opted to face the judgment of his son in the afterlife over a jury of his peers. In doing so, he'd spilled the last family secret—literally. The barrel of maple syrup he'd jumped from had toppled open, revealing a Cracker Jack surprise: packets of heroin.

Theories ran wild around Riverdale High and particularly among Jughead's circle of friends. Had Jason known about his father's true business venture? Had he opted to run drugs for an opposing dealer to flip daddy off? Had Jason threatened to shatter the perfect Blossom image? Nothing was certain, but all of it made sense. What didn't make sense was Keller and Mayor McCoy's adamant belief that the Serpents were dealing Clifford's heroin, but it hadn't stopped them from trying to get names from FP in exchange for leniency. His father steadfastly denied Serpent involvement, but said little else.

Jughead's father remained in jail as expected, facing a stack of charges that amounted to everything but murder itself. Mary Andrews had flown in from Chicago to assist, but left her meetings with his father discouraged and pessimistic. FP remained tight-lipped about Jason's murder, refusing to offer any motive for his disposal of the body. The refusal to cooperate on the murder or the drugs had killed any hope of negotiation.

Without a legal guardian, social services was alerted to his precarious living situation and immediately attempted to take him into a group home pending a foster family assignment. Fred Andrews, to his relief, had stepped up, reminding them of how harmful it would be to disrupt his school schedule to shuttle him to Greendale. Reluctantly, the social workers had granted Fred temporary custody, although they soon made it clear that it could not be a permanent solution.

"I'm sorry, Jughead," Fred had explained over dinner one night. "When Mary and I broke up, I was picked up on a DUI. They won't let me foster you as a single parent with my income, especially given my record."

"It's okay. Thank you for wanting to. It matters," he insisted as Fred began to protest.

On his list of things that mattered: Betty's scathing article in the Register, calling out the town for refusing to name Clifford outright in their coverage of the murder while assuming the Southside Serpents were the couriers for the illegal wares of the Blossom empire. Her passionate defense had earned her some sideways glances in town and worse, a vandalized locker. Jughead still seethed at the thought of the blood smeared on the door: *Go to Hell, Serpent Slut* it proclaimed, alongside a blonde doll strung up by her neck.

"Like this is scary after what Chuck did," she scoffed, refusing to meet Jughead's concerned stare.

"Betts, you have to stop standing up for my dad. It's not worth it."

"Like hell it isn't. You stood up for me. FP stood up for me. Loyalty matters to me, Jug. Not disgusting pranks and idle threats."

Despite her reassurances, Jughead quietly arranged for Betty to be escorted to and from classes until the furor died down. If she noticed what he'd done—and he assumed she would catch on quickly—she didn't fight him on it.

A week passed, then two. Betty was invited to speak at the town Jubilee in recognition of her role in
solving the Blossom case, an invitation she rejected on the grounds that Jughead had been just as vital to the investigation. He'd managed to talk her out of it, suggesting that at least someone with integrity and honesty would be speaking for a change. She'd spent the entire week scribbling notes in the margins of her notebooks and typing furiously on her laptop, determine to "heal the town" with her words.

With a sudden abundance of free time on his hands, he'd visited his father three times now. Despite his persistent questioning, FP was unwilling to speak of the USB drive, the plan or why he'd copped to a murder he'd clearly not committed. Each time, FP would blame the lack of privacy and insist he didn't need to know. Each time he'd storm out of the station, fighting frustrated tears.

His father was running out of time. He was running out of time.

His social worker called at last on that second Thursday night since FP's arrest, informing him that a Southside family had been contacted about possibly fostering him. The social worker, in her saccharine voice, advised that they'd fostered teens before and were very nice, not that Jughead gave a damn. Especially when it was explained that he would have to transfer to Southside High.

Depressed and in dire need of a little video game venting, he headed inside the Andrews home in search of his best friend. Inadvertently, he stumbled onto a loaded conversation between Archie and Fred.

"What are you talking about, Dad? Chicago?" he heard Archie shout.

"Yes, with your mother," Fred replied firmly. "Given everything that's happened in the last year and my precarious financial situation, maybe it's best you move in with your mother."

"And leave all of my friends when they need me most? No way!" Archie's voice grew louder, his anger as fiery as his hair. "Betty's getting threatened, Polly's kids are missing, Jughead's dad is in jail. And Veronica—"

"Veronica is exactly why you need to leave town," Fred interrupted. "Son, you have no idea of what Hiram Lodge is capable of."

"Veronica isn't her father."

"That doesn't matter, Archie. My business is tied up in the Lodges' affairs and SoDale… Something's not right, and I can't get out of it yet, but I intend to. I'll sell the business completely if that's what it takes. We need less ties to Hiram, not more."

Jughead stood motionless in the front hallway, stunned by Fred's condemnation of the entire Lodge family. What did he know about SoDale that the public didn't? Was it the private prison Veronica had uncovered in her father's documents?

"You've never judged Jughead for what FP's done. Judging Veronica is hypocritical, and you know it. And I'm not going anywhere!"

Archie stormed out of the kitchen, nearly colliding with Jughead in his hurry. A silent exchange of concerned looks was followed by an evening walk through the neighbourhood to blow off steam.

"My dad's an idiot," Archie muttered as they rounded the corner near the Klump house.

"He loves you. He means well, even if he's completely wrong," Jughead replied, thrusting his hands deeply inside his Sherpa coat for warmth.

Archie led them to a nearby park, where a set of empty swings swayed in the October breeze. They settled into the seats, somewhat crammed but comforted by the familiar surroundings. They'd spent plenty of summertime hours here, usually with Mary or Fred supervising. The significance was not lost on Jughead, although it went unsaid.

"He is wrong, but he'll come around. Unlike most of the adults around here, he actually listens to us. Give him time to cool down, Arch."

They began to swing, absently pumping their legs until they fell into a rhythm, arcing only half as high as their childhood antics, but satisfied with the soft sway.

"I just don't understand how he thinks I can abandon you at a time like this. Or Betty, or Ronnie. He raised me to stand by my friends, and while I've screwed that up at times, I don't plan on it now," Archie insisted.

"Your dad, like half this town, is realizing that there's no such thing as an idyllic, safe small town," Jughead suggested. "He sees you in Jason Blossom. He… Jesus, Archie, that's it!"

Archie stilled his swing. "What's it?"

Jughead's boots skidded along the ground, halting his swing. "What could Clifford Blossom hold over my father that would terrify him enough to remain silent, even now? What would he go to prison for?"

Archie's eyes widened. "His kids. You."

"Bingo." Jughead leaned back in the swing, exasperated. "And of course he won't just tell me. But he made it clear ages ago that he doesn't want me anywhere near him, or the jail."

"But Clifford is dead," Archie countered. "The threat is gone, right?"

"Is it?" Jughead's mind was racing now with sinister possibilities. "Penelope drugged Polly, so she probably knew about Jason and said nothing. The man was running drugs to and from Montreal for years. Who are his contacts? Who's moving the drugs now?"

Archie slumped in his seat, kicking the sand beneath them. "My dad knows something about SoDale and the Lodges. Hiram Lodge met with the Blossoms. At the time, we couldn't figure out why a real estate developer and maple syrup empire would work together, but it's different now."

"Hiram wants to build a prison, and the Blossoms have been quietly running a heroin empire for years," Jughead agreed. "What if Hiram wanted in on their turf and they shut him down?"

Jughead's mind flashed back to what Joaquin had told them about "a rich guy's job" that Mustang had brought forward. Was the rich guy Clifford Blossom? Or was it Hiram Lodge?

"Jug, this is big. You need to talk to someone about this."

"Who, Keller?" Jughead snorted angrily, kicking the sand beneath him. "It's a lost cause getting justice in this town. You have to hand over the actual smoking gun to get any response."

"What about your dad, then? Maybe if he realizes how much you already know—that he's not protecting you from anything—he'll finally tell you the truth."
Huh. Archie did have a valuable point: if he already knew the truth, his father would likely confirm it.

"Might be my last chance to get him out of there, save myself from foster care," he agreed, adjusting his beanie.

Archie grimaced. "Shit, did they finally call?"

"Finalizing it Monday, unless things change dramatically. Come next week, I'll be at Southside High."

"What did Betty say?" At Jughead's averted gaze, Archie stood up. "You've told her that my dad can't foster you, right?"

"Um, I may have downplayed the possibility of living elsewhere…"

"You can't do that to her! She's your girlfriend, and your best friend."

Jughead threw his hands up, exasperated. "And I'm sure she's tired of the non-stop negativity that is my Jones birthright! Look, I'll tell her, but she has that damn speech for the Jubilee. Last thing I need is to fuel her anger at this town."

"Jug—"

"Archie, listen to me. She can't save my dad from jail. She can't save me from foster care. But what Betty can do, perhaps better than anyone else, is bring the two sides of this town back together. Right now, that's the focus of her speech. I don't want her to go in an angry direction tomorrow. Because getting this town to ease up on the Serpents? That helps me and my dad."

Archie ran his hand through his hair, fingertips drumming absently on the steel support of the swing set. "Okay, I get it. But you have to tell her after the speech."

"I will. I know I have to." Glancing up at a gathering of grey clouds, Jughead shrugged. "Gonna rain, maybe even snow. You ready to go home, or should we head to Pop's?"

"Nah, we can go home."

They'd scarcely taken ten steps before Archie halted abruptly in his tracks. Without warning, he embraced Jughead, leaving him bewildered as he hugged him back.

"Thank you for listening," Archie mumbled. "For still being my friend, even after all the things I've screwed up."

"I'm not perfect, Archie. It's okay."

Pulling away awkwardly, Archie pressed on in silence towards his childhood home, his best friend in town. And while neither spoke of it, each was consumed by the same thought:

Was Hiram Lodge the mastermind behind the Blossom murder? And if so, what else was he capable of?
Chapter End Notes

And boom! Wait just a freaking minute... Could it be that everything shady in Riverdale ties to dear old Hiram after all? We'll mull that over in the next chapter. Also next time: the fall-out of Clifford's crime affects the town, and Jughead makes one last effort to get FP to open up. But will FP listen?

Three more chapters, including the epilogue (which is a flash forward). The offer stands: if you'd like to see an event, a character, or have a specific question answered before this story wraps, leave a review and let me know!
Twenty-Three: Mad World

Chapter Notes

I've never felt that Riverdale fully explained Jason Blossom's death. Remember: FP's confession was coerced, and we already know of at least two major lies within in.

On this, the anniversary of Jason's death, I'm going to give you the full truth about Jason's death (my theory, anyway). It takes into account what we know now in season 2.

Stick around for the end notes, because I do have updates...

Song: Mad World - Gary Jules

Disclaimer: I'm not a Riverdale writer, or else we would have had these scenes in there
*whistle* Disclaim, disclaim!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Twenty-Three: Mad World

"Went to school and I was very nervous
No one knew me, no one knew me
Hello teacher, tell me what's my lesson?
Look right through me, look right through me
And I find it kinda funny
I find it kinda sad
The dreams in which I'm dying
Are the best I've ever had…"

Mad World – Gary Jules

Sociological researchers like Blair Wheaton have long argued for the "broken bridge" theory of stress. Springing from an event in 1984 where a physical bridge—seemingly without any major event or damage suffered—simply collapsed overnight, the theory suggests that physical and emotional stress share similarities. A bridge can be damaged by a single, catastrophic event like an earthquake or a bombing, but tiny cracks and rust forming over years and left unchecked can also eventually weaken the metal to where it simply breaks down and gives way.

It's no different for people, really. A single, traumatic event can be so life-altering, it results in PTSD, depression, and what most of us think of as a "mental breakdown". But little things can also add up for people too, and those proverbial straws will break our camel backs and leave us face-first on the ground. A failed test. A relationship ended. A parent loses their job. Little cracks, rust around our edges, until that one final thing happens and we just can't anymore. We're out of strength, out of ideas. We're done.

Riverdale is that latter bridge, golden and gleaming, standing strong for years in a haven free of storms and damage. And yet, it's crumbling before our eyes. The tiny fractures of corrosion and time
have picked away at it, leaving a heap of debris at the divide between north and south. We are the bridges inside those bridges, each of us bearing the strain of pokes and prods and lies and long-hidden truths.

Which of us will collapse first? Will anyone see the cracks in time? I may be a lifelong pessimist, but I don't think I'm wrong in believing that no one's coming to save us. Jason Blossom's murder is the corrosion of all of us, some more than others.

The breakdown has begun. All we can do now is pick up the pieces.

Sitting in the centre of the lunchtime din at Riverdale High, Jughead was far more emotional that he'd anticipated.

If things went down as expected on Monday—and given his father's predicament and his mother's disinterest, it was a done deal—this seemingly typical Friday afternoon would be one of his last as a student here. No more lunchtime laughter with Archie. No more stories with Betty at the Blue and Gold. No more secretly amusing gossip sessions with Kevin Keller at the helm. No more sassy barbs thrown by Veronica at jocks still rallying around Chuck Clayton (although their numbers had dwindled sharply after his disastrous birthday party).

And while his father's name had at least been cleared, the only reason life hadn't crumpled him to his knees was the comfort of Betty at his side. The thought of facing a new school, with lacklustre funding, angry teens and gang affiliations at every corner… it was overwhelming. And he would be alone. Yeah, he'd been a loner his entire life, but Archie and Betty had served as protectors against the worst of the bullying he'd faced.

"I hate this speech," Betty grumbled, angrily crossing out a paragraph. "I'm just going to go up there and say, Hi Riverdale, you suck, free FP Jones."

"An unconventional approach," he quipped, "but somehow, I sense that's not on brand for the Mayor's 76th Jubilee."

"Then she shouldn't have asked me to speak." Shoving aside her notebook, Betty reached for his hand. "You going to see your dad today?"

"Yeah, after school. Kevin told me his dad's on the early shift and that if I ask really nicely, the night clerk will let me and my dad talk in the room they usually let inmates consult their lawyers in." He reached out to tuck an errant strand of hair behind her ear. "I don't know if it'll matter, but maybe the privacy will get him to tell me something more than stay away from this mess."

"I really hope so, Jug. Even if he doesn't want to tell the police anything, you're his son. You deserve answers."

"Hello, Bughead!" a cheery voice called out from behind them.

Spinning around, they spotted Veronica and Archie approaching, lunch trays in hand. The perpetually overdressed Latina slid into the chair beside Betty, nudging her blushing friend's shoulder.

"Bughead?" Jughead rolled his eyes. "That's what they're calling us?"

"Every great couple needs a couple name, and yours is honestly adorable," Veronica chirped.

"What's with her?" Jughead asked Archie.
Archie shrugged, reaching for the carton of milk on his tray. "She said she wanted to tell all of us together."

"As Archiekins has hinted at, I have an announcement," Veronica agreed, reaching into her backpack. "As of today, I am the interim captain of the Riverdale Vixens, complete with HBIC t-shirt."

At this, she pulled the shirt free, holding it up for all to see. Betty's eyes widened at the sight of Cheryl Blossom's trademark training gear. Whenever practices grew brutal enough that the Vixens protested, Cheryl would toss her hair and point to her shirt while clearing her throat loudly.

"Cheryl's quitting the squad?" Betty asked. "The Vixens are her life."

Veronica folded the tee neatly, tucking it away. "I know, I couldn't believe it either. But she told me that with everything going on at home, she wants to be there for her Nana Rose. She also thinks her family drama will distract the squad and she, and I paraphrase, refuses to let the tradition of cheerleading excellence at Riverdale be tainted by distracted, gossiping girls. I'm surprised she asked me over Ginger or Midge, but I'm happy to help out until she can come back."

"Well, you'll be an excellent captain, V!" Betty enthused, hugging her friend.

"Speaking of Cheryl," Archie broke in, his voice low, "she's coming over here."

Following Archie's gaze, the group turned to greet a Cheryl Blossom very unlike her usual self. While her trademark curls were perfectly coiffed, her pale grey blouse and black skirt were far from her daily blood-red attire. It occurred to Jughead that Cheryl had been wearing nothing but black and grey for days.

"Hello Archie, Veronica, Jughead, my cousin Betty," she greeted them softly. "I assume you've heard the news of my abdication."

"We did," Betty replied. "But Cheryl, if you need anything—"

"I'm fine," Cheryl cut her off with a smile. "I just need to focus on the family right now. And speaking of family, I wanted to offer a little support."

Reaching into her purse, Cheryl withdrew an ornate gold and ruby broach in the shape of a spider. It was one Cheryl wore often, ever since her twelfth birthday. Even Jughead had noticed it, although given its ostentatious size, it was difficult to ignore.

"Jughead, whatever may have happened with your father, you are not him. As my cousin's betrothed, that makes you family. Here."

She tossed the broach across the table and Jughead's hand shot out, snatching it from the air. The golden legs of the spider poked into the palm of his hand.

"That will fetch a pretty penny at the pawn shop. Should be enough to keep you in burgers and 'S' t-shirts for months to come, maybe years."

"Cheryl, you really don't have to do this," he protested, uncomfortable with the weighty jewel.

"I would like to," Cheryl insisted. "Don't insult me by returning it."

Veronica leaned forward, clearly troubled by the exchange. "Cheryl, are you okay? Do you want to sit down with us, have lunch?"
"I'm as well as anyone can be expected, given my father's actions. And thank you, but I have an appointment with Weatherbee to discuss making up some assignments from last week." Forcing a smile, she leaned down to hug Betty. "Give my best to Polly."

"I will," Betty murmured in bewilderment.

Once the maple syrup heiress had exited the cafeteria, Archie was the first to speak. "I'm worried about her."

"Me too," Betty agreed. "V, maybe we should have a girls' night soon? You, me, Cheryl and Polly at my place?"

Veronica clapped her hands excitedly. "That's an excellent idea. I'll arrange a housecall from my favourite masseuse! If nothing else, we could all use a little de-stressing these days. And it'll get her out of that dreadful house."

"That place gave me the creeps before we found out about Clifford," Jughead agreed, taking a bite of his burger.

And while the four of them sensed that Cheryl needed a friend, none of them realized just how badly. Not yet, anyway.

The group had convened after school to walk home together. The first snowfall of the year had arrived the night before, rendering the sidewalks icy-black and the air sharp in their lungs, but they were too distracted to care. Veronica and Betty had decided to engage Polly in planning their girls' night, while Archie and Jughead made plans to hang out to have an excuse to escort them safely to their destination. Betty had spent the walk throwing out lines from her speech, with her friends offering suggestions and feedback. And while Betty continued to joke about ranting at the town about their hypocrisy and divisiveness, her genuine suggestions were the inspiring but sincere message Jughead knew she could deliver.

They found Polly on the front porch of the Cooper home, pacing anxiously out front. Upon spotting Betty, the elder sister ran down the steps to greet her.

"Betty, I'm so glad you're here!"

"Pol, what is it? What happened?"

"Something's wrong with Cheryl. Come inside, you'll see what I mean."

The group complied, following a frantic Polly into the dining room. There, she revealed two items that were both worrisome and loaded with goodwill: a red ring box, and a large folder, labelled Twins.

"Cheryl came by an hour ago," Polly began, settling down at the table. "Said she was skipping the afternoon for a therapy session and wanted to stop in on the way. She… she said I deserved these things, and that she wished I could have been her sister, just like Jason wanted me to be."

Betty reached for the folder, flipping it open. Pages fluttered as her eyes widened in recognition.

"This is the investigator's file," Betty announced. "The search for the twins… it's all here. And he found them."
"He found the babies? That's amazing, Polly!" Veronica exclaimed.

"How did she get this away from Penelope?" Jughead asked. "And if they knew where the twins were, why didn't they tell you?"

"I don't know." Polly reached for the small red box, turning it over in her palm. "But they're happy and healthy, in Manhattan. They found out two days before Clifford… That's not all she brought."

Opening the box, Polly revealed Nana Rose's ring. Her engagement ring.

"She said it was mine, that I was family and Jason wanted me to have it… Betty, something is very wrong with Cheryl. The way she spoke to me, the way her mind kept drifting off… She's in trouble."

"Yeah, we were thinking the same thing," Veronica agreed. "We were planning to invite her for a sleepover. Just us, away from Thornhill. Maybe Sunday?"

"No, no!" Polly rose to her feet, grabbing Betty by the shoulders. "I told you what happened to me at the Sisters. It's like that."

Betty's skin blanched as she glanced sideways at Jughead. "We don't have until Sunday, do we, Pol?"

Oh my god. The dark, uncharacteristic clothing. Giving away belongings. Putting affairs in order. It was a textbook study in suicidality. How had they not recognized it?

"No!" At this, Polly collapsed against Betty, hugging her tightly. "She can't be alone right now," she sobbed.

Betty nodded. "Okay, we're going to go get her tonight. You can drive us, right Archie?"

"Of course, whatever you need," the redhead agreed.

"I'm coming too," Jughead chimed in. "We all will."

Rubbing her sister's back, Betty hugged her tightly. "Do you want to come with us?"

"I can't. If I'm right and… I can't." Polly pulled away, slumping into a chair. "Just find her, Betty."

A text message was sent to Cheryl, inviting her to dinner at the Cooper home. Betty sent it, figuring her status as family might be enough to get a reply. Five agonizing minutes passed before her phone beeped. As she read Cheryl's response aloud, Jughead's stomach dropped.

"Thank you for trying, but I'm going to be with Jason now…"

"We have to go!" Veronica demanded, zipping her coat.

"Go where?" Archie asked.

"The funeral, Archie," Veronica replied. "Think. Where is Jason to her?"

"The river," Betty concluded. "We have to hurry."

The drive to Sweetwater River flew by, thanks in no small part to Archie's decision to go twenty over the limit. Crammed into the cab of the truck, the teens slammed into the passenger door as Archie made a sharp turn down the main public access to the shoreline. Betty had continued to text
Cheryl, pleading with her to respond, to no avail. Archie had no sooner parked the truck than Betty was practically crawling over Jughead to open the passenger side door.

"I've got it, Betts!" Jamming the handle down, he nearly fell onto the snowy gravel below in his haste. "Where do we go from here?"

"The memorial site. Let's start there."

The teens hurried through the snow, cutting down the steep pathway to the river bank. Beneath Jason's maple tree, piled in the snow, they found Jason's jersey alongside Cheryl's Vixen uniform. It was a chilling sight, one Jughead knew would haunt him forever.

"She's been here," Archie yelled, turning to the river. "Cheryl! Cheryl, where are you?"

"Cheryl!" It was a symphony of frantic shouts, echoing off the trees and sending the last birds of summer into flight. "Cheryl!"

They cut closer to the water, eyes searching in every direction, until Betty patted his arm furiously, pointing into the distance. "Oh my god, she's there!"

Out on the frozen surface, swinging her fists angrily at the ice, sat Cheryl Blossom. Dressed in white, her hair flowing down her shoulders, she was almost angelic. Dressed for heaven itself, Jughead thought sadly. Even now, the demanded perfection of the Blossom name dictated her every decision.

"Cheryl, stop!" Betty pleaded.

The group rushed forward, halting as the delicate surface beneath their feet crackled beneath the strain. Edging backwards onto the shore, Archie studied the river.

"It's not fully frozen. Too much weight and it'll give out beneath us," he explained.

"And take Cheryl with it," Jughead whispered anxiously.

"Cheryl, please, come back to the shore!" Veronica pleaded. "We're here for you."

The redhead's arms swung wildly, determined to break through, as if Jason himself were waiting beneath the surface, beckoning to her. As Betty screamed out her name, she paused, tilting her head slightly.

"She heard you. Keep trying!" Archie pleaded.

"Cheryl! Cheryl, please! Polly needs you. You can't leave her alone," Betty rambled, her words spilling out in a flurry as Cheryl rose to her feet. "The babies! She wants you to help her find them. Jay-Jay's babies. Cheryl, please, come back to the shore and we'll figure this out together."

Cheryl turned around slowly, her gaze fixed on Betty. Her hair was messy, her hands fisted at her side, but Jughead swore he saw a half-smile of recognition. Trekking as a group across the ice was dangerous, but if Cheryl came back slowly on her own, she would be safe.

The strain of murders, of bodies and tears, of beautiful girls banging on ice and desperate cries in the forest chill—it finally took its deadly toll. To their collective horror, the ice gave away and with it, Cheryl collapsed into the frigid waters of Sweetwater River.

"NO!" Archie screamed, running across the ice.

"Archie, careful!" Veronica screamed, giving chase.
"Stay spaced out!" Jughead ordered them as he veered to the left of Archie's trajectory. "Too much weight and we all go under."

They moved quickly but carefully, mindful of creaks and cracks, but Archie rushed headlong into the fray, oblivious to the impending danger. The surface was already compromised now. One false move and it would shatter into the dark depths beneath them. Reaching the hole Cheryl had tumbled through, Archie's hands brushed aside snow, peering through the frozen sheet.

"She's not here!" Archie screamed.

Reaching his side, Jughead studied the rushing water. "The current has her. Spread out!"

The group scattered, radiating from the site of Cheryl's descent. Bare hands swiped at fluffy snow as Jughead scanned the glass for that familiar red hair that might just save her life now. His first swipes revealed nothing and he cursed beneath his breath. He moved a foot away, swiping furiously and finding nothing but inky blackness.

"She's here!"

The group spun around, rushing to Archie's side as his fists pounded angrily at the ice. Jughead winced as the surface cracked but the skin of Archie's knuckles also split wide, spilling blood on the snow. Pleas to be careful, to be safe, went unnoticed as Archie's fury rained down upon the icy block. A sickening crack signalled a broken bone and Jughead moved to intervene, but he was waved away by his friend.

"DAMN IT!" Archie screamed, driving his hands down once more.

The ice gave away and with it, gave up the crimson-haired girl within its clutches. Archie's hands plunged beneath the surface, yanking Cheryl out of the water and laying her gently on the ice. Betty dropped to the ice beside him, the two of them coordinating CPR strategy as Archie checked Cheryl's vitals. Veronica whimpered as Archie began chest compressions, his bloodied hand staining Cheryl's white coat.

"Come on!" he grunted as he moved.

"I've got no reception!" Veronica yelled at her phone as Betty counted off Archie's compressions.

Betty yelled fifteen and Archie tilted Cheryl's head back, opening her airway. He breathed for her—once, twice—then fell backwards as the bedraggled redhead began to cough furiously on the ice. Betty turned her to her side, whispering encouragement as Archie sunk back, shaking out his bleeding hand.

"That's it, Cheryl, cough it out. You're safe with us," Betty murmured.

"You gonna be okay, Arch?"

"It's nothing, Jug," his friend dismissed him. "Come on, we need to get her warmed up."

"And get you to a hospital," Veronica insisted.

Ignoring his girlfriend's quiet protests, Archie cradled Cheryl to his chest, lifting her up gently. Jughead pulled the keys from his friend's jacket pocket, leading the group across what seemed to be the most stable path of ice to the shoreline. It was Jughead who ultimately took the wheel, rebuking Archie for trying to drive one-handed.
"My place," Betty told him. "We'll get her a change of clothes and a warm shower."

"On it."

Cheryl was silent on the drive to the Cooper home, resting her head on Betty's shoulder. Veronica's coat was draped over her like a velvety blanket, working to keep the chill at bay. Archie's hand had begun to swell, and his fingers weren't willing to bend anymore.

"I'm dropping you three at the house and taking this one to the ER," Jughead announced, turning onto Betty's street. "No protests, Arch. That needs an X-ray."

"What about your dad?" Archie countered.

He shrugged, turning into the Cooper driveway. "I'll drop you off, drive down to see him, pick you up with the cast I'm sure you're wearing home. Stop arguing."

Veronica and Betty helped Cheryl out of the truck, steadying her with their arms and soothing words. The redhead paused as her feet touched the driveway and turned around to face Archie.

"Thank you," she murmured.

Archie nodded. "You're very welcome. Go get some rest, okay?"

"Mmmhmm."

As the trio of women stepped inside, Jughead exhaled loudly. "Holy shit…"

"I know, Jug. And you're right, you know: my hand's broken. I just didn't want Ronnie to panic."

"Ahh." Backing out of the driveway, Jughead headed down the main strip in search of the town hospital. "How bad is it?"

"Pretty sure I broke at least two bones. Wanna bet on it?"

"Yeah, no thanks."

As Jughead drove on in silence, he thought of himself, of Cheryl and how they were two sides of a coin in so many ways. Rich and poor. North and south. Shattered families, broken and lost, but in very different ways. He thought of Archie, of Betty and even Veronica, reminding himself of how his friends had been there for him in his darkest days, no matter how many times he'd tried to shove them away. And yet Cheryl, for all of her popularity, had few true friends to rely on, it seemed—only hangers on, craving her social power.

_I could have ended up like her_, he realized sadly. Giving in to despair. Unable to see any light.

Much to the surprise of his fifteen year-old self, he silently promised to look out of Cheryl from now on. That she would never feel alone again.

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His father was cuffed to the table at the centre of the room, as if he were a threat to his son. His grizzled beard was unkempt, his eyes heavily rimmed in shadows, but his father still managed a genuine smile as he entered the room.

"Twenty minutes," the deputy instructed them.
Jughead nodded, sinking into the chair opposite FP and waiting for the door to close on their private room. As the deputy's footsteps carried down the corridor beyond, he began to speak softly, but firmly.

"Cheryl Blossom tried to kill herself this afternoon," he began, staring his father down. "Tried to drown herself in the river to be with Jason."

FP's head bowed forward, his expression pained with guilt. "She okay?"

"For now," Jughead replied, continuing. "And you know what I thought about after Archie pulled her from the river? That I could have ended up that low. Could still end up that low. Not like life has done me any favours."

"Jughead, you listen to me—"

"No! No, you will listen to me, Dad. Really listen. Because I'm done with this," Jughead's hands slammed down on the table, startling FP. "Cheryl's family kept her in the dark about the truth and when it finally came out, it destroyed her. Their lies destroyed her. And whether they did it out of spite, or to somehow shield her, it didn't stop her from trying to end her life. And I get it now. Whatever you're hiding about Jason's death, it's because of me and Jelly. But I'm telling you that I can't protect myself from a threat I can't see coming. And neither you nor the Serpents can save me if it comes knocking."

FP's hands gripped the edge of the table tightly, white knuckles and dirty fingernails from days in a cell. "Jughead, I may be more innocent than guilty, but I've done things. Terrible things… and I'm going to have to answer for my part in that, you understand?"

Jughead sighed. "I know. And this isn't about telling Keller shit, or snitching, or whatever reasons you're keeping your mouth shut. This is about me, your son, asking his father for the truth. I may not like it, but I can't live with the uncertainty anymore. You owe me better than that."

"And what if you can't live with that truth, Jughead?" FP countered angrily. "I've already lost your mom, Jellybean, my freedom. You're all I've got left."

"Is the truth worse than me thinking the last twelve weeks have been nothing but lies and bullshit?" Jughead snapped, his vision blurring as he blinked away tears. "Because that's what it feels like to me. Everything you told me and Betty about Jason. Everything you said on the phone when you begged me to come home. Was any of it true? Did you actually change, or did you just say what I wanted to hear to get me on the damn bus and keep suspicion off of you?"

"I was completely honest about that, Jughead Jones. I have never told you a lie, not once!" His cuffed hands jangled as he tugged at his slicked back hair. "The only thing I've done is choose my words carefully and lie by omission."

"Then stop omitting things, please!"

"Fine."

FP sniffed loudly, leaning forward in his chair. "But first you gotta believe me, Jughead. When I told you why I decided to get sober, I was telling you the truth. Seeing Jason dead, knowing you were almost the same age, it destroyed me. I saw your face on that corpse. I had nightmares about opening the freezer and instead of him, it'd be you…"

Jughead's heart ached as his father broke down in tears. The practiced stoicism of the biker king was falling away, leaving a humbled, horrified father in his wake.

"Did you kidnap Jason, like you told Keller?" Jughead prodded gently.
"No, no I didn't," FP replied firmly. "What I told you about Jason approaching me, that was true. The kid needed to get away and I took advantage of his school connections and cut him in on a job. I realize now it was probably Blossom's dope, but I didn't know that at the time. Didn't ask questions when I ran these side jobs, you understand me, boy?"

Jughead nodded. "So Jason came for money, and he was supposed to what, sell heroin?"

"No, just move it from distributor to distributor. The guy he was gonna take it to would then parcel it out and his goons would do the dealing," FP continued. "After Jason leaves, one of the Serpents comes up to me and asks what's up. Why are we letting a rich kid on our turf unanswered, etc. Told him to mind his business, that I was making a strategic move. This guy was also running side jobs, but let me be clear: the Serpents, as a gang, deal in pot only. No guns, no narcotics, none of that shit."

"Mustang," Jughead concluded. "He was the other guy running jobs."

"Yeah." FP shook his head with a huff. "Knew from your manuscript that if anyone was gonna put the pieces together, it'd be you."

"If Jason was running the stuff, why was it in his getaway car?"

"The drop-off date was the Fourth of July." FP's eyes skirted the floor, avoiding his son's stare. "Day before, Mustang says he's got a job offer: kidnap the Blossom kid, collect a ransom of two hundred grand. I tell him to piss off, that I won't link the Serpents to anything like that. But Mustang decided he wanted to get paid. Calls me on the night of the Fourth, says he'll meet me out back. Figure it's the cash for Jason's delivery, but instead…"

"Mustang kidnapped Jason…" Jughead's mind connected the dots. "Who offered Mustang the kidnapping job?"

"He never told me, and that's the God's honest truth," FP insisted. "I cut him off before he could even tell me about it and once it was in motion, I told him I wanted to know as little as possible."

In Jughead's mind, he knew exactly who was behind the kidnapping: Hiram Lodge. Likely a power move to grab the Blossom land he needed in the Southside, although the specifics of how he would have leveraged it remained a mystery.

"So why didn't you let Jason go? You're the Serpent King, Dad. Why not tell Mustang to piss off and set him free?"

"Because by then, the police were already searching the river, and I had no idea where the drugs were," FP explained. "There was no telling what the kid would do after being double-crossed, so I told Mustang to stash him in the basement. Said he was responsible for him being treated well, that he could collect the damn ransom, but I wanted half."

Jughead leaned back in his chair, disgusted. "Jesus, Dad. Are you kidding me?"

"You want the truth or not?"

"Fine." Jughead folded his arms over his chest, biting back an angry tirade. "Then what?"

"I asked for half for two reasons: first of all, it was gonna be my ass in a sling if the drugs weren't found and the kidnapping was discovered. Keller's been after me for years. But second, I had thought of a way to make Jason shut up. I told the kid that I'd look after him, that I would give him fifty grand for his getaway as long as he played along and cooperated. Told him to think of how
much fun it would be to screw his dad over for the cash. Jason agreed.

"So Jason thought his dad would pay a ransom, then he would take off with Polly?"

"Yeah. And that job he agreed to was only gonna pay five grand, so fifty was a huge difference. He knew it. And aside from Mustang getting punch happy a couple times, the kid was fed and clothed. I did lie and tell him Polly was fine. Figured I'd help him after this stupid idea of Mustang's played out. We waited a few days, and then Mustang came by, said the guy who hired him had made contact. Blossom said he needed a few days and that he'd come by the night of the tenth. He had a bag with him, but insisted on proof of life before giving up the cash. Mustang agreed… and you know what happened."

Jughead knew. Mustang had let Clifford downstairs, where he retrieved a family heirloom and put a bullet in his son's head.

"The money?"

"Clifford was bluffing. Left us with nothing to ransom and a murder in the basement of the Wyrm. I lost it with Mustang, told him to deal with whoever hired him. I called someone I trusted for help and pulled the video from the DVR. There's a reason I do business in that basement. Hidden camera, just in case."

"Mustang's overdose was a murder, wasn't it?"

"Pretty sure it was, can't prove it. Mustang got paid for the kidnapping, flipped me some of the cash. Enough to pay for the missing heroin and keep that from blowing up." With a heavy sigh, FP leaned back in his chair. "And there it is. The truth. Was it worth it, Jughead?"

"Yeah, yeah it was." Down the corridor, footsteps quietly approached, signalling the end of their twenty minutes. "Because I know that no matter how terrible things got, you were trying to do the right thing. And that counts for something, at least with me. But one more thing: why did you confess to it all, even things like the break-in?"

As the lock clicked in the door, FP leaned as close as he could. "Because he promised you'd end up like Jason if I didn't."

And there it was, what he'd always feared, deep down. His father was going to jail to protect him. His hand shot across the table, reaching for FP. Their fingers grazed even as the deputy ordered them apart.

"Be safe, Jughead. Look after your sister and your mom, alright?"

"I'll do my best," Jughead promised.

FP grinned. "Ain't no doubt in my mind."

"I told my sister about my darkness tonight," Betty whispered.

They were lying together on the floor of the Andrews home, nestled on blankets in front of the TV. It was how they'd spent countless days of their childhood, with bowls of popcorn and snacks in tow. Archie was upstairs, woozy from the pain medication the hospital had given him. Two broken metacarpals meant a cast for the next several weeks—and no football for at least two of them. Fred
was still at work, having taken off from the work site at the hospital's call. It was a payroll week, and Fred was determined to ensure his guys were paid promptly.

"How did that go?"

"Polly… She understands it. How the anxiety and the anger can build until you need to do something to ease the pain." Propping herself up on her elbows, Betty stared into his eyes. "She told me details about the times she tried to kill herself. Told Cheryl, too."

"Oh, Betts…"

"The feeling of being alone, of being so lost and afraid she'd never feel anything good again… It breaks my heart, Juggie. And it scares me because there was one time, when I was with Chuck, that I felt that hopelessness, too."

The way her voice cracked as she spoke, the way her body curled in on itself, diminishing her light… It was a knife in his heart. He sat up slowly, reaching for her hand.

"Betty, did you…?"

"Almost." Her voice was scarcely audible as she bowed her head. "I was so tired of being perfect, of never being perfect enough… I thought that maybe… But I didn't do anything. Not like Cheryl or Polly."

"What changed your mind?"

"I got a letter from you. The last one, actually, that you sent. And in it, you told me that my silence was a darkness, that you couldn't keep casting stones into a well without hearing the splash, and part of me wanted to disappear even more than ever. But then I thought of how you would react if I was gone. And I couldn't hurt you that way."

*I should have known something was wrong. I should have come back like I was planning to. She needed me. I could have lost her forever.*

He pulled her into his arms, clutching her tightly against his chest as she quietly wept. Her head burrowed into the crook of his neck, her breath hot on his skin.

"I knew that someday, I'd find a way to write you, to tell you everything that had happened," she continued. "And you would forgive me, I hoped, for being quiet. But you'd never be okay if I wasn't here at all. I fought back against the darkness because you would have wanted me to. And I'm still here."

"You're still here, Betty. All three of you. And I am forever grateful for it."

"Me too. Because now, we're this." Her lips found his, gently claiming them with a kiss. "And this means everything to me."

"Same." He nestled her closer, pulling her on top of his chest. "You're the one thing keeping me steady in all of this, Betts. I'm stronger than any bullshit this world throws at me as long as you've got my back."

"You've always got me, Juggie."

"And you'll always have me," he vowed.
They fell asleep there, in the dim glow of the television. Fred Andrews, finding them entwined and content, simply smiled and fixed himself a quiet dinner. He had fifty-five minutes to wake Betty in time to make her curfew, after all.

*Let them rest*, he thought, gently covering them with a throw blanket.

Chapter End Notes

And there it is! My theory: Hiram Lodge is the reason Jason is dead.

I would love to hear what you think, or your own theories on the full events of the murder and how it happened.

ALSO... this story has one more chapter and an epilogue full of the happy ending joy these two deserve. If we can get to 10 reviews before next Wednesday, I'll post the final main chapter early. If we hit 20? I'll give you the epilogue too. It's the fluffy, sexy joy I've been denying our babies, promise.

ALSO ALSO... I'll be posting a slightly smutty, definitely flirty Bughead AU story soon (expect 6-7 chapters max).
At long last, we come to the final main chapter.

Reviewer question: how did FP know to follow Bughead to Jason's car and torch it when they left? Show never did explain that well, did they? My answer, reader: FP feared for Jughead's safety. He knew he was looking into things - remember, Joaquin was spying in the series, basically. FP as Serpent King asked a trusted Serpent to watch out for Jughead. This also fits with the show (note how FP was trying to find out where Jughead was going to stay when the Twilight was shut down?)

Life has been pretty mean to Bughead in this AU. Here's where I start to make it right for them. A little fluffy flashback goodness, and some good fortune. Warning: this story is rated T, but consider it a strong T from here on out.

Song: Fire Meet Gasoline - Sia

Disclaimer: Not my sandbox, just building dreamy ship castles in it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Three years ago

"So which play are we doing?"

Jughead groaned, opening the fridge door and studying its contents. "I can't believe this is even a choice with you, Betts."

His blonde best friend settled into a seat at the kitchen table and unzipped her backpack.
"Shakespeare is classic, Jughead Jones."

"Classic? If by writing dramatic re-enactments of historical events or ripping off other writers you mean classic, then yeah, Shakey's your boy." Grabbing a Tupperware container of roast beef, he waved it above his head. "You hungry?"

"No, thanks. Got any juice?"

"Got a bottle of Sunny D."

"That'll do! But don't think it will make my mood any sunnier," she chided gently. "You're being way too hard on the Bard. Regardless of his writing techniques, his stories are timeless. Love, revenge, miscommunication—all classic themes that authors are still working with today."

Jughead poured a glass of juice for each of them, delivering Betty's glass before shoving the leftover roast in the microwave. He was always grateful when it was his turn to work with Betty on a class project (she insisted on alternating between him and Archie), but a part of him was wishing he'd gone solo. While Shakespeare had a few intriguing plays he could at least enjoy dissecting, their teacher's options were Romeo and Juliet, The Taming of the Shrew and Hamlet. Sexism, rampant sexism and an alright play.

Betty, on the other hand, adored the tale of Fair Verona, volunteering daily to read Juliet's parts. Mercifully, her ability to cleanly read the lines in perfect iambic pentameter made it less of a chore to listen to than when Ginger was given a turn. Jughead typically offered to read Mercutio to Archie's Romeo, or pleaded to read the Nurse's lines as a second choice. Those two characters knew the score, he thought with a smirk.

A commotion in the back of the trailer caught his attention. His snack abandoned, he edged around the corner and was promptly slammed into by a skinny girl with her long jet-black hair woven in a French braid. She giggled loudly as he picked her up and swung her in a circle.

"Where do you think you're going, Jellybean?"

"Put me down, Jug!" she squealed, flailing her legs.

"Turn you upside down? Okay!"

As his sister protested, he dipped her backwards, her head nearly touching the floor. Her hands shot out to support herself and she shrieked with joy as Jughead held her in a perfect headstand.

"Hold it… hold it…."

"My head is full of blood!" Jellybean announced with a giggle.

From the back bedroom came a warm, albeit exhausted voice: "Jughead Jones, do not make your sister puke! She has a birthday party to go to!"

"Fine! Sorry, Jelly, down you go."

Carefully, he guided her back to her feet, steadying her as vertigo hit. Betty cheered for her, declaring her ready for the Olympics. Realizing her brother had company, Jellybean yanked away from her brother and ran to Betty's side. The blonde's arms opened in time to catch an eight year-old on a mission for hugs.

"Betty! Betty, you've been gone for DAYS!"
"I have! How dare I?" Tugging Jellybean onto her lap, Betty beamed. "So, what have you been learning at school? Tell me *everything."

The microwave chimed and Jughead retrieved his snack slash first dinner. Fork in hand, he took a bite, listening to his sister ramble about growing a plant in a Styrofoam cup and mastering fractions. Betty's interest was genuine, her eyes widening as his sister recounted feeding a mouse to the classroom pet: a snake.

"You're not afraid of the snake?"

Jellybean laughed, reaching for Betty's juice. "No, silly. Snakes are loyal and only bother you if you bother them. Daddy said so."

"Well, your Daddy is super smart and *you* are going to get tickled if you don't stop swiping my Sunny D!" Betty warned, winking at Jughead.

"Noooooooo!"

Setting down the juice cup, Jellybean slid off of the chair and rushed to greet her mother. Gladys was dressed in her usual tank top and jeans, her hair tied up in a careful knot atop her head. Pressing a kiss to her daughter's forehead, she reached for a gift bag on the sofa.

"We shouldn't be too late, maybe seven? Oh! Hello, Betty."

"Hey, Mrs. Jones. Don't worry, he'll have his homework done, teeth brushed—"

"You're not my babysitter," Jughead grumbled.

"You can always use someone to look after you, Forsythe," his mother rebuked him softly. "See you soon."

Jellybean rushed out the door, her sandals clomping on the steps as she yelled out over her shoulder. "Bye, Jug! Bye, Betty!"

As the screen door shut, Jughead relaxed. He loved his family dearly, but with his father's moodiness, the vibe at home could shift fast. Betty didn't need to see that.

"So…" Betty pulled out her Shakespeare books, reaching for *The Taming of the Shrew* first. "I don't like this one because it's misogynistic garbage, but what do you have against *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*?"

"This could get ugly, Miss Judy Blume."

"Bring it," she challenged him.

Leaning against the kitchen counter, Jughead snorted. "Alright. First of all, I don't hate *Hamlet*. It's the only tolerable play of the three, mainly because it deals with legitimate issues and the drama isn't total BS. The guy's dad dies and grief is hard enough, especially when you're away at school and don't get any closure. On top of that, his mom marries his uncle right away and the whole city is talking smack about her, Hamlet included. *Then* he goes insane trying to prove his uncle is a killer and in the process, kills his girlfriend's dad, drives her to suicide and then dies because her brother is a cowardly shit. If anyone deserves to be dressed all in black and complaining about life, it's *Hamlet*.

"Given your commentary, I'm assuming you don't think *Romeo and Juliet* has substance?" Betty
Jughead laughed. "Are you kidding me? Romeo is literally in love with some other girl until he catches sight of a hottie, whereupon he immediately changes his mind and marries Juliet. Juliet is so caught up in this whirlwind romance that she fakes her death to run off with him and gets the idiot killed." Taking a long swig of juice, Jughead rolled his eyes. "I believe in attraction at first sight, but love? Come on! They don't even know each other."

Leaning forward in her chair, Betty smirks. "Oh Jughead, your superficial analysis is embarrassing. Why am I working with you?"

"Because Archie keeps pronouncing *dost* as 'doo-est' for reasons I'll never understand." Sitting down across the table from her, he gestured for her to continue. "Enlighten me, then."

"The reason that Romeo and Juliet are so eager to marry is the arranged marriage she's being forced into by her father. She's fourteen and being married off to a stranger in his twenties because daddy considers her property. Of course she's willing to risk death to escape! The guy she loves is a nobleman, but their parents have a petty ongoing spat. She has no interest in Paris the turd."

Jughead frowns. He'd forgotten that twinkle of feminist rebellion.

"And as for your boy Hamlet, instead of confiding in his girlfriend about his uncle and his plan, he shuts her out, drives her away with cruelty and tells her she was just a lay. Highly problematic and tragic, because the reality is they love each other, but their families have torn them apart," Betty concluded.

"Alright, Cooper. You've made a valid point," he conceded reluctantly. "You've also presented the working version of a thesis statement, so thanks for doing the heavy lifting, partner!"

Betty reached for her notebook, flipping through the pages to her careful notes on the assignment at hand. "Hmm, she didn't restrict us from focusing on multiple plays! I love it."

"I still insist the moral of *Romeo and Juliet* is 'Don't hang out with priests who dabble in lethal drugs.'"

"Or maybe don't trust Elizabethan Fedex with the news of your fake death plan?" Betty countered, chuckling quietly.

"Miscommunication... *That* is a common thread, isn't it?" Jughead mused. "So much of the plot in each play depends on what people don't know, hear too late, or hear incorrectly."

"Yes!" Betty's pen scribbled furiously as she took notes. "Because really, how much heartache could be avoided if these couples would just tell each other everything? Their feelings, their fears?"

She paused, those brilliant green orbs casting their spell upon him. He was lost again, stung by the secret truth in her words. *If only I could tell her how I feel... or if she could feel it too, tell me first..."

"Juggie?"

"Hmm? Yeah, no, that's perfect. This presentation is going to obliterate the competition."

"Of course it will. We're working together, and we're awesome. Now, let's get outlining..."
Now

He was sprawled out on her pastel pink blanket with a familiar text when she emerged from the bathroom. Hair damp, her t-shirt sticking to her skin, no make-up—she was a vision. He sat the book down, far more interested in an angelic woman haloed in early morning light.

"Whatcha reading?" Betty asked.

Holding up her copy of *Romeo and Juliet*, Jughead shrugged. "Wanted to see if I hated it any less now that I'm smitten with you."

Betty's eyes twinkled as she crossed the room. "Oh, really? And the verdict is?"

He tossed the book aside with a look of disgust. "These two have no idea what love is."

His arm snaked around her waist, tugging her onto the bed in a flurry of limbs and frantic kisses. They didn't have much time alone—Polly and her mother were shopping for road snacks for their trip to Manhattan, having reluctantly dropped Cheryl off at Thornhill—but Jughead was hardly about to waste the opportunity. And, as Betty swung her leg over his hips and straddled him, it became clear that they were very much in agreement. Leaning down, wet hair draped along his cheek, she rotated her hips and kissed him hard. The friction elicited a groan of need as his hands slid beneath her shirt to cup her firm breasts.

"See?" he murmured, breaking off the kiss. "Our bedroom time is so much more fun than theirs."

"We could make it hotter," she murmured before sinking her teeth into his shoulder.

"How long do you figure we got?"

"At least ten, maybe twenty minutes more. And Polly will call me when they're around the corner," she replied with a wink.

"Goddamn, I love your brain," Jughead growled.

His hands seized the hem of her flimsy cotton tee, tugging it over her head and dropping it on the plush pink carpet. The delicate lace masquerading as a bra sent a shiver of sinful delight down his spine. He buried his face in her cleavage, earning a purr of satisfaction as his open-mouthed kisses roamed her perfect curves. Her hands shoved aside his beanie, fisting in his hair as her centre pressed against his groin.

"Don't stop," she pleaded.

"Not until Polly calls," he promised.

Tasting and teasing, hands roaming, they explored each other eagerly. Somehow, his t-shirt hit the ceiling. Fingers danced along his chest and down his jeans and oh my fucking God, she'd taken hold of him unexpectedly and it was all he could do not to embarrass himself. His breath hitched as he retaliated with a wandering hand of his own, earning a shuddering gasp.

"This okay?"

"Don't you even think of stopping," she hissed.

"I'll take that as a yes," he teased, biting her lip gently as he continued to explore this incredibly alluring new territory she'd welcomed him to.
He couldn't speak for himself—couldn't speak, period, as Betty's focus returned to demonstrating her manual dexterity through his boxers—but he was moments from falling over the edge when the torturous sound of Betty's ringtone cut through the room. His girlfriend groaned at the warning bell, planting a hurried kiss upon his lips before scrambling for her shirt.

"To be continued?" she panted.

"Yes, please!"

Recognizing his jeans did nothing to hide his arousal, he snatched his shirt from the floor and hurried to the bathroom down the hall. As he debated whether to finish things off or wait for his problem to dissipate, he heard Betty greet her mother and sister as if she hadn't been seconds away from getting him off just now… and now, all he could think about was Betty straddling him.

Yeah, this wasn't going away anytime soon, he quickly realized. Before Mama Cooper could grow suspicious, he closed his eyes and relieved his frustration in record time.

The inner circle spent the afternoon at the Andrews home, taking advantage of Fred's decision to put in overtime for a little private conversation. Veronica had arrived bearing pizza and wings, presumably the proverbial spoon of sugar to make her latest discoveries more palatable.

"I took advantage of Daddy's late nights this week and broke into his study," she explained, setting aside her half-eaten pizza. "I was able to find a few new pieces of the puzzle, none of them good."

Archie's hand settled on her knee, squeezing reassuringly. "It's okay, Ronnie. We're here for you."

Slowly, the raven-haired beauty listed off what she'd found. For starters, her father was hoping to build a private prison and housing for its staff. The sheer scope of the project led her to believe he would need far more land than SoDale and the Blossom property combined. Remembering her drive through the Southside with Jughead, she thought of the Whyte Wyrm and Sunnyside Park as viable properties he'd pursue, although Southside High was smack in the middle of it all. A little sleuthing through her mother's laptop affirmed her theory—and sadly, her mother's complicity.

"The Whyte Wyrm is struggling financially. The current lease on the land is set to expire in six months, and the projected increase will bankrupt the owner in maybe another six," Veronica explained sadly. "The right offer could definitely be persuasive. And once Daddy has the building, acquiring the land is easy."

"Who owns the land beneath it?" Betty asked.

"Junkyard Steve. I seriously doubt it'll take much for my father to cut the right check to sway him."

"Steve would probably flip it for a year's worth of beer," Jughead grumbled, pushing his plate away. "And there goes my appetite."

"There's one more thing," Veronica announced reluctantly. "The reason I've had so much freedom to snoop these last few days? My parents have been entertaining their old friends from Montreal."

Jughead sunk back in his chair, equally stunned and unsurprised by this revelation. "And it all comes back to the heroin."

"Last year, when my mother pleaded with me to testify on my father's behalf, I hesitated. You
remember, B?"

Betty nodded. "Of course I do. That was when Ethel's dad ended up in the hospital."

Swiping at her eyes, the troubled Latina sighed. "I didn't want to defend him, but he implied bad things could come out about my mother if I didn't. At the time, it seemed like a bluff, but I didn't want to risk it. But now, I see she's tied up in it too. She may not be the mastermind, but she's definitely happy to play along. I wish I never helped him get out of that prison cell!"

"Ronnie, c'mere," Archie urged her, pulling her closer. "Shh, it's okay. You were manipulated. You love your mom."

"We're not our parents," Betty assured her, glancing at Jughead. "Except maybe Archie."

"Betty's right," Jughead agreed. "Your dad's a bastard for using you to get out of jail."

"He's going to destroy the Southside, Jughead. We have to do something," Veronica pleaded.

Tugging his beanie down, Jughead reached for his plate. "And we will. We know the endgame. All we have to do is find a way to either reveal Hiram's true plans, or block them. And for that, I need brain fuel."

His friends laughed quietly, the comforting familiarity of a Jones eating more than the average human soothing their troubled spirits. Jughead quietly ruminated on his mental map of the Southside, studying each block adjacent to the SoDale project. The Wyrm. The junkyard. Southside High. Sunnyside. Places that were integral to his childhood, all merely cannon fodder for Hiram Lodge. It made his limbs twitch with rage.

Did Hiram decide that the best way to control Southside's real estate was seizing control of the drug trade in Riverdale? Did he force Blossom's hand by orchestrating the kidnapping of Jason? And if he now controlled the drugs flooding the schools, per the Mayor's press conference, what advantage did it give him?

"You okay, Jug?" Betty whispered.

"I'm fine," he lied.

"You're not, but we'll talk later," she replied as her phone chirped beside her. "Wait… Turn on the TV!"

Archie scrambled for the remote as Betty directed him to the local news. On screen stood Mayor McCoy, with Sheriff Keller at her side.

"… a meth lab. The damage done to the integrity of the building cannot be overstated. Given that Riverdale High is not at capacity, the decision has been made for the safety of our children."

"What the hell?" Archie muttered.

Veronica's eyes widened. "Daddy. It's started."

The press conference continued as a ticker scrolled across the screen: Southside High condemned. Students to transfer to Riverdale High effective Monday.

Betty stepped into the kitchen, speaking in hushed tones on her cell phone. Mayor McCoy's empty promises of harmony and an easy transition reeked of political posturing, but Jughead was more
concerned with his distraught girlfriend. He rose quickly, placing his arm around her as she mumbled various words of agreement to the caller.

"Betts?"

"Thank you. I've gotta go."

Noticing Betty's dramatic shift in demeanor, Archie muted the TV. "Betty, what is it?"

"It's Chuck." Drawing a deep breath, she leaned into Jughead's embrace. "He's taking a plea deal. I... I won't have to testify."

"That's good, right?" Veronica asked nervously.

Betty nodded, forcing a half-smile. "It is. I'm sorry, I know I seem upset, but... I guess I've spent so much time worrying about it, worrying about seeing him again in town, that I can't believe it's over."

Jughead led her back to the sofa, urging her to sit down. "What's the deal?"

"Two years' probation, an anger management program, 200 hours of community service explaining domestic violence to other teens and a protection order, binding for the course of his probation." Glancing at the TV, Betty's eyes widened. "He has to leave town, or be home schooled."

"At least something good came of this mess!" Veronica exclaimed, reaching for her Diet Coke.

"The timing of this also works perfectly," Jughead mused. "Monday morning, the students of Southside High will be shuttled into Riverdale High. If this town ever needed your speech, Betty, it's now."

Forcing a brave smile, Betty shrugged. "I'll see what I can do, Mr. Jones."

Dressed in a sleeveless pink blouse with ruffled trim, her hair cascading in looping waves, Betty was breathtaking.

"Wear your hair down forever," Jughead murmured huskily as Betty paced backstage.

"Betty's ponytail is iconic and beyond reproach," Kevin Keller chastised as he hurried by, clipboard in hand.

"I am not criticizing the ponytail!" Jughead protested. "Just... wow."

"But if I wear it down every day, I won't have the pleasure of this reaction," she teased. "Besides, curling it takes forever and I just do not give enough of a damn to put that effort in every morning."

The sound of applause signalled the opening remarks of the Jubilee, meaning Betty would be called to the stage in a few minutes. Reaching for her cue cards, Betty took a deep breath, holding it briefly before releasing it.

"You should head out there, Juggie."

"Alright. You're going to be amazing, Betts. Just be yourself."

"That easy, huh?"
"You've got me wrapped around your finger, don't you?"

With one last kiss, he slipped away, rounding the auditorium and stepping just inside the rear entrance. A quick scan of the seating revealed no readily accessible chairs. No matter, standing suited him just fine. It gave him the perfect vantage point for people watching.

"And now, please welcome Riverdale High's Betty Cooper with opening remarks."

The Mayor stepped aside, her practiced smile in place as she shook Betty's hand. The blonde teen smiled, equally poised. Jughead smirked. McCoy had no idea what she was in for. Granted, he only had a hint of it. Betty had kept her final speech hidden from everyone. But he knew his girlfriend well enough to know she'd take at least one shot at the Mayor's leadership tonight.

Stepping up to the podium, Betty adjusted the mic and laid her cue cards down. "Thank you, Mayor McCoy, for inviting me to speak on an important day. Riverdale's anniversary. And what defines Riverdale? Its people. You, me, our neighbours and friends."

Gesturing to Archie and Veronica, who'd opted to sit upfront, Betty smiled. "Archie Andrews is Riverdale." The crowd applauded enthusiastically for the local football star and sometime musician. "A kind friend, a star athlete, a loyal son. Kevin Keller is Riverdale," she continued, gesturing backstage. "He's the one who ensures so many local events are organized, on time and perfectly lit."

Betty chuckled softly to herself as Kevin called out from backstage: "You forgot the perfect costumes for the spring play!"

The crowd laughed as Betty took a sip of water before continuing. "Veronica Lodge is Riverdale. She is, unquestionably, the person you want on your side in a difficult time. She will always have your back, like a good neighbour should."

"But you know who else is Riverdale? FP Jones, who were all so quick to judge and blame for Jason's murder, so much so he simply accepted your assumptions."

Jughead nodded along as the crowd murmured nervously, sensing the point of Betty's speech. What he did not expect, however, was the next sentence she spoke.

"Jughead Jones is Riverdale, the very heart and soul of it," she told the crowd, glancing in his direction. "Without him, Jason's murder never would have been solved. Mayor McCoy would have you give Archie and I the credit, but Jughead devoted himself to the truth, and he found it. And yet, how do we thank him? By relegating him to the shadows, like we do with any truth that is too ugly for us. The truth being that Clifford Blossom killed his son, and yet, he is also Riverdale."

Glancing down at her cards, Betty scooped them up in her hands. She tore them neatly in half, tossing the pieces onto the stage.

"That is what our town is right now: divided into factions. Two towns within a town, constantly assuming the worst of each other. But we're one town," Betty insisted, scanning the crowd. "We are all Riverdale. And with the tragic loss of Southside High, the youth of this town will be united. We will learn together, grow together, make new friends. Because that's what Riverdale was founded on, wasn't it? Separate families choosing to embrace each other's differences to build a community."

Jughead's jaw fell open as Betty tossed her hair back, studying the anxious crowd before her. She'd called out the entire town, suggesting they grow up. It was bold and heartfelt. But were they listening?

"Riverdale's at a crossroads. If we don't face the reality of who and what we are, if we keep lying to
ourselves and keeping secrets from each other, then what happened to Jason could happen again. Or, God forbid, something even worse. Riverdale must do better. We must do better."

The silence in the auditorium was violent, a sucker punch to the gut. Betty stepped back nervously, her eyes finding him in the crowd. Without hesitation, Jughead began to applaud loudly. The Coopers popped out of their seats to join him, then Archie and Veronica. Like a wave, the sound swelled until it thundered in Jughead's chest. With a small nod, Betty slipped backstage, pushing past the Mayor without a backward glance.

Kevin announced a short pause as the Pussycats set up for their featured performance, but Jughead slipped away, meeting Betty outside. She was shivering, having forgotten her coat inside, but her cheeks were equally flushed with excitement.

"Well?"

Jughead threw his arms around her, holding her tight. "That was brilliant, Betts. Except for that momentary lapse in reason where you went on about some loser kid being the heart of this town," he joked, earning a poke in the ribs.

"I meant every word."

"Also, I personally think of myself more as the liver of Riverdale, if we're going to get anatomical."

Betty's hands seized the collar of his coat, yanking him closer as her lips crashed into his. "Take the damn compliment, Juggie," she murmured. Pulling back, she glanced over his shoulder and grinned. "Polly, Mom, Dad!"

The Coopers had joined them in the crisp evening air, each congratulating Betty in turn. Alice and Hal seemed content in each other's company, clearly in an "on again" phase. With hugs and praise exchanged, Alice Cooper's attention turned curiously to him.

"Jughead, Betty has told me of your predicament."

"My what?"

"Archie told me," Betty blurted out quickly. "About what social services said. Don't be mad at him. He let it slip. You know he's a terrible liar."

"Oh." Damn it. "Um, yeah. I'm expecting the placement call Monday."

Alice frowned, tossing her hair back. "Well, even if Southside High were not abruptly shuttered this afternoon, we feel it would be irresponsible for you to be uprooted from everything familiar to you. We also know what a tremendous force of good you've been in Betty's life."

Hal stepped forward, smiling warmly. "Jughead, we'd like to volunteer to be your guardians. You'd come and live at our house, and stay in familiar surroundings."

"In separate bedrooms, of course!" Alice chimed in. "We'll convert the basement to a room for Polly and move you in upstairs."

Betty was speechless and Jughead was faring no better. While he and Alice had never completely seen eye to eye, their shared love of Betty had seemingly built a bridge of understanding.

"Mom, Dad… I mean, would social services really approve of that?" Betty asked.
"But of course!" Alice replied confidently. "We're a perfect family. And if they don't like it, Fred is conveniently situated next door. We would co-sponsor with him."

"Thank you," Jughead blurted out, reeling from their offer.

"It's the least we can do," Alice assured him. "Now, come along. That beautiful speech calls for a milkshake!"

By Sunday afternoon, it was official. Jughead Jones was in the foster care of Alice and Hal Cooper, albeit with one amendment: that Jughead reside in the basement apartment, to encourage further propriety, and that the two of them never spend a night alone in the house. Alice signed off immediately, reminding the case worker that Fred would happily host Jughead for sleepovers if needed.

Jughead had his family—his chosen family. It wouldn't be ripped away from him.

To celebrate, Betty suggested a Sunday evening dinner in her backyard, given her parents' absence. The irony of it all, Jughead noted: his first night as a ward of the Coopers, they would be out of town. Having scoured the file provided by Cheryl and verifying the contents within, the Coopers were escorting Polly to Manhattan in pursuit of her children. With assurances that Jughead would spend the night at Archie's, the trio had piled into Hal's car and headed for the highway.

Betty and Jughead had trekked out to Sunnyside Park to gather Jughead's clothing and critical belongings. Empty backpacks in tow, they'd made quick work of the task, loading clothes, toiletries and a family photo album in record time.

"Is this really all you need?" Betty asked.

Scanning the room, Jughead paused. "I'll definitely need to come back for that."

The turntable, speakers and the crates of records nestled beneath it. There wasn't a hell of a lot in the trailer worth keeping, but music was priceless. His childhood memories were framed by song, tied to the albums his parents played. Studying the modest stereo system, Betty crouched down and began disconnecting wires in haste.

"Betts, I said we could come back."

"And I say we'll take a cab back to my place and bring them now," she countered. "Besides, it'll be nice to have music to listen to in the basement. Grab the crates and set them at the door."

Knowing better than to argue with a determined Betty Cooper, Jughead complied. Propping the screen door open, he spotted a trio of teens approaching the steps.

"We have company," he called out.

"Good or bad?" Betty hissed.

"Good," he decided.

Jughead greeted their unexpected visitors with a nod. Toni, Sweet Pea and Fangs hovered at the bottom of the steps, noticing the crates and backpacks on the floor. He noticed a baseball bat in Fangs' hand, loosely held by his side.
"You going somewhere, Jones?" Sweet Pea asked.

"Consider me officially fostered," he replied, thrusting his hands inside his pockets. "What brings you by?"

"Neighbourhood watch," Fangs quipped, loosening his grip on the bat.

"Heard all the noise, wanted to make sure you weren't getting jacked," Toni clarified, leaning on the handrail. "So, who'd they place you with? Old Lady Mackenzie? That weird couple with the three terriers, what's her name… Fangs, help?"

"Oh! You mean the Parkers? Yeah, they're nice, but they push those dogs in carriages."

"Actually, social services has allowed me to stay with the Coopers." At the chorus of titters, Jughead smirked. "I know, we're just as surprised as you are."

"Money talks," Toni mused. "So you're ditching your Southside roots altogether now, huh?"

"He's not ditching anything," Betty chimed in, peering over his shoulder. "Hey, Toni! How are you?"

"Good, considering my school's been shut down as a meth lab and your jocks are already suggesting we're not welcome."

"What?" Betty edged forward, seething. "You tell me who's being a jerk and I will handle them."

"What's Blondie gonna do about it?" Sweet Pea scoffed.

"Oh, I don't know, considering Blondie's best friends include the cheerleading captain and a star football player, I'm sure I can arrange something," Betty retorted. "And if that doesn't work, Jughead tells me stuffing asshole jocks in garbage cans is always a worthwhile option."

Sweet Pea smirked, running a hand through his hair. "You got fire. Must be why he likes you."

"Definitely on the list of reasons," Jughead agreed.

"You three up for burgers?" Betty asked. "We're having a get together at my place, just a few friends. You're more than welcome."

The Serpent teens eyed her suspiciously, waiting for the punchline that never came. Nominating herself as their leader, Toni shrugged her shoulders and nodded.

"I think we all like free food. But are your neighbours gonna be cool with bikers in your backyard?"

"This town needs to get over its drama," Betty griped. "I could not give less of a damn what the snobbier Northsiders think. You're friends of Jughead. You're friends of mine."

Satisfied with her response, Toni grinned. "Well, in that case, we'll follow you out! Let's grab our bikes."

As the trio headed down the road to retrieve their motorcycles, Jughead kissed Betty's cheek. "You didn't have to do that."

Betty tilted her head askance. "Do what? Invite our new classmates to hang out? Welcome someone who helped us on a rough night? Jughead, it's not charity. I want to get to know them."
"I know… It's the fact that it's not charity that makes you so incredible."

Her soft hands cupped his face, studying him intently. "Someday, you'll stop expecting the worst of people. Expecting pity. You'll just know that you are important and belong. Believe me, Juggie."

Lost in the porcelain grace of her gaze, he found himself smiling in spite of himself. He was starting to believe her.

"Well, I'd say that was a success!" Betty called out from the kitchen.

Gathering up the last of the empty soda cans, Jughead deposited them on the centre island to await a rinsing. "Define success."

Jerking her thumb in the direction of the Andrews home, she smirked. "Oh, I don't know. I'd say Archie and Fangs practicing their free throws for basketball tryouts was definitely encouraging, given their awkward introduction."

"That may have been more about Veronica's 'man-candy' comments about Fangs," he mused, tucking away the extra paper plates beneath the counter. "But yeah, Archie came around fast."

"What time do you have to be over there, anyway?"

"Fred said your mom's calling at eleven, so just before that."

Betty's eyes skirted the microwave, noting the 9:23 on the display. "Recycling can definitely wait, then." Betty leaned against the fridge, shaking her head in disbelief. "Toni and Cheryl..."

"Have to admit, I never saw that coming. Especially after the icy introduction."

Betty's eyes twinkled. "So, I wasn't just imagining the flirting between them after dinner?"

"Oh my god, they were as subtle as a sledgehammer! Did you know?"

"Which part: that Toni's bisexual or that Cheryl is an as-yet unspecified sexuality that is not hetero? Neither! Although, there was this thing that happened when Cheryl was in junior high. She and this girl Heather were really close friends and then suddenly, Heather left town. No goodbyes, no warning. Even Cheryl seemed surprised by it. Huh."

"What, Betts?"

"Well, that's when Cheryl went from kind of snobby to Cheryl Bombshell, super bitch." Betty's expression softened. "Maybe Cheryl's been lashing out because she's never been allowed to just be herself."

"Well, if there's anything Toni believes in, it's being yourself," Jughead replied. "I haven't spent much time with her over the years, but she's always dressed differently, but with pride. It's not about getting attention, but just her style. Clearly, opposites attract." Jughead approached the svelte blonde, admiring her silky blue sleeveless blouse and tight black jeans. "On a more serious note, thank you for this. And for not having our entire class show up this time," he gently teased.

"Thank you for indulging me. After the last few weeks, I just really wanted to have a few hours of teenage normalcy. A little calm in the eye of the storm." Her fingers grazed the collar of his black plaid button down, tugging him closer. "Because the fight's not over yet, Jughead. I'm not giving up
on your dad. *Hell no. He's getting out of there, as soon as I can pull the town's head out of its ass.*”

Maybe it was the way the soft lighting of the kitchen made her golden hair shimmer. Maybe it was the peace that a few hours of laughter and friends had instilled within him. It absolutely was the conviction in her voice as she promised to stand by his father until justice was done, any consequences to herself be damned. Overwhelmed by her strength and heart, Jughead's own heart tumbled to the ground at her feet in offering.

"And that is why I love you."

Her emerald eyes widened in surprise, mirrors of his own. *Oh, shit. He'd said it.* The words he'd been choking on for years as he dismissed himself as unworthy of her, dismissed the utter absurdity that he would ever be able to give her all that an earthbound angel should possess. And even as he wondered if he should take them back, he immediately ignored his insecurities. For if there was one thing Betty had been telling him for years, it was that he was a good person, worthy of kindness and yes, love.

Swallowing hard, his mouth chalky with fear, he met her gaze and doubled down: "I love you, Betty Cooper."

Her pale pink lips parted, exhaling a soft laugh. "Jughead Jones, I love you."

He hesitated briefly, convinced he'd hallucinated her declaration. Betty took advantage of his bewilderment, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him hard. He laughed into her mouth as their tongues tangled in a frenzy of taste and touch.

She loved him back. Betty Cooper, the girl he'd measured all others against, was in love with him.

His hands gripped her hips tightly, hoisting her onto the kitchen island. Betty giggled in surprise, Jughead laughing too as several cans hit the floor in his haste. His mouth found the sensitive skin of her neck, nipping and sucking as she tilted her head to offer him access. His beanie was plucked from his head and tossed aside, her hands fisting in his hair.

"Blinds closed?" he murmured.

"Yes, thank god!"

Sliding his arms out of his button down, he grinned. "Good. Because I have an idea, if you're interested."

Leaning close, he whispered what had been a fantasy of his ever since he and Archie had come over to visit in freshman year and found Betty perched on the island, reading a magazine in a bikini while waiting for microwave popcorn. And while Betty flushed crimson, she eagerly nodded her approval, reached for the hem of her blouse and tugged it over her head without a second thought. Clothes fell to the cool tile beneath them until Betty was perched on that damn counter, her white lace bra and panties scarcely covering her curves.


"If you were breathless, you'd stop talking," she demurred.

Betty Cooper was a smart woman. So Jughead stopped talking, and started kissing her. All of her. Collarbones, shoulders, the peaked nipples straining their lacy confines. Her toned stomach, the soft curve of her hips, her thighs. And when her cries of his name turned to pleas, he parted her delicate thighs and found a new favourite place to kiss her.
Time lost meaning for Jughead, his world reduced to the sounds of her pleasure, the feel of her bare skin against his, his aching need for more of her. Always more of her. He'd followed her up the stairs to her bedroom at some point, kissing and touching with each step. They were symbiotic, each guiding the other, irrevocably bound to serve each other's needs. Her skin was hot as she pulled him to the mattress, wrapping her thighs around his waist. He groaned at the contact as she pressed hard against his groin, rolling her hips higher and amping up the friction.

"Juggie, I want you. All of you," she demanded.

"I want you, too," he whispered huskily. "Do you have any—"

"Bedside table," she interrupted. "Veronica smuggled me some contraband."

"Veronica, huh?"

Betty's smile was mesmerizing. "She felt tonight was a golden opportunity, and I agreed. To be continued, remember?"

"How could I forget?" Reaching for the strip of foil packets in the drawer, he set them aside to kiss her once more. "You sure, Betts?"

Her fingertips ran along his ribs, dancing in lazy figure eights. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life. I love you."

He leaned forward, forehead resting gently on hers. "I love you so much. You're it for me, Betty. You're all I've ever wanted."

"I'm yours."

In the quiet darkness of her room, where he'd broken her heart by leaving for Toledo, where he'd gathered its pieces to heal her by candlelight just weeks ago, their bodies echoed their hearts and merged into one.

He hadn't been prepared for how it would change him to give himself over completely, to surrender to a rhythm born of instinct as hands gripped and mouths clumsily met. How his heart would beat wildly against his ribcage, wanting to be with her, be hers altogether. How her eyes would darken like forest pines as she whispered that she was close, she was so close, don't stop. How the formless cries spilling from her lips would drive him over the edge until he was falling, falling without end, falling into her arms, happy to die in them as he forgot how to breathe.

He was hers, now. Forever.

Their sweaty bodies clung to each other in climax, panting for air in the shadows. Betty's hair was sprawled across the pillow, a messy halo of gold as he reluctantly pulled away to collapse on the pillow beside her.

"God," she murmured.

"Thank you," he quipped.

Betty giggled softly, curving her body against his. "You should be thankful."

"I am." He was serious now, tilting her chin and drawing her gaze to his. "I'm so thankful for you."

"It's mutual." Her fingers toyed with his messy curls. "We're going to be okay, Juggie. As long as
we're together, we can get through anything," she murmured, kissing his cheek. "Can you see the clock?"

Glancing across the room, he grimaced. "Twenty minutes."

"Hmm. That sounds like enough time to shower…"

Caught off-guard, he turned to face her. "Shower?"

"You're not the only one with fantasies, Jughead Jones."

"Well, since you were so obliging with mine, it's really only fair that I am equally gracious…"

He was five minutes late arriving at the Andrews house that night. And despite the knowing glance from Fred as he informed Alice that Jughead was out of the bathroom now and could take the phone, he regretted nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Ahh, much better, especially dusting off that deleted alternate scene. And yet, my shipper heart still wasn't satisfied.

Leave a review, let me know the hours I spend each week have made you smile, cry, or simply killed some time. And stick around, because we're jumping four years into the future for the epilogue, featuring appearances by FP, Jellybean, and Choni.
Epilogue: Heroes

Chapter Notes

The end of a story. Let's make it a happy one.

Many thanks to everyone who reviewed along the way, especially those who repeatedly popped up (I miss hearing from some of you and hope you’re well): Malo, Jiffermac, Em11134, Meggory and more! If you've quietly left kudos on the regular, you're also awesome.

If you've read In Case Of Emergency, I've borrowed a moment from it for the epilogue.

Archie's Song: You Made Her by Scott Helman
Song playing during breakfast in bed: The Darkest One - The Tragically Hip

STAY TUNED FOR THE END NOTES - THERE’S MORE BUGHEAD COMING.

Disclaimer: Still not mine, but Bughead better have a great ending like this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Epilogue: Heroes

"I, I will be king
And you, you will be queen
Though nothing will drive them away
We can be Heroes, just for one day
We can be us, just for one day…"

Heroes – David Bowie

Four Years Later

"I often say I love my job. I'm grateful to those who support this podcast for letting me tell the stories that matter to me. But for those of us who choose to shine a light into the darkness and reveal the horrors lying within, there is always an emotional toll. Our compassion for the victims weighs heavily on us as we interview them or their families. There is also the toll of immersing in these case files, digging through photos and descriptions of the worst things human beings do to each other."

Hitting pause on the recording, he downed the rest of his now cold coffee, grimacing at the bitter taste. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a familiar face and quickly held up three fingers. They were acknowledged by a nod.

Recording resumed, he continued to speak. "Someone important to me once called out that sleepy town of Riverdale for burying the truth, ignoring the darkness in favour of a candy-coated lie. The story of the Black Hood Killer, and his inadvertent exposure of the deep racial and class divides in the town, is an important one. But having lived through the experience and nearly losing friends in the process, I knew that when we reached this final instalment, I'd need to step away for a few
weeks. That's right, listeners: for the first time in three years, I'm taking an actual vacation! I can scarcely believe it myself. We'll be back with a new episode on October 16th. Those of you who generously support us as monthly subscribers, however, can look forward to a special video chat next Saturday night, which I will be broadcasting from Pop's Chock'lit Shoppe. Yes, that Pop's. As always, thank you for listening. Stay safe in those neon cities and sleepy towns.

Hitting stop, Jughead pulled off his headset and smiled. He'd mix this down tonight, ship it off to Toni for a little extra polish, and tomorrow morning, the final instalment of the Black Hood season would be available on iTunes for his five million (and counting) listeners. His support had grown, allowing him to live more than comfortably on the proceeds even if he hadn't just signed a publishing deal for a book on Riverdale's dark side. And while he missed taking classes full time at Columbia, he had no regrets about dropping out.

Well, maybe one tiny, silly regret. It meant less time with his favourite person, and former classmate.

Gathering up his dishes from the shared office, he padded out to the kitchen, where a svelte blonde was gathering various vegetables from the fridge. She glanced up at his approach, grinning widely.

"Hey babe, podcast all done?"

"Just needs a mix, which can wait until you head out with Veronica." Setting his dishes in the sink, he leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Hey, you had a long shift today. Let me cook dinner."

"No way. It's your birthday tomorrow. And what do we do every birthday?"

With an exaggerated sigh, he leaned against the stove. "I let you spoil me because you love me, and I give you three days off from telling you not to do it."

"Exactly!" Setting out a bag with two marinated striploin steaks and the fixings for a garden salad, Betty tightened her ponytail and washed her hands. "If you insist on doing something, you can pick a bottle of wine for dinner and get the table set. But I've got these incredible steaks from the butcher that will cook up in no time."

His arms slid around her waist from behind as he kissed her neck. "I love you, Betts. Thank you."

"Love you too, Juggie. Now shoo!"

He made quick work of the table settings, setting out the red wine glasses before choosing a bottle of Betty's favourite Australian Cabernet. He opened the wine and left it to breathe before checking his phone. A slew of text messages awaited him, most from a pesky younger sister.

Archie: Hey, we still grabbing coffee tomorrow before your party? Wanted to go over last-minute details.

Veronica: Did Archie talk to you about the entertainment yet?

JB: Hey brother, happy early birthday! You're finally drinking legally, hahaha.

JB: But seriously dude, you'll pick me up at the airport Monday, right?

JB: Hello, Forsythe? Stop macking on your girlfriend and reassure meeeeeeeeee.

Firing back quick confirmations to Archie and Veronica, his attention turned to his sister.

It's called work, JB. How else do you think I paid for your flight? Yes, we will be there Monday.
Betty might even bake her salted caramel cookies if you behave. Talk tomorrow afternoon?

"Dinner in two!" Betty called out.

His sister was quick to reply: *Um, yeah! I want all of the details of the party I'm not allowed to attend.*

Setting his phone aside, he poured the wine and took his usual seat at their antique table, a lucky find at a yard sale a month after the move to New York. The two of them had made the move immediately after high school, matching acceptance letters to Columbia in hand. Archie and Veronica had soon followed—Veronica enrolling in Marketing at NYU and Archie accepting a football scholarship at Rutgers to study Psychology. The commute to Newark was tough at times, but Archie and Veronica had made it work, thanks in large part to Veronica's trust fund. Having unearthed enough dirt to send her father back to prison ten times over, she'd made a play for early control of her trust fund at graduation in exchange for her silence.

What Veronica had failed to tell Daddy Lodge was that she'd already helped Sheriff Keller locate all of the evidence necessary to slap the cuffs on him. Hiram was currently serving a twelve year sentence, no chance of parole. Veronica hadn't visited him once.

Betty sat his dinner down with a flourish, pulling him from his memories of their once-empty apartment. While Jughead still longed for a more hearty side dish—salad and steak seemed wrong to him—Betty's health-kick compromise was buying him inordinately large steaks to compensate.

Raising her wine glass, Betty smiled brightly across the table. "Happy birthday weekend."

He raised his glass, clinking it gently against hers. "And now we can both buy wine legally!"

Taking a sip of her wine, Betty hummed happily. "This one's my favourite. But you know that."

Setting her wine aside, she reached across the table for his hand. "Are you sure you want a party tomorrow? You're not just having one for my sake, are you?"

"Betty, this isn't my seventeenth birthday. It's a highly-controlled, private event with a guest list and bouncers. It's fine, I promise."

He dug into his steak, popping a large bite into his mouth to cut off the line of discussion. While he understood Betty's concerns, he'd elected to have a party this year after careful consideration. For starters, he wanted to challenge himself to shake off his dislike of his birthday, particularly after Betty's party in June. Her joy and gratitude for the efforts he and Veronica had gone to was so immense, he understood now why Betty wanted to express her love in elaborate and meaningful fashion.

Of course, he had other reasons for wanting to celebrate in a group this year, not that he planned to tell her in advance.

"Oh! Veronica said she needs help with some last minute decorations for the party tomorrow. Do you mind if I pop out after lunch to help her? I know we're also going to Sabrina's bachelorette party tonight." Betty frowned, stabbing at her salad. "You know I'd rather spend the entire weekend with you, don't you?"

"You care far more about my birthday than I ever will. Archie wanted to grab coffee if I had time tomorrow, so it works out perfectly. Just us guys, that sort of thing." Jughead rolled his eyes, chuckling. "Like we don't do that twice a week?"

"Yeah, but you two have been friends since birth. Archie's a sentimentalist like that."
"That and I'm calling in a favour," Jughead mused.

They fell into easy conversation, as they always did: Betty talked about her latest assignment at the family law clinic, while Jughead laid out the opening episode for his next season of *It's a Murderous Day in the Neighbourhood*. He was focusing on a case from Canada that had been recommended by a listener, one where the killer was currently on trial. He was hoping to take a trip over the border to cover the proceedings, although their schedules were certainly full over the next few months.

Dishes washed quickly in tandem, he looped his arm around her waist, pulling her close to him. "Is there dessert?" he murmured.

"Depends on your definition. I mean, there may be cookies stashed in the bedroom, but I could also be stashed in the bedroom, if you like," she purred.

"Have I ever told you that you're the only person in the world for me?"

Her hands fisted in his hair as she pressed her hips against him. "Maybe once or twice."

"I'm taking my dessert to go, then," he growled, hoisting her into the air.

Instinctively, her legs wrapped around his waist as her hands clung to his shoulders. Giggling and kissing their way down the hall—Jughead bumping his head into the bedroom door in his haste—he carried his stunning soulmate to his favourite room in their home. Walls adorned in photos and framed replicas of their favourite book covers, and with a large bookcase of personal favourites in the far corner, it was their haven from the world at large. It was also where he laid her down, as he did now, to explore and ravish her body at every opportunity.

"I want to be on top," Betty insisted, moaning softly as he unzipped her jeans and flicked his tongue along her inner thigh.

"I'll take it under advisement. But first, you promised me dessert."

Peeling off the denim and silk between them, he paused briefly, admiring the soft porcelain of her skin, the curving of her hips, and the way she opened herself to him. The trust they shared was sacred to him, and he never let himself take it for granted.

"Juggie, please?"

"Please you? I think I can manage that," he teased as he trailed open-mouth kisses up her left thigh. Betty squirmed on the bed beneath him, gasping at his first sampling of her. Grinning to himself, he tormented her with kisses trailing down her right thigh.

"You're being mean," she complained, squeezing her thighs together.

"I'm savouring you like your wine," he countered. "But I could always go mix my podcast—"

"Jughead Jones, don't you dare! I have to leave at nine."

Crawling up her body, he planted his elbows on either side of her head. Leaning down, he seized her lower lip between his teeth, tugging gently.

"Like I could resist you, Betts." The words were heavy, loaded with the immense love for her that centred his entire existence. "Now, where was I?"

Betty's fingers slid through her hair as she guided him back down where she ached for him, her
appreciative moans filling his ears like a symphony. Her back arched as his groin tightened and fingers found hers and interlaced. She was scarcely soaring, peaking and crying out, before he'd stripped himself bare and pressed into her. The shock of contact stole their breath as he hovered over her briefly, before a clever ankle hook turned the tables. Tugging her blonde hair free of her ponytail, she sunk down upon him with a satisfied murmur.

"My turn."

Hands planted on his shoulders, soft waves cascading down to graze his chest, she fixed her green eyes upon him as she began to move. Soft kisses and whispered vows of love fell from their lips in mutual exaltation. His golden sun went supernova and he surrendered happily to her fiery lust, consumed by her.

His twenty-first birthday had begun in the best possible way: a naked Betty Cooper, wild curls framing her features, had slipped beneath the sheets and woken him up with her expert mouth. A lazy morning of lovemaking and laughter had been topped off with breakfast in bed (fluffy flapjacks and a healthy side of bacon). He'd tugged Betty to sit between his legs, nestled against his chest as they shared a plate and sipped coffee.

"This is my favourite place," he mused, feeding her a slice of bacon. "You and me, no noise, no work. Just us."

Music played softly in the background, piped in from Betty's iPhone. Her "Bughead playlist", as she called it. Songs that reminded her of their relationship. Right now, it was a song by The Tragically Hip, a band they'd stumbled onto at his favourite vinyl store in the city.

"Where the wild are strong
And the strong are the darkest ones..."

"I wish we didn't have to go anywhere today." Betty turned slightly, offering him the last forkful of pancake. "I'd much rather stay in bed with you."

"We'll have time at the end of vacation for that, Betts. A whole weekend, just us. We'll ignore our phones, order in and ban clothes." He opened his mouth, accepting the syrup-kissed morsel. "Mmmm."

"It's a deal, Mr. Jones." With a soft kiss, Betty reluctantly untangled herself from the sheets. "I have to shower and meet V. You joining me?"

"Somehow, I suspect that will be counterproductive. Besides, it's noon, which means any minute—"

He laughed as his phone began to ring on the night stand. "What did I tell you?"

Betty slipped out of bed, squealing as Jughead spanked her playfully. Reaching for his phone, he smiled. His dad, like clockwork.

"Hey, Dad. Betty says you have excellent timing."

"Happy birthday, Jug. Tell Betty her sarcasm is noted," he replied lightly. "Twenty-one. Where the hell has the time gone?"

"No idea. I think I might actually feel this one. Is this being old? I'm asking an expert."

"Ha, ha, smart ass. Just wait until you find your first greys at twenty-five, like the rest of us Jones men." There was a shuffling on the other side of the line. "Sorry, gathering up my things for the
drive to New York. She in the room?"

From down the hall, the cascading sound of their rainfall shower signalled his girlfriend was preoccupied. "Nope, but given the profession…"

"I'll do most of the talking, then. You still going ahead with it?"

"Absolutely, although now the nausea is back. Thanks, Dad."

"It's going to be fine. Trust me. I've known that woman as long as you have. And your plan is perfect."

His fingers toyed with the hem of the bed sheet, twisting and folding it. "I hope so. It's just… things never go right on my birthday."

"Now that's a lie and you know it," his father chided. "Things used to be awkward or bad on your birthday, but have the last three been awful?"

Jughead's mind drifted back, recounting those three days: a weekend in Boston; a weekend in a cabin in Vermont; Betty and Jughead, alone watching movies in the basement of the Cooper home. While yes, every year had a mild hiccup, he'd been with the woman he loved. Just the two of them, as he'd asked.

"You raise a valid point. But this is a party."

"Think of it as a party to celebrate Betty, then. What she brings to your life. I may be divorced, but I understand women enough to know that celebrating them, thanking them for all they do, that's all it takes."

"I'll do my best."

"Alright, I'm gonna get on the road. Party's at eight, right?"

"Yeah, just give them your name at the door. The bar's closed to the public tonight. And Dad? Thank you… for the pep talk, I guess."

"Love you, Jughead. See you soon."

Drawing a deep breath, his lips curved into a smile as the faint sound of Betty singing in the shower caught his attention. Why was he worrying? As long as the focus remained on her, he would be fine.

A flurry of activity filled the Cooper-Jones home in the next hour as Betty and Jughead readied themselves for their respective outings. Betty disappeared at one, while Jughead slipped out to the coffee shop down the street for one-thirty. Archie was prompt, sheet music in hand and a coffee waiting for his friend. They embraced warmly, Archie murmuring a birthday wish before they sat down.

"It's a busy day, but I wanted to check in and make sure everything's perfect for tonight," Archie explained.

"Yeah, that's fine," Jughead assured him. "Truth be told, now that Betty is off planning or whatever fake emergency Veronica invented—thank her for that, by the way—I'm scared shitless."

The redhead leaned forward, brow furrowed. "I don't understand. This is Betty."

"Yes, it's Betty. This incredible woman with a giving heart, our friend since kindergarten, the only
woman I've ever loved. So yes, while it rationally seems like a done deal, the stakes are high and I'm panicking, Arch." Jughead's grip on his coffee mug tightened as he suddenly longed for the beanie he'd given up wearing two years ago. "Is it too soon?"

"Jughead, she loves you, unconditionally. You've been together for four years now. I guarantee she'll say yes, especially after all of the effort you've gone to. Speaking of, am I still holding onto it?"

Jughead nodded furiously. "Trust me. No matter where I tried to hide it, she'd randomly stumble upon it. I'll grab it off you tonight at the bar."

"Speaking of, the renovations look fantastic. Worth every penny that ol' Pete spent on the place."

Archie held out his phone to Jughead, flipping through a series of photos. "The gold and blue accents are a little creepy as a coincidence, though."

"You're not kidding," Jughead mumbled.

Archie had been working as a bouncer at Where Angels Fear to Tread, a tiny speakeasy hidden in Manhattan, since its opening in 2020. Having become a beloved hot spot over the last year, thanks in no small part to Archie's regular performances garnering the attention of music industry insiders, the owner had decided to add new flourishes to the décor and upgrade the seating. Apparently, he'd opted for tasteful gold flourishes and glass lightshades cast in a deep blue.

While the bar had been scheduled for ten days of renovations, Archie had pleaded with Pete to keep the place closed for an extra night. Veronica's trust fund had secured the open bar and staffing, along with Archie's promise to work Thanksgiving weekend. The latter, he knew, was a huge ask, but Archie had willingly offered.

"Ronnie and I are soundchecking at three-thirty. I took a quick look at the gear last night, made sure the contractors didn't screw up wiring or anything. It's all good to go." Archie examined the sheet music. "It's pretty straight forward. I've been practicing the melody for a week with Ronnie at home. We're just pulling together the drums and bass today."

Jughead forced a smile, his mind still racing with increasingly catastrophic endings to the night, including a random vision of a T-Rex stomping him flat as he walked down the street. That had to be the red wine; every time they drank it, his imagination went into a surreal overdrive. All the same, the reassurances of his friends and family were doing little to shrug off his overwhelming anxiety. What if he couldn't tell her? What if it came out all wrong? What if she rejected him in front of everyone?


"Sorry. I'm not good company, I guess."

"No, you're a perfectly normal guy. But seriously, listen to me on this. I've known Betty as long as you have, right?" At Jughead's affirming nod, he continued. "I've also known you my entire life. So I'd like to think I understand you both pretty well."

"Are you about to use your psych major shit on me?"

"Maybe, but I'm also using experience here." Archie downed his coffee, pushing the mug aside. "You're only afraid right now because of what happened with your parents. Now, I know that you rationally know that Betty is not your mom and you are not your dad. But you've spent your entire life waiting for everyone to disappoint you, and many people have. But Betty hasn't, has she?"

"No," he reluctantly admitted. "Not in any way that matters."
"Exactly!" Archie smiled, relaxing into his seat. "And that's why you love her, right? Because she's there for you. So when the anxiety you're literally shaking with takes over your brain today, I want you to list off every single time Betty has had your back. That's evidence. That's all you need. As for Betty, she spent her entire life not feeling good enough before you two hooked up. You're offering her undeniable proof that she is good enough. How can it go wrong?"

Seated in this bustling café, where he and Betty often came for a quick coffee before her classes at Columbia, Archie's words grounded him. Evidence. As a journalist, he'd spent his entire career following just that. They'd fallen in love pursuing it. The evidence was in the way Betty would bake cookies whenever he was struggling with the podcast. The evidence lay in how she'd always arrange her schedule to be with him on his mother's birthday, knowing it stung. The evidence was in those mesmerizing eyes of hers when she came undone beneath him.

"Okay. Okay, I can do this. Thank you."

"Brothers for life," Archie reminded him. "I'm going to go set up for soundcheck. See you at eight."

Archie patted his arm on the way out, leaving Jughead with half a coffee and a heart full of certainty. Focus on the evidence. Easy as that. Scrolling through his phone contacts, he tapped on his sister's number, waiting for her to pick up.

"Brother of mine! Happy birthday!"

"Hey, JB. Thank you. Don't have long before Betty's home, but wanted to give you a call.

"So you're doing it tonight? Dad said it's tonight!" His sister's enthusiasm was on par with the time she'd found a rare Bauhaus vinyl lurking at the Salvation Army store.

"Yeah, it's tonight. You've kept your mouth shut since June, right?"

"Of course I have. How dare you? Like I'd ruin the greatest romance Riverdale has ever known!"

Jughead snorted, sipping his coffee. "Really, JB? What has puberty done to you?"

"What has being a jaded true crime podcaster done to you, huh? Great final episode, by the way. I just listened to it. Anyway, come on: childhood besties who were so obviously into each other that even I told Mom you'd get married when I was seven. High school sweethearts who bonded over solving murders, shacked up in the big city, with the exact same career aspirations. Hell, both of your fathers ended up in jail. It's a noir fairytale."

Jughead laughed heartily, staring out at the bustling sidewalk. "Remind me not to let you make a speech if this wedding happens, alright?"

"Like you're stopping me! One sec." He heard the phone shift and his sister hollering at Milkshake, her kitten, to stop howling. "Sorry, she's an idiot who thinks screaming in the kitchen will get her extra treats. I swear they put crack in them. Anyway, serious stuff now, brother of mine. Did Betty ever tell you about our first conversation after you two hooked up?"

"The Facebook convo where you interrogated her?"

"No, the phone call, when you were in the hospital."

The hospital… The Black Hood. Hal Cooper, as they learned eventually. On the night he'd been unmasked, Jughead had been jumped by the Ghoulies in a paid hit, presumably financed by Hiram Lodge. Betty had been brought to the hospital for shock after her father had tried to kill her family,
only to find FP in the waiting room, desperately trying to call her broken phone. He'd broken two ribs, suffered blood loss and exposure from being left in the winter chill, but he'd recovered quickly. And while Betty had whispered many things to him in that hospital room, none of them involved his sister.

"I have no memory of this."

"Good, I asked her to keep it that way. I heard about what happened on the news and called Dad, but he was a blubbering mess. So he passed me over to Betty. She wasn't a hell of a lot better. She was crying. But I could at least understand the words she was speaking. The whole story doesn't matter, but here's the part I want to tell you now. You sitting down?"

"Yeah, JB." His stomach flipped, uncertain whether he wanted her to continue.

"So after she'd given me the scary news of your beating, I was lost. I mean, Mom was out with a loser, grandma and grandpa were asleep. I need to do something until there were buses to Riverdale. So I asked her about dating you. Made a joke about how it was nice to talk to 'the future mother of his children, never to be named Forsythe or Forsythia'."

"Jellybean! Damn it, why?"

"Because I'm a smart ass who's determined to end this god-awful tradition of names? Oh, you mean the kids part? Because I crack jokes when I'm scared. Remind you of anyone?"

Jughead slumped in his chair, understanding now why Betty had omitted this story. "Jesus, we'd been dating like four months? What did she say?"

"That's why I'm telling you this, dummy! She simply says, 'Yes, I am.' No hesitation, no nerves. Confident as hell. Why yes, I'm the future mother of his kids. You connecting the dots yet?"

"She was in shock," he protested.

"Jughead, listen to your sister. I'm a woman, we know things."

"You're fifteen!"

"A woman. Anyway, listen to me: she loves you. She's never been uncertain of that. We've been talking for almost four years and whenever you come up, she's the happiest person alive. So ask the damn girl to marry you, alright? I know for a FACT she'll say yes."

"And if you're somehow wrong?"

His sister laughed. "I'm not, but if I am, I will start using Forsythia in my daily life for a full year. I'm that sure."

That was an enormous vote of confidence. And while this conversation made him realize that he should have peered over Betty's shoulder more often as she chatted with his younger sibling, it had steeled his resolve to propose.

"Love you, JB."

"Love you, too. Make sure people take a million pictures for me, since you chose a licensed venue for this momentous occasion!"

Goodbyes exchanged, Jughead finished his coffee and headed down the street to the apartment.
Everyone in his life was so certain of Betty's answer tonight. He would try to believe them.

But maybe he would dig out his beanie, just in case.

Betty was in danger.

Serious danger, Jughead thought as he walked her up to the entrance of Where Angels Fear To Tread. The biggest danger. Because if he caught another glimpse of the plunging back on her dress, he would not be responsible for how thoroughly ravaged she would be in the bar's back room.

Her dress for the evening was a pearl white that shimmered beneath the street lights and fell just below her knees. Despite its angelic colour and ornate lace, the scarcely there bodice with its deep V-neck was positively unholy. At his request, Betty's hair was down in loose, looping curls that framed her face. Her makeup was light, as was Betty's preference (and his), but the hint of green around her eyes was stunning.

In fact, he was feeling rather under-dressed in his black suit and tie, and eager to shed the stupid jacket. But her wide smile as he'd stepped out of the bedroom had made it all worthwhile.

"Good evening Jughead, Betty," greeted Pete as they stepped inside the renovated space. "What do you think?"

"It's beautiful," Betty gushed, glancing around. "The lights are perfect, Pete. Heaven-sent."

"As are you," the owner gushed. "Jughead, how did you ever convince God to send you an angel?"

"I have no idea, Pete. I'm the luckiest man alive."

Betty's cheeks flushed crimson as Pete pointed them to refreshments and excused himself to check on the caterers. Hovering near the bar, they found Cheryl and Toni Blossom-Topaz challenging each other with cherry stems. Betty was surprised they'd made the trip from Boston, but Jughead quickly dismissed it, reminding her that her sister was making the trek and seeing the twins the following day.

Don't let her catch on now, he silently prayed.

"I've got this," Toni purred, popping the stem into her mouth.

"Hello, cousin, Jughead!" Cheryl called out, rising from her seat to embrace them. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks, Cheryl."

"Voila!" Toni announced, pulling the tied stem from her mouth triumphantly. "Move aside, wifey."

Toni embraced Betty and Jughead too, pulling back to study Jughead's unusually formal attire. "Damn, we couldn't even get you to wear one of these for our wedding!"

"Your wedding was on a beach in the Dominican," Jughead reminded her. "In July."

"At sunset!" Cheryl countered. "Hardly midday at the equator. But I do suppose we were on fire," she purred, leaning sideways to kiss Toni's neck.

Playfully chiding her wife, Toni nodded approvingly. "Either way, you clean up nicely, Jones."

"As have you, although I see you've still got a fondness for fuchsia."
Toni twirled around in her strapless gown, perfectly matched to her hair. "It's my trademark."

Cheryl, true to form, had chosen a slinky red dress, with a slit cut to the top of her thigh. Red remained her trademark, of course. Her wedding dress had been white with a ruby-red sash and shoes as a compromise.

"Have you seen Archie?" he asked. "He asked me to meet him when I got here."

A white lie. But he needed to grab the ring fast, before he was bogged down in well-wishers and the night's festivities.

"Um, I think I saw Big Red duck backstage a few minutes ago," Toni replied.

"Alright, I'll try there. He's probably just worrying about the new song he wanted to play tonight. Time to go give the brotherly pep talk." Planting a kiss on Betty's cheek, he paused, drinking in her beauty. "I will absolutely hurry back, so don't go anywhere."

He found Archie backstage, running through chords with Veronica in the modest green room. Veronica leapt to her feet, her burgundy dress swirling around her as she rushed to embrace him.

"Happy birthday, Romeo. Does Juliet suspect anything?"

"If she does, her poker face is ready for professional tournaments. Archie?"

"I've got it."

Archie stood up, reaching inside his jacket pocket and withdrawing a teal ring box with the Tiffany logo embossed on it. At Veronica's request, Jughead opened the box, revealing a classic Tiffany engagement ring setting, albeit with a custom twist: in lieu of the usual diamonds encrusting the platinum band, he'd commissioned alternating diamonds and emeralds to complement Betty's eyes.

"Oh, Jughead," Veronica whispered. "She's going to love it."

"I hope so." Tucking the ring inside his pocket, he began to pace. "Run me through the timing, guys. Keep me sane."

"Mingling until around nine, where Archie and I will get up and do his new song followed by the classic 'I Want You to Want Me' to set a joyful ambiance," Veronica explained. "I'll make an excuse to take a break. YOU make an excuse to need some air. You're the only two besides Pete allowed on the roof, so you'll be alone. Magic happens, you descend. I'm assuming Betty will be giddy and we'll take our cue to sing our finale."

"Okay. One hour, then." He shook himself, chanting his mental mantra of Evidence!

"Why are you still here? You have guests to greet and a beautiful woman to dance with," Veronica rebuked him gently. "We'll be out in ten."

His secret safely stowed inside his jacket pocket, he headed back out into the front of the bar, eyes scanning the crowd for Betty. He noted a few of Betty's friends from school and work, his agent and her husband, and Cheryl and Toni slowdancing to the Bruno Mars song drifting from the speakers. To his far left, he finally spotted her: his angel incarnate, seemingly haloed in light as she embraced his father and kissed his cheek. To Jughead's surprise, his father had gone all-out, wearing an actual suit and slicking his hair back neatly. Beside him stood Alice and Polly Cooper, their golden hair secured with ornate clips and similar dresses—Alice in gold, Polly in blue.
He hung back a moment, watching his father and Betty interact. Having disowned her father after his horrific crimes, Betty had wrestled with her inner demons, terrified that her darkness was an omen that she would be a killer like Hal. And while she'd moved past that fear in time, the loss of a father figure had left his girlfriend angry and, in a sense, grieving. His father's release from prison two years ago—a commuted sentence thanks to testimony from Cheryl—had led to a powerful bond forming between them. He often joked that FP liked Betty more than him, but their relationship was truly special to behold.

"Hey, Jughead! Get over here!" his father called out.

Crossing the room, he threw his arms around his father and squeezed tightly. "Just giving you a moment with your favourite," he teased.

"How very gracious. Must be the suit talking class for ya." He waved a small box around questioningly. "Gift table?"

"Give it to Pete over there. They're stashing everything in his office until we leave," Betty explained.

"Always has the answers," FP mused. "I'll be right back son."

He greeted Polly and Alice, who clung to him tightly. While she had no idea of his plans, they'd remained close after his time living with the Coopers. Despite her abrasive attitude, he'd come to learn that in high school, Alice had been a Serpent herself. He'd also learned that his suspicions about Alice and FP were bang on: the two had been a couple before Alice had begun dating Hal. In the aftermath of Hal's arrest, Alice had shed her polished veneer and embraced her Serpent past, finding strength in the solidarity of Southsiders. Their shared roots—and protectiveness of Betty—had led to surprisingly candid conversations and a penchant for sarcasm wars that exasperated Betty.

Intriguing, that FP had shown up with Alice and Polly. A part of him sensed his father had never gotten over Alice, but the two of them seemed content to remain friends.

"This place is lovely, Jughead," Alice commented. "Do you come here often?"

"Archie works here and plays shows sometimes, so we're here a couple times each week. He's singing tonight with Veronica."

"His new songs are so good, Mom," Betty gushed. "There's a label rep from Universal who keeps dropping by to see him."

"That's wonderful! Fred would be so proud. Speaking of, he gives his regrets, Jughead. That flooding in Greendale has him tied up with coordinating relief efforts," Alice explained.

Fred had recently been elected as the Mayor of Riverdale, to the joy of their inner circle. The flooding in the neighbouring town had taken a heavy toll, including serious injuries to their own Mayor. Fred, ever helpful, had stepped up to support them in crisis.

"Right, we heard about that. Everyone okay?"

Alice nodded as she plucked a glass of wine off a passing tray. "No deaths, thank God, just injuries. But everyone will recover. There's a great deal of property damage, but Fred's rallying every tradesperson he knows to assist."

Jughead grabbed wine for himself and Betty, looping his arm around her shoulders. "Maybe we can swing over and help when we're home. What do you think, Betts?"
She leaned into him, sipping her wine. "That's a wonderful idea, Juggie."

The party grew in size, swelling to forty guests laughing and drinking their fill of Pete's carefully curated liquor selection. He'd even let Betty convince him to dance a few times, relishing in the excuse to run his palm along the soft skin of her back. Archie and Veronica circled by often, clearly aiming to distract him from the growing knot of tension in his guts. It was helpful, but the butterflies had long evolved into angry bears, shaking the bars of his ribcage.

He pulled her into a corner after the cake cutting, sneaking kisses along her exposed collarbone. The frosting upon her lips was only fuelling his desire to skip the party and take her home. For ten blissful minutes, he lost himself in stolen caresses and teasing kisses.

And then, Archie took the stage to perform.

It registered in his skull, a shrieking siren of warning: it was time. The plan was unfolding. Childhood fears and teenage insecurities took hold, screaming that he was living in a dream and this shining beauty was out of his league. Pulling her to him, his mouth found hers in a frenzied need to kiss, to taste one more time, just in case he was wrong about everything. Her arms folded around his neck as she pressed her hips eagerly into his.

"Juggie, people are watching," she murmured.

"I love you, Betty Cooper," he blurted out. "I love you so much."

"Hey, what's wrong?" She was visibly concerned now, studying what he presumed was a panicked face. "I'm here. Talk to me."

"I don't know."

And he truly didn't. The evidence was there, and yet here he was, not even having to pretend to panic, because his heart was skipping and his knees shaking in terror.

Betty pulled him down into a nearby booth, hugging him tightly as she whispered in his ear. "This isn't your last party. We're safe. We're together. I will never, ever leave you."

How did she know? How could she see the terror within him so plainly?

"That's it, isn't it? You're afraid of losing me?"

He nodded reluctantly, kissing her forehead. "I know it's stupid and I know it's pretty much insulting you because everything you do, everything you say, it tells me the opposite. But sometimes, I just stare at you and wonder why me? Why do you love me?"

"Because you see me, Juggie. You always have. Not the perfect student. Not the perfect daughter. Me. Darkness and light. Fear and bravery. Anger and joy. And you've always made me feel safe."

Her fingers found his, clinging tightly to his hand. "You keep me honest and true to myself, instead of what anyone else wants me to be. I feel safe enough to be who I am, flaws and all, because of you."

Jesus, she was practically proposing to him, he thought ironically. This anxiety was bullshit, and he had to let it go.

"You're incredible, Betts."

Smoothing his hair back, she smiled. "Feel better?"
"I think we can rejoin the masses now," he decided, rising and extending his hand.

"Good. Because it looks like he's ready to go. And you know V will never let us hear the end of it if we're not upfront."

Arms linked, they wove their way to the front of the room, taking in Archie's newest song. Like many of his tunes, it was about a relationship, but this one was playful and coy—a far cry from the gloomy folk rock offerings of his teens. The chorus reminded him of his relationship with Betty, back when it began: "She's your daughter, misbehaviour. You don't like what you got, but you made her." It was catchy, and Veronica's vocals blended perfectly with Archie's richer timbre. The guests applauded loudly for him by the end, Archie himself surprised by their enthusiasm.

"Thank you. And now, we're going to have fun with a classic track about attraction. Let's dance!"

Archie's house band companions kicked things up a notch, delivering a rousing take on the seventies staple. Cheryl and Toni immediately took the centre of the room, dancing wildly around each other. Buoyed by the four shots well-wishers had brought him in the last hour, he grabbed Betty's hand, twirling her around. Betty giggled, leading him through every popular dance step she could recall. By the rousing outro, they'd twisted, swam and even done a sloppy tango. She fell laughing into his arms at the end, linking her hands around his waist.

"That was so much fun!" Betty gushed.

"Alright, we're going to take a ten minute break to tune up for a few more songs. Grab a bite and a drink and we'll be back!" Veronica announced, glancing sideways at Jughead.

"I could use some air after dancing in this damn suit," Jughead told her. "Let's go to the roof."

"That sounds wonderful, Jug!"

*Phew. She bought that.*

Grabbing two fresh glasses of wine en route, they made their way to the rear of the bar. The hired security minding the roof access smiled and stepped aside, ushering the young couple up the steps. One of the primary draws of the establishment was the rooftop seating, where delicate twinkle lights adorned a vine-covered framework. The effect was that of a starlit canopy of green—a little Garden of Eden, Pete often quipped. Although the night air was brisk, it was clear and still tonight.

Betty settled onto an ornate bench, gazing out at the city skyline. "I love this patio. It's so nice sitting out here, just high enough to drown out sidewalk chatter, but still buzzing with city sounds."

"Yeah, Pete scored a deal when he bought this building," Jughead agreed.

*Ten minutes*, he reminded himself. No time to fear. No hesitation. Draining his wine glass, he sat it aside.

"Can I tell you something, Betts?"

Her curls bounced gently as she turned to face him. "What is it, Jug?"

Settling onto the bench in front of her, legs straddling either side, he took her hands in his. "Do you remember the night we became this? The kiss in your room?"

Betty's lips curved into a knowing smile. "Still wow, after all these years."
"That's a relief," he quipped. "You remember how I told you I'd wanted to kiss you for five years?"

"Mmhmm. Which would have made you, twelve?"

Jughead nodded, swallowing hard. "I wanted to tell you about that moment when I realized how I felt about you. That you were my best friend, but there was a feeling, this connection that I know now was me falling in love with you."

"Oh, Juggie…" Her hand reached out to graze his cheek. "Tell me?"

"Do you remember when Archie went to camp for a week and it was just the two of us? The summer when we were twelve?" At her nod, he continued. "There was a day when we stayed around your place, watching movies and making popcorn. You decided that wearing a hat in the summer was weird and joked about stealing it from me."

Betty's eyes widened. "Oh, I remember that! You were so upset, I felt terrible. I couldn't understand why it was so important to you, but you were so afraid of me taking it away. I felt awful for weeks about it. I…" She laughed softly, bowing her head. "I was so afraid you wouldn't be my friend anymore after that."

"You were so kind to me that day. Talking me out of the panic I was dealing with. The panic no one knew about, except my parents. You kept me steady. And in that moment, I was so mesmerized by you, by how you could calm me down when no one else could. That you always knew how to reach me. That you saw me, Betts."

He drew her hands to his lips, kissing them gently. She was studying him carefully, perhaps sensing a hidden weight within his words, but her expression was open and loving. It was so very much the woman he fell for.

"You love me because I see you, but I see you because you've let me in over the years. You trusted me with your heart, your fears, your secrets. And that trust taught me how to let people in again. To believe in them. In myself, even. I mean, look." He pointed at his head as a breeze ruffled his unruly waves. "I stopped wearing that beanie because of you. Because I can do anything if you're there beside me. You healed me."

"You healed me, too," she whispered, stretching out her palms to him.

The scarring was gone now, long faded away. She hadn't dug her nails in for years, not since the move to New York. Betty made a point now of pampering her hands, indulging in manicures and expensive lotions. Giving myself love, not pain, she'd tell him.

"There's one more thing," he murmured.

"Anything."

He reached inside his jacket pocket, falling to one knee beside her. Her surprised gasp was a small moment of victory. He'd been so determined to keep the proposal a secret, and clearly, she hadn't seen this coming. As he forced himself to look up, he was startled to see a tear sliding down her cheek.

"Elizabeth Cooper, you stomped your way into my life as a bully tore me apart and from moment one, you have protected me, cared for me, picked me up at my lowest and kept me safe. You've brought me more happiness than any one person could ever ask for. You've seen me at my worst and loved me all the same. And I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my life repaying you with the same love, respect and protection. Everything I am as a man, is because of you, and I would be
the happiest person alive if you'd marry me."

Betty brushed aside the tears upon her cheeks, leaning towards him. "I was starting to think I'd have to ask you first."

*Wait a minute. Is that...?*

"Bets, I'm going to throw up on your gorgeous shoes out of anxiety here."

Grabbing his shoulder, she laughed. "I so want to marry you, Jughead Jones. That's yes, underlined, bold type, font size fifty—"

His lips crashed into hers, relief turning swiftly to jubilation. Unsteady on one knee, he buckled, pulling her to the ground on top of him. She froze, muttering something about her dress not ripping, and their mouths found each other anew. *Yes, she said yes, she said yes. She said YES.*

"You almost wore the beanie tonight, didn't you?" she murmured breathlessly.

"I was terrified. Even put it on for five minutes while you showered," he reluctantly admitted.

Carefully, he boosted her back to her feet before finding his own footing. They dusted each other off, picking a stray twig from Jughead's hair.

"Oh god, the ring!"

The box had fallen from his grasp when she'd tumbled on top of him. He bent down quickly to retrieve it, opening it with trepidation. While Betty had always favoured simpler pieces, he'd wanted something remarkable for their engagement. Her hand flew to her mouth as he revealed the two carat stone and its accompanying emeralds.

"Juggie, it's beautiful! How?"

"Many thanks to Pantheon Press." Plucking the band from its case, he gestured to her hand. "Let's see if Veronica was right."

"She knew?" Betty's eyes widened. "Wait a minute. You've *never* wanted a birthday party before and now you're... This was your plan, wasn't it?"

"I knew that my birthday would be the last day you'd expect me to propose, yes."

Her hand stretched out even as she continued to mumble about *Archie* and *party* and *JB coming to visit*, the pieces falling rapidly into place. Once he slid the ring onto her finger, however, she fell speechless. She tilted her hand side to side, the diamonds reflecting the twinkle lighting above her.

"This is really happening," she murmured. "You want to marry me."

His heart ached at this momentary slip, this quiet revelation that Betty's own insecurities still haunted her. She was his gravity, his sole reason for being, and still, a small, fearful voice questioned her worth. He drew her to his chest, tucking her head beneath his chin.

This was why they belonged together. They were two sides of a coin. Broken, but healing together.

"I have one more surprise for you," he told her. "We have to go downstairs right now."

"It's your birthday, Jug. Why am I getting the gifts?"
"You just gave me the best gift I've ever received. Let me spoil you back."

Hand in hand, they made their way downstairs, where they found Veronica pacing the corridor. Her eyes drifted immediately to Betty's left hand and she began to grin.

"You're forgiven for being tardy! Now, go! And I want all of the details later, B!"

Shy smiles exchanged, they made their way to the front of the stage, where Archie was picking up his guitar. Veronica joined him as well, microphone in hand. Archie searched the crowd for Jughead, raising his eyebrows in question. Jughead nodded, unable to hide his grin.

"Alright, we're back! As you all know, we're gathered here to celebrate the birthday of Jughead Jones."

The crowd applauded, with his father shouting, "That's my boy!"

"Now, if you know Jug, you know birthdays are usually low-key with him. So, figuring this would be the only time I'd get to do something big, I asked him to name any song in the world and I'd sing it for him. Being Jughead, he asked—hey, can I?"

Shrugging, Jughead looked to the beaming blonde beside him, who gave Archie two thumbs up.

"Being Jughead," Archie repeated, "he asked me to play a song for his fiancée, instead."

Archie paused, waiting for the crowd to catch on. Cheryl was the first to put it together, shrieking excitedly and rushing forward to embrace Betty. Polly soon followed as various cheers and applause broke out around the room. And while the attention made him squirm, Jughead was grateful it wasn't just about him.

Adjusting the guitar strap, Archie grinned. "Betty, this one is for you. Congratulations."

He'd spent weeks debating what song to choose, particularly given Archie's willingness to attempt anything he so desired. In the end, he'd settled on a song his father had played often when he was a child. Funny enough, it had been playing the first night they'd stepped foot inside this very bar.

"Shall we?"

Pulling Betty close, they began to dance, just as they had done that very night. Drunk on whiskey and giddy about living together in their own space, they'd been celebrating their freedom. Tonight, they danced in celebration of each other. Trading lines and harmonizing, Archie and Veronica began to sing.

\[I, I will be king  
And you, you will be queen  
Though nothing will drive them away  
We can beat them, just for one day  
We can be heroes, just for one day…\]

"You turned your birthday party into an engagement party," Betty deduced.

"I did." He dipped her back, grinning as she giggled in surprise. "But, I really did want to have a birthday party. You were right all those years ago. It was an experience I deserved to have. I realized that at your birthday party in June. That was also the week I started shopping for your ring."

He twirled her away from him, deftly reeling her back in. Betty's joy was infectious; it was freeing
him of his usual social hang-ups.

"Do I sense a bit of making your birthday a better day in there?"

Jughead shook his head in disbelief. "There's a reason you're the Sherlock to my Watson."

Noticing a crowd forming around them, Betty rolled her eyes. "It's not the wedding, guys. Everyone dance!"

"Thank you," he whispered.

On stage, Archie laughed at Betty's demand, strumming along as Veronica continued to sing.

"'Cause we're lovers, and that is a fact
Yes we're lovers, and that is that
Though nothing will keep us together
We could steal time, just for one day
We can be heroes, for ever and ever
What d'you say?"

"Are we heroes?" Betty wondered aloud.

"Some would say so. You're my hero." At Betty's protests, Jughead pressed a finger to her lips. "Look, being sentimental is not in my nature. Deal with it for a night. Besides, I was thinking more of the king and queen business when I chose it."

"Maybe you should have worn your crown, then."

"Oh don't worry, I'm wearing it to the wedding." As she burst into laughter, he frowned. "I'm dead serious, Betty Cooper."

"I'm getting a tiara, then. You're not upstaging me," she joked, flipping her hair.

"I accept these terms. Although it looks like we're both being upstaged right now."

Betty followed his gaze, smirking as Cheryl and Toni were revealing their apparent secret lives as professional dancers. Their sensual moves were raising a few adult eyebrows, but that was nothing new for the couple. Two free spirits, passionate and stubborn, they'd never shied away from expressing themselves.

"I suspect it might be deliberate," Betty mused. "Cheryl knows how you feel about being the centre of attention."

"I love Cheryl, but this isn't strictly benevolent," he snarked.

They fell into a sway, clinging to each other as Archie and Veronica delivered an admirable take on a David Bowie staple. Mindful of the parents in the room, they kept their kisses soft and sweet, although the sly way his mischievous fiancée kept bumping into his groin betrayed her post-party intentions. As the song drew to a close, the swarm began: family and friends offering their congratulations. Embraces for Betty, pats on the back for Jughead, and many requests to see the ring.

Jughead was relieved that it met with everyone's approval.

Of all of the exchanges in the next hour, the last would stay with him forever. FP Jones, a man of few words for much of his life, had hung back, allowing everyone else to step forward first. Jughead
wasn't surprised; he'd gotten his loathing of attention and crowds from his father. Drawing them to a quiet corner, the grizzled biker embraced Jughead first, squeezing the air from his lungs.

"You've done good, boy. I'm so proud."

"Thanks, Dad."

The young couple were stunned by what happened next: FP Jones began to weep. Betty moved forward first, reaching for his hand.

"Mr. Jones, what is it?"

"FP," he corrected her reflexively, as he'd done for years. "Oh, Betty… You have been there for Jug since he was a scrawny, scrappy kid. I know the popular idea back when you were all little was you and Archie ending up together, but I always knew this would happen. I knew."

"You did?" Betty asked, bewildered.

"I know a little something about Cooper women. You're strong because you gotta be, but your hearts are wide open like the countryside. That big heart of his, you nurtured it, not me. Not his mom. You. And now…" FP's voice cracked as he hugged her. "Now I get to call you daughter, if you'll let me."

"I'd really like that," Betty replied hoarsely, blinking away tears.

"No more Mr. Jones," he admonished her lovingly, stepping back. "FP, or Dad. You hear me?"

Her palm pressed to her heart, Betty nodded. "Okay… Dad."

"I'm gonna go, get some rest before tomorrow. Jelly's visit and all. Congratulations, again. I love you."

"Love you too," Jughead echoed, still reeling from the exchange.

With a small wave, his father slipped away through the chattering, laughing crowd, leaving them on its fringes. Betty leaned into him with a sigh.

"You Jones men are something special," she mused.

"Yeah, I guess we are. But only because you bring it out in us."

Turning to face him, Betty toyed with the lapel of his jacket. "I know it's your birthday, but can we go home soon? I'd like to thank you for the magical evening," she purred, running her fingers down her cleavage.

His groin now in charge, he cleared his throat and nodded. "Get an Uber, now."

Her playful laughter buoyed him through the crowd, carrying them into the inky night and lighting his way home. His sun, constant and true, kept him warm well into the night.

And the noir fairytale, as my sister dubbed it, drew to its end. The childhood friends turned young lovers had found in each other the unconditional love and security that had eluded them. The criminals were caught, and peace was restored to their sleepy little town.

And while the darkness continues to pursue us, its hungry maw wide and eager for prey, we tether each other to the light we've found. In this world of death and destruction, love's the only weapon we've got sometimes. Keep it close, friends. I know I do.
AND THEY LIVED FLUFFILY EVER AFTER. I say so.

"Damn it, A.! Now what am I going to read on this hiatus?"

I give you two options:

1) If you enjoy stories of people finding each other and healing, I write novels about complex characters sleuthing up murders. The first book in the series, Change of Season, is available on Amazon. You'll find me under my authorly name, A.C. Dillon. The ebooks are low priced because life is expensive. I think you'd love Autumn - she has some Jughead snark tendencies.

2) I'm also posting a new Bughead AU (College years) very soon! What if Betty was a good girl going bad while fronting a band? It will only be about 6-7 chapters. I'm on chapter four and it's a snarky, sexy good time. Follow me as an author so you won't miss it!

One last time: thank you. Let me know your thoughts on the Bughead ending we all deserve.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!