
As her new boss stands, a sweep of dark, wavy hair falls across his eyes in a way that makes Betty realise he’s much younger than she’d initially assumed.

“Welcome to The New York Times Magazine,” he says.

…

Or, Betty Cooper interns at her dream newspaper and finds herself falling for more than just the job.

And Jughead Jones? Well, he’s not prepared for anything when it comes to his newest features writer.

Notes

I'm back with a new story! This one has been in the works for a while - before Double-Booked - but that little Christmas trope-fest took over and I thought I'd save this for 2018 :)
I have based the editorial stuff in here on what I experienced when working for a publishing house and magazine company, albeit a much small one than The New York Times Magazine, and have used a little creative license for other parts.

I hope you enjoy - please let me know what you think with a comment :) x
Looking at the building in front of her, Betty takes a deep breath in an attempt to calm the unsettled feeling in her stomach. She’s not sure quite what the ratio of nerves to excitement is, but has an inkling that the latter is definitely the smaller portion. The large expanse of glass in the lobby makes for a framed entrance of sorts, and somewhere in the back of her mind there’s the hope that other people see her entering and assume she works here.

Maybe she does, she supposes, but this isn’t the steady income that will pay for her questionably-ventilated apartment in a dimly-lit street in Brooklyn’s Red Hook. It has the potential to become that if she succeeds (and God, she hopes she does) but right now, she’s an intern on a two-month-long trial period. Nobody’s paying her to write anything.

Pushing the door open doesn’t relieve the feeling of nausea so Betty focuses instead on the feeling of her fingers grazing against her palms. It’s nowhere near enough to break the skin (her nails are short now anyway after the last time) but it provides some semblance of comfort when she can feel the crescent-shaped indents beneath her touch.

Immediately, she’s struck by the sheer power of the building. Of course, she’s been here before - to interview for this position after several rounds of applications and the submission of numerous articles she’d written while at Columbia - but this time, she’s so much closer to her end goal that the moveable type wall she’d been so enamoured with the first time round now seems to be mocking her.

*You’re good enough*, she tells herself despite feeling very much like she might not be.

“Name?” the stunning redhead at the desk says, her perfect red lips framing the word like a work of art. Betty isn’t sure she’s ever seen anyone so beautiful.

“Hi. Um, Betty Cooper.”

When the receptionist continues to stare at her, clearly expecting an elaboration, she feels incredibly foolish.

“It’s my first day. I’m interning for the magazine.”

When the woman still doesn’t look at her computer screen, Betty swallows hard. “I’m uh...I’m early.”

That appears to do the trick and with a lightning-quick cast of her eyes over the information on the screen, the redhead must find what she’s looking for (if she was even looking for anything).

“Take a seat. Someone will meet you at eight-thirty.” She lifts her chin in the direction of some modular couches and Betty gets the distinct impression that there’s an unvoiced *which is when you were meant to arrive* lingering in the air.

Seven and a half minutes later than eight-thirty - right when she’s beginning to *really* panic that her post as an intern here is all just some elaborate hoax - the elevator opens and reveals a dark-haired woman who looks to be about Betty’s age. She’s dressed head to toe in black despite the almost sweltering weather outside, and even her eyes seem obsidian in colour.

For such a small person, Betty notes that she creates a sort-of whirlwind on her approach to the redhead at the desk. She tries not to keep looking but gets the distinct impression their hushed
conversation is about her - made all the more obvious when the woman in black spins around with a grin now plastered on her face.

“Betty!” she exclaims as though she’s simply someone she hasn’t seen in awhile rather than a stranger who feels inadequately dressed. In retrospect, her navy skirt and pink blouse combo is a potential mistake. She’d been aiming for casual elegance (whilst ensuring her arms remain covered) when she maybe should’ve been aiming for catwalk ready.

“Veronica Lodge.” She sticks out her hand and Betty’s about to do the whole nice to meet you thing when Veronica launches into an explanation as to why she’s late. (A nonfat vanilla latte spillage)

“A disaster of epic proportions!” Veronica says on their way to the elevator, and Betty’s almost positive she genuinely means it.

Once they reach their floor, she’s given a whistlestop tour of the bathroom, breakroom, water dispenser and then the magazine’s main office. It’s slightly less glamorous than she’d initially imagined, but there’s a thrill building inside of her which is starting to edge out the nerves (or some of them at least).

“And this,” Veronica says, leading her to a room filled with rails and rails of clothes “is where you’ll hang out with me on your breaks.”

Betty surveys the room - sketches and photographs littering the walls in a manner that initially appears haphazard, although when Veronica’s dressed as impeccably as she is, Betty figures this is probably some sort of interior design trend she’s not familiar with. There are two desks at the end of the room - one devoid of even a pen - and the other housing what appears to be most of Staples’ office supplies. Betty decides that this one belongs to Veronica.

“Pretty amazing right?” the brunette asks.

“Not as amazing as me!” comes a voice from behind Betty, making her jump a little. The owner of it - a tall man wearing an extremely well-fitted suit - squeezes past the two women with two stainless steel travel mugs in his hands. “I took the precaution of stainless steel seeing as you can’t handle cardboard. Don’t spill it this time,” he instructs, handing her one of them and then holding out the other to Betty. “Americano with a shot of almond syrup,” he says, shaking the mug at her.

She takes it somewhat warily: she hadn’t expected people to be so nice. “Thank you.”

He waves it away, like buying someone he’s never met an elaborate coffee is an everyday occurrence.

“Kevin Keller,” Veronica states. “My best gay and literally the only person I trust when it comes to fashion advice.”

“And yet, she wears black in this weather,” Kevin stage-whispers, raising an eyebrow when the brunette eyes him up and down. Betty feels very much like she’s stumbled into some sort of sitcom. It’s incredibly unnerving.

“And this is Betty Cooper,” Veronica tells him. “My new best friend.”

“Your skin is amazing.” He says it like it’s the usual way in which one would respond, and Betty touches her cheek self-consciously. “She can’t take a compliment,” he then tells Veronica as though she’s not there.

It’s not that she can’t take them, it’s that - especially when it comes to her appearance - they make
her uncomfortable.

“Hmm,” Veronica muses aloud, setting her mug down on the desk covered in office supplies. So, Betty thinks, her prediction was correct. “I suppose I should deliver you to Jughead.”

“Jughead?”

“The boss,” Kevin calls from his desk.

Betty frowns. She’s read plenty of copies of the magazine and had met the editor at her interview - albeit briefly - and she can only remember his name being J. Jones. But maybe the J actually stands for, “Jughead?”

“Not his real name of course,” Veronica tells her, linking an arm with Betty’s in order to to guide her out of this haven for clothes. “But he’s never told us and even I wouldn’t ask.”

They walk back in the direction in which they’d come and then reach a stop outside of a glass-walled office housing a single desk, two dark leather armchairs which look worn but comfortable, and, Betty notes, a potted plant in need of some water. Veronica knocks on the glass in a way that’s almost regal and the editor looks up from his computer. Although there’s no official ‘come in’, she opens the door and ushers Betty inside before following herself.

“Betty Cooper - the new intern.”

As her new boss stands, a sweep of dark, wavy hair falls across his eyes in a way that makes Betty realise he’s much younger than she’d initially assumed. Not that she’d really assumed anything about him (her interview had passed by in a blur of nerves regarding the rigid pitch she’d practised with Archie in the apartment they now share until he’d told her to quit stressing because she’d be perfect for the job) but perhaps she should’ve taken in a few more details about her editor.

“Welcome to The New York Times Magazine,” he says, holding his hand out across the desk. He appears to frown - although Betty’s not sure what at - and she hesitates for a second before securing her palm against his.

She hopes he doesn’t feel the grooves there.

“I’ll see you at lunch Betty,” Veronica chirps, then leaves the office in much the same way as she’d first encountered her in the lobby.

“Take a seat.”

She does, setting down the mug of coffee Kevin had given her on the desk, then suddenly panicking about it marking the wood and lifting it back off again. When the man in front of her lifts his own mug for her to see with a wry smile on his face “Good luck finding a real mug in this place; it’s like they’ve been discontinued and nobody told us,” and sets it back down again (sans coaster) she feels a little better.

He explains her role in great detail despite the fact they’ve talked via email prior to today and of course, in applying for this job she’d known what it entailed, but the way he talks with such animation about certain issues makes her excited to begin.

“Any questions?” he asks when they’re done and she shakes her head.

“I’m fine. Thank you Mr Jones.”
He seems a little taken aback, and pushes the wave of hair that’s fallen across his eyes again back off of his face. “Call me Jughead.” His voice is quieter and Betty wonders whether she might detect a little uncertainty there. She shoves the thought aside. Impossible.

“Okay.”

They rise at the same time and Betty almost knocks over her coffee mug. “I’ll show you to the desk you’ll be working at,” Jughead tells her. She tries not to feel the sting of disappointment at the way his words are chosen so carefully (the desk you’ll be working at, and not your desk) but of course, she feels the cut anyway.

The day passes relatively quickly, although she’s disappointed not to have had the chance to write any of her own pieces. She’s proof-read two articles: one about the rise of medication prescribed to elementary school children for Attention Deficit Disorder and the other about the ways in which some elite colleges across the country hide their wealth to avoid paying taxes.

Betty had found both pieces incredibly interesting and had initially gotten lost in the information, then remembered she was supposed to be looking with her critical eye and had spotted two misplaced semicolons. She’d made the suggestions in blue-coloured font and then spent at least ten minutes fretting about how the writers were going to respond before sending the suggested revisions back to them.

(As it turned out, both thanked her and she didn’t see either piece again.)

She arranges back at her apartment before seven, which she considers early given that most of the staff had still been at their desks when Jughead said she could leave and he’d see her tomorrow. He’d been passing the desk she works at and Betty had been unable not to notice how striking he was (or is, she supposes). There’s an intensity about him she hadn’t picked up on during the interview process; a sense too, that despite the prestige of his job, he’s firmly rooted in the real world.

She wishes she wasn’t quite so, sometimes. (Most of the time, these days)

Archie is playing a videogame when she enters the living room and very sweetly puts it on pause to crane his neck in her direction.

“How was it?”

“Good,” she says, although if she’s going to become the renowned journalist she wants to be, she figures she might have to start coming up with a better word choice than that.

“No scary editor like that one in that movie you made me watch over and over?”

“The Devil Wears Prada,” Betty reminds him, washing her hands before opening the refrigerator to take out the chicken she’d placed in a marinade last night. “And no, no scary editor. He was actually quite nice.”

She feels bad at the use of the word quite, but when she opens her mouth to tag ‘really nice actually,’ onto the end, she remembers the way his hair had fallen into his face and a stab of something indefinable catches her off guard, making her lose her train of thought.
By the time Betty’s shut her mouth again, Archie’s unpaused his video game and muttered “That’s good then,” whilst shooting his gun at the opposition.

They eat their dinner of chicken, potatoes and salad on the couch and she finds that, considering nothing about today has been particularly taxing, she’s pretty tired. They talk about Archie’s day shift working at the bar he’s now been tending at for the past three weeks - and the upcoming gig he’s got there - and by the time they’ve cleared their plates, Betty’s seriously flagging.

“I can do the dishes,” he tells her, which is an incredibly sweet offer (but not one she’ll take him up on after the last time). “You look pretty beat.”

She only smiles and takes his plate from the coffee table anyway, rising before she answers. “It’ll only take me a couple minutes. You can do them next time.”

They both know she’ll repeat her words tomorrow too, but that’s how it’s been since they moved in together a month ago and nothing’s going to change any time soon. Her childhood best friend has, for the most part, been the only person who’s kept her feeling like she’s just above water and throughout all of her mom’s phone calls and visits in college (both prior-arranged and unannounced - and God, those had been the worst) he’d been the one to squeeze her shoulder and say “I’ll come by with pizza and beer as soon as she leaves.”

Even during that awful period where everything had changed and where he’d been the only one eating (and he’d known he’d be the only one eating before actually arriving at her door) Archie had been her constant.

(The girls entering and leaving his bedroom had always changed though - his own constant of sorts - and, be it odd or not, there’d been comfort in that too.)

“Night Arch,” she says on her way to her room.

He doesn’t look up from the video game he’s started again but there’s a kind smile on his face - despite the gun sounds - as he says, “Night.”

Betty’s head hits the pillow and she thinks of the desk she’ll be working at and, strangely, her editor’s hair. Those thoughts are then edged out - as all thoughts always are - by the image of Polly: that long, straight curtain of blonde flowing down her back; her blue eyes sparkling with secrets (too many of them, in the end) and the excitement that would’ve been in her voice if Betty could call her to recount her first day.

The office where Veronica and Kevin work would’ve been her favourite.
Jughead groans as the knocking on his door grows louder. Tugging his beanie down over his head (and then pushing back that section of hair that always seems unwilling to cooperate) he stumbles almost blindly towards his apartment door. He can’t be sure what time it is, but his alarm hasn’t gone off so he knows it’s not yet six.

And that’s means it’s too early.

When he looks through the little hole centred in his door, he’s face-to-face not with a person, but a foil balloon baring the number 30 in garish blue. Jughead sighs and opens the door.

“Why are you here JB?”

“Still not a morning person huh?” his little sister chirps, pushing her way through the small gap left by the open door so that the balloon smacks him in the face. (He’s pretty sure it’s intentional.)

“Nothing’s changed in the week since I last saw you, so no.”

“I think you’ll find something has changed,” Jellybean states with a raised eyebrow, setting the bag she’s brought with her down on his counter. Jughead can see the faint blue logo of his favourite bakery in the city printed on the paper so he’s torn between acceptance and steering her right back out of the door again. Vanilla-blueberry cheesecake will always earn figurative brownie points though. “Your age for starters,” she grins, jumping to perch herself on the counter and swinging her legs far too happily for this ungodly hour. “How does it feel to be old?”

He scrubs a hand over his face. Better than it felt to turn seven or eight or nine or ten, he thinks (but doesn’t say aloud). Thoughts like these are precisely why he hates this day.

“It feels like a normal day,” he says. “One that you’ve already ruined before the sun’s risen.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Jellybean counters. “The sun’s already risen. And it’s beautiful outside.”

“I don’t want to celebrate my birthday JB,” he warns in an attempt to put a stop to whatever she’s got planned. He’s almost certain that expression on her face means she wants to do something more than simply eating cheesecake at an inappropriate time (which, incidentally, is the only thing he wants to do other than go back to bed).

“Okay,” she shrugs, hopping back off the counter. “But I’m going to celebrate it. You’re thirty Jughead!”

“I know.”

“A milestone like that deserves to be acknowledged.”
“We’ve acknowledged it. Goodbye Jellybean.”

“I mean, properly acknowledge it,” she argues. “Celebrate it.”

“What will make you stop?” he asks, suppressing a sigh and taking a peek inside of the bag. He stifles the smile upon seeing the cheesecake box.

“A birthday breakfast,” Jellybean replies. “You and me, two stacks of pancakes and an obscene amount of home fries.”

“Does it include the abuse of free coffee refills?”

“Naturally.” She takes the box out of the bag to place it in the refrigerator, then slaps him on the back. “Promise I won’t say anything more about it, but happy birthday big brother.”

Jughead relinquishes a small smile and heads towards the bathroom. “Yeah, yeah. Give me ten minutes.”

He’s on his third coffee refill and has a mouthful of home fries when his sister asks about work. It’s not something they usually talk about: she can be proud of what he’s achieved without taking any real interest in the magazine and besides, she’s much more interested in his photography, but she’s been asking a steady stream of questions since he cut into the penultimate pancake in his stack.

“How’s it working out with the new intern?” Jellybean queries, shovelling in an unladylike portion of pancake drenched in syrup.

He thinks of a pastel palette before recounting any of the work Betty Cooper has done - something that both surprises and confuses him. And then he thinks about her evident nerves in his office on her first day; the way she’d set down her coffee cup on his desk and then had looked mildly horrified upon realising she might’ve made a mistake.

She’s been working for him for over a week now and so far, he’s learned she’s a huge stickler for the appropriate use of a semicolon (not that he isn’t) and she always smells sweet. Kind of like frosting.

An unusual smile twitches at his lips. “She’s nice.”

“Nice?” Jellybean clarifies. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say anyone’s nice before. In what way is she nice?”

He doesn’t like the lilt that’s invading his sister’s voice.

He stabs a piece of his final pancake and stuffs it into his mouth, expecting her to move on. Instead, she only clasps her hands in front of her, resting them on the table in a manner completely unlike they’d learned back when they were kids. Jughead finds himself chewing unnecessarily slowly.

“Well?”

“She does a good job.”
Jellybean grins and takes a pronounced sip of coffee. “That’s not a quality that makes someone *nice*.”

He shrugs. “She edits well and doesn’t force her suggestions on people. She’s considerate of their work.”

Jughead feels a little on edge and hopes it’s only because of the coffee, but then his sister shrugs and picks up her fork again.

“She sounds nice,” she says (all little too faux-innocently for his liking) then steals some of the homefries from his side of the dish.

When Jughead arrives at the magazine’s floor of the building, the desks are mostly all occupied. He spots Betty at the one he’d shown her to just over a week ago, her eyes glued to the computer screen in obvious scrutiny (that polite kind - but meticulous all the same) and her bottom lip trapped between her teeth.

Something accusatory filters into his thoughts - like he shouldn’t notice these two details about her (had he noticed anything about Cheryl Blossom on the front desk downstairs?) and he quickly forces himself to think about the upcoming photoshoot he’s got in two weeks’ time.

It’s not the first one he’ll have ever done, but *it is* the first professional one he’ll have ever done which has a venue other than a studio. He’s also kind of excited to get out of the city for the day too.

He thinks about overhead shadows on his way to his office, passing the formidable Veronica Lodge carrying two travel mugs of coffee on the way. She offers a “Good morning,” but doesn’t stop for him to return the sentiment, nor to mention the significance (or, as he prefers to think of it, *lack* of significance) regarding today’s date.

Other than Jellybean and his parents, she’s the only other person in the city that knows his birthday and his preference not to acknowledge it.

The corridor smells like coffee and something sweeter - almond, perhaps - long after she’s out of sight.

Jughead removes his suit jacket once inside what he’s come to think of as the glass-walled box, then brings up his emails. Given his early start and his sister’s point-blank refusal to have their time spent together interrupted by technology, he hasn’t checked his inbox since the previous night. He’s never really been a fan of old adages but the ‘news doesn’t sleep’ one *does* have justification.

There are several to answer and the odd one or two from staff regarding final versions of articles, but before he can work his way through the entirety of the unopened emails, there’s a knock on the glass. Glancing up, he finds a rather timid-looking Betty Cooper on the other side of the door.

“Come in,” he calls, gesturing with his hand as though she doesn’t speak English.

“Morning, Mr Jones,” she says softly, her eyes big and round and Jughead finds himself noting mentally that they’re a shade of green he’s never seen before. He raises an eyebrow like he’s taken to doing whenever she addresses him by his surname (which is approximately 90% of the time) and
Betty promptly makes an ‘o’ shape with her mouth. No sound leaves it though until she follows up her greeting with,

“Jughead.”

He’d imagined that hearing the people who work for him call him Mr Jones would make him feel like a middle-aged man with an ex-wife, a house in Connecticut, and two children who play lacrosse for fun. For some strange reason though, when his new intern does it, he doesn’t feel any of those things.

He still prefers her to use his nickname - however unprofessional it might make him seem.

“Betty,” he says. “Did you make the revisions?”

He’s referring to the suggestions he’d made the previous day regarding an article she’d written about the soaring price of white asparagus. (He truly hates himself sometimes for including such trash pieces in the magazine, but they’re writing for the middle class masses and as it turns out, people have an interest in such trivial matters. Not that he’s ever even bought asparagus - white or otherwise - but if he were to find it too expensive, he’s almost certain there’d be something else to take its place in the shopping cart.)

“Yes,” she replies, hovering next to the chair in front of his desk before finally deciding to take a seat. “I’ve just sent the new version to you.”

Jughead nods and then glances at his computer screen. Sure enough, he spots the new addition to his inbox from gen7.nytmagazine@gmail.com. He feels a slight twinge of guilt at the fact the magazine is so blatant about advertising her status as ‘not technically employed here’ but setting up an email account for this place is apparently more tricky than he’d realised. People come and go all the time and earning an email address is worth more than people might initially assume.

“But you’re here for something else?”

“Uh, yes,” she replies, wringing her hands together. “I uh...I was wondering if...I’ve had an idea,” she says. “For a piece about the closure of community hubs across the country - particularly in small towns.”

He listens as she tells him about some little drive-in theatre in her hometown somewhere in upstate New York, and the nerves she’d clearly been experiencing before asking him have subsided. She’s animated as she tells him of the nights her friends would park up in a beat-up truck, stretch out on the flat bed under blankets and order an obscene amount of popcorn as they watched classics like Casablanca and Citizen Kane and Rebel Without a Cause.

“And now it’s closing - there’s nothing anyone can do because the mayor has already sold the land to some developer but things like this are happening all over the country. I’ve done some preliminary research. There’s a library in this little town called Centreville in Vermont that’s closing - it’s used by out-of-school programmes focusing on arts for disadvantaged kids and -

“- Yes,” Jughead interrupts, getting the sense that if he doesn’t, they might be here all morning.

Betty stops abruptly. “Yes?”

“Write the story. Between the other work you’ve got and the proof-reading I know they make the interns do, work on this.”

Her entire face lights up and Jughead suddenly feels like there’s something inflating inside of his
chest. It’s uncomfortable and he pops it immediately.

“Thank you,” she says softly. “I’ll send it your way once I’m done.”

“I look forward to it,” he replies, not entirely sure he’s ever said that to an intern and meant it before.

He watches her blonde ponytail bounce as she leaves.

Jughead’s day is filled with various meetings, deadline setting and agony over a particular font for the tagline of a piece about drug smugglers in international waters. Nothing looks quite right and by seven fifty-six pm (as the clock on his desk states) his stomach is growling.

He decides to leave the font decision overnight in favour of going back to his apartment to devour the cheesecake Jellybean had brought over that morning. He grabs his redundant jacket (at this point, he’s not even sure why he brings it when he spends the day with his sleeves unbuttoned and rolled up - not far enough to reveal the ink on his arm though) and switches the computer screen to standby.

It’s not unusual for there to be people working at this time, particularly when it’s close to print day, but Jughead is surprised to see Betty typing away at her desk.

“You know you don’t have to get the story finished today right?” he says. She obviously hadn’t sensed his presence as she jumps about a mile off of her chair at his voice. “Sorry,” he adds. “Didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“I guess I was just in the zone,” she replies. “Sorry.”

His lips twitch into a smile. “For jumping?”

She seems to catch his drift - she doesn’t need to apologise - and smiles warmly at him. Her eyes, still that unusual shade of green he’d noticed this morning, are bright but betraying signs of tiredness.

“There must be someone waiting for you at home,” he tells her, predicting that when it comes to relationships, working such long hours might take their toll. Not that he’d know exactly, but still. “Don’t stay too long Betty.”

Her lips part, like she’s going to say something and yet only a tiny breath of air leaves them. Betty nods with the smallest of smiles (and a stifled yawn) then says, “Okay.”

Jughead flicks on the desk lamp beside her screen so she won’t have to squint in the fading light. He might not know about relationships, but he does know it’s often close to pitch black when he’s lost himself in a story so much that he hasn’t noticed nightfall. The last thing he wants is for her to ruin her retinas before she leaves this place.

“Goodnight.”

“Night Mr Jones,” she replies softly.

This time, he doesn’t lift an eyebrow at her use of his last name.
Later, once he’s back at his apartment, he scarfs down a frozen lasagna and then nearly half of the cheesecake Jellybean had brought round whilst watching *Psycho*. He’d found it on Netflix after Betty had mentioned the classic movies she’d enjoyed watching at that drive-in movie theatre in her hometown, and as he dusts the stray graham cracker crumbs off of his t-shirt, he finds himself wondering whether someone like her would ever go home to eat the amount of dessert suggested for five people.

He recalls the way her dress had nipped in at her waist, and concludes *probably not*. 
Betty learns the hard way that sitting at her desk for close to twelve hours straight (save for the couple of bathroom trips and a short visit to the break room to retrieve her salad from the refrigerator at lunch) does her back no favours. She’s sore and stiff for the remainder of the week and her painful muscles are a reminder that she’s been neglecting the gym too much lately.

She’s barely switched on her computer screen when Veronica sing-songs her good morning greeting whilst setting down a paper coffee cup. “There’s an extra shot of espresso in there this morning,” she tells Betty. “You look like you could use it.”

“Wow, if ever there was a thinly-veiled version of ‘you look like crap’, that would be it,” Kevin muses from the other side of her desk. She hadn’t noticed him approaching and jumps a little. “Her skin still looks amazing though!” he exclaims to Veronica as though Betty isn’t standing right there - much in the same way he had the day she first started. “V - look at it! What do you do?”

The attention is making her a little flustered. “I...I don’t know. Just exfoliate and moisturise I guess.”

“Here.” Kevin slides the little notepad on the desk she works at towards her, nudging the blue biro also. “Write down the names of these products you use. I need them.”

Betty does as he asks (or commands, she supposes) tearing the piece of paper off neatly and then handing to him. His eyes widen at her writing. “Seriously? These cost like what? Eight dollars each?”

“That’s what I use,” she says quietly.

“I can literally get these at Walgreens when I’m on my lunch break!” Kevin exclaims, then wanders off in the direction of the room he works in without so much as a thank you or a goodbye. She’s never met anyone quite like him before - needless to say there weren’t any openly gay beauty-product-wearing guys her age back in Riverdale. He’s both highly-amusing and incredibly endearing at the same time.

“Aside from bringing you coffee,” Veronica starts, perching herself on the edge of Betty’s desk. If it were anyone else, it would be a precarious choice but something tells her that the brunette isn’t the kind of person who even has ‘clumsy’ in her vocabulary, let alone be uncoordinated enough to fall off the edge.

That being said, they did meet right after a coffee spillage so…

“I came to tell you that whatever your plans are this weekend, cancel them.”

“You mean the plans I had to clean my apartment and meal prep?” she asks, and she means it to be something of a joke (kind of, she thinks - though that is what she had planned) but the look of abject horror on Veronica’s face lets her know it’s fallen flat. “I just thought that was an aesthetic,” Veronica says. “I didn’t realise people actually did it.”

“It makes it easier to be organised for the week,” Betty replies.

It’s true - meal prep absolutely helps in that respect, but it’s also a distraction: weekends (especially
those that Archie works) are too quiet, even in the city; there are too many things that remind her of Polly; too much time to let her mind wander to that place where she’s seeking out the hissing pain brought by digging her nails (or worse, something sharper) into her skin.

Time is a trigger. Meal prep and cleaning are productive distractions.

“Well whatever,” Veronica dismisses. “Kevin broke up with his boyfriend and we need to take him out to help him get over it.”

Betty frowns. He hadn’t seemed upset. “I don’t mean to be rude Veronica but -”

“-He’s not crying into his Starbucks?”

Not exactly how she would phrase it but… “Well, yeah.”

“Betty, he got a white chocolate creme frappuccino. Do you know how many calories are in that thing?”

She doesn’t, but Veronica’s huge dark eyes tell her that there must be a lot. “The boy’s hurting and we need to take his mind off of it,” she continues. “And that means drinking way too much vodka and making out with more hot guys than he can count.”

It kind of sounds like Betty’s idea of hell. Rather than tell Veronica this however, she forces herself to say, “Okay.”

“Yay!” the brunette claps excitedly and Betty blinks in confusion. Nobody’s ever been this enthusiastic to go drinking with her. She’s a little concerned regarding Veronica’s expectations but can’t find the words to voice this aloud.

In the end, she doesn’t have to because their editor crosses the room, heading in the direction of his office and Veronica’s focus switches. “Make sure you call in to Casa Lodge y Keller for lunch okay?” she says, the last few words growing faint as she quickens her pace towards Jughead. “Jug!”

Betty watches as her boss stops in his tracks, that wave of hair flopping across his eyes like it always does. She can’t hear what they’re talking about, but the conversation seems intense and features several arm gesticulations from both parties. Only after she’s watched Jughead push his hair out of his eyes for the third time does she realise that she’s staring.

She swallows, silently scolds herself, and then opens up her emails.

Betty finishes the article inspired by the closure of Riverdale’s drive-in on Friday. She reads it through three times, edits and rewrites, then undoes every revision and reads it through three more times. When she finally sends it her editor’s way, it’s gone seven pm and there are only a handful of people left in the office. The print deadline was three-thirty and so the empty desks aren’t unusual for the time of day, but Betty doesn’t want to look like she’s desperate to leave.

She’s not (for more reasons than one) and so rather than shutting down the computer, she begins reading one of the articles published on the magazine’s website earlier that day.

Her fingers rub absently at her eyes of their own accord, leaving her vision blurry halfway through a
sentence. Betty blinks and squints into the screen’s glare, reaching blindly for her coffee.

“I’m cutting you off,” a voice says softly, a hint of what she thinks might just be mirth filtering in around the edges. She sets the mug back down and turns in her chair to see her boss standing behind her.

His hand then reaches over her shoulder to turn off the computer screen and her eyes re-adjust to the less-harsh overhead and natural lighting combo gratefully. “I didn’t get to finish it,” Betty protests, although she can hear the weakness in her argument and cringes at her lack of sincerity.

Jughead shrugs. “There’s a growing trend regarding the purchase of second homes in Krakow. That’s pretty much it.”

“You paint quite the picture,” she replies, a touch of amusement tingeing her response - and growing when the corner of his mouth lifts into the smallest of smiles. It reaches his eyes too - only just - and Betty notices how acutely dark blue they are: sapphire-like, or the cold ocean on a winter’s day, except there’s a warmth in them that she hasn’t noticed before.

“That’s why I’m the editor,” he replies, now leaning against her desk. She can smell pine and soap and a faint lingering of what she thinks might be cigarette smoke.

His mouth drops back into its usual position and Betty finds something out of place - something about wanting to make it better (whatever it is) - flitting across her thoughts. She’s saddened to watch a smile that wasn’t even big to begin with fade right in front of her eyes.

It reminds her instantly of Polly and she sucks in a deep breath.

“You okay?” Jughead asks.

She nods and then lifts her head as Rachel, one of the features writers working a few desks away (with her own desk, Betty can’t help but note) calls out a ‘See you Monday!’

Their boss replies only with a nod and a raise of his hand and it makes her nervous as to why he’s chosen to speak to her. “You look tired Betty,” he says, and she wants to laugh (bitterly maybe, or at least with an edge of annoyance that she feels when people try to delicately tell her she looks like hell). It bubbles up inside of her lungs but she represses it.

(He can always find a way of letting it out later)

“I just didn’t sleep well last night,” she says - and it’s not a lie.

“Well go home. Get some sleep tonight.”

Easier said than done, she thinks, but she nods in response. “Do you have any plans for the weekend?” she asks out of courtesy, switching her screen back on so she can shut down her computer properly. Let it never be said that Elizabeth Cooper can’t take direction.

When she glances back at Jughead for his response, there’s an expression creasing his face into something akin to confusion - like he’s unsure as to why she’s even asking him.

“I didn’t mean to pry,” she adds quickly, feeling foolish for overstepping whatever invisible line she’s crossed.

“No, I…” he trails off, rubbing at the back of his neck. The action makes his shirt sleeves ride up and Betty wonders whether she’s just imagined the dark shadow of ink on his upper forearm. “People
don’t usually ask, that’s all.”

Great. Now he thinks she’s the nosy intern.

“I’m going out with Veronica and Kevin,” she tells him in an attempt to eradicate the awkwardness with her rambling. “It’ll be my first time since I moved to the city, or...my first time in bars that don’t cater mainly for college students anyway,” she adds with a forced laugh that sounds oddly like a bark. He’s studying her and it’s making her nervous.

“You’ll be drinking,” he says. *Questions?* Betty can’t pinpoint which.

“Probably not.” She has a batch of cupcakes to bake on Sunday morning so she needs a clear head. Besides, her medication and wine really, *really* don’t mix well.

Jughead says no more about it and straightens up. “Have a good weekend Betty.”

It’s only once she’s replied with ‘You too,’ that she realises he never *did* tell her his plans.

She spends Friday night cleaning the kitchen and bathroom. Archie’s working seeing as he has a gig the following evening, so to drown out the obvious silence brought about by the fact he’s not playing video games or whistling in that way that’s only *mildly* irritating, Betty puts her earphones in and blasts Beyoncé whilst scrubbing every available surface.

When she’s done, everywhere smells like lemon.

She pulls off her rubber gloves, takes the quickest of showers and then heads straight to bed in the hope that sheer exhaustion will pull her under without too much trouble tonight.

(At twenty-three minutes to one, when she’s still awake, Betty pulls up the story she’d been reading earlier in the office and learns that Jughead was right. The writer has used nearly a thousand words to say exactly what he had in twelve: There’s a growing trend regarding the purchase of second homes in Krakow.)

Archie comes in a little after two, the apartment door shutting behind him with more of a bang than a click. It’s followed by a feminine giggle; the clack of high heels on their floor, and a loud ‘shhh’ that can only mean that he’s stayed for drinks afterwards and picked up a girl.

She’s about to close the laptop when an email notification pops up from Jughead signalling he’s read the story she sent earlier that afternoon. Checking the time, she wonders why on earth he’d be spending his Friday evening reading her work when he’s probably on the guest list of innumerable trendy bars in Manhattan.

*You’ve done a great job here Betty.*

*Just a couple of revisions we can work out on Monday - in other words, don’t spend the rest of your weekend rewriting this.*

*J. Jones*
A small smile filters across her lips and she closes the tabs she’s got open, lets the laptop shut down and then flicks off her lamp.

From Archie’s room, she can hear the sound of his belt hitting the wood floor. Sinking her head beneath the top pillow, Betty closes her eyes and makes a mental reminder to pick up some vanilla extract from the store in the morning.

On Sunday, she rises before six in order to make the cupcakes for an anniversary dinner later that day. Her sort-of semi side-business (if she can really call being asked to make a couple batches of cakes every month or so that) had been an unexpected result of once making some chocolate malt cupcakes for her roommate’s birthday back in Freshman year. Somehow, word had spread about her baking and she found that she got the odd email or knock on the door asking if she might make a batch for another birthday. At that point, she’d only charged the cost of the ingredients. Now, she adds on ten dollars which enables her to invest in new cooking implements every so often (although for this week, it’ll have to be spent on buying Veronica and Kevin one of their extravagant coffees from Starbucks)

Usually on a weekend, she’d go for a run first but the cakes need to be delivered by ten am and she’s learned the hard way about what happens if you try to decorate them while they’re still a little warm. The weather’s doing her no favours in that particular respect today anyway.

So as not to wake her sleeping roommate, Betty’s quiet as she navigates the tiny space of their kitchen, taking out everything she needs first before making a start. Organising everything on the counter first however, leaves her with very little room to do the actual baking, but she just about manages.

There’s enough of each ingredient for her to be able to make some spare cupcakes, and so she decides it might be a good idea to take a batch into the office tomorrow. If nothing else, they might please Veronica and Kevin. Something (okay, her incredible figure) tells her that Cheryl Blossom on the front desk might not want to try them. Still, she’ll offer. There’s a lemon and a lime in the fruit bowl so she decides to grate the zest into the batter too, and fills twenty-four paper cases two-thirds full.

By the time they’re in the oven and she’s cleaned the surface and the bowls, the first batch is ready for frosting. She’s grateful that her clients (a girl she took quite a few classes with back at Columbia - and her husband of a year) have requested traditional buttercream and not the Italian kind: it already feels a hundred degrees in the apartment so the last thing she needs is to have to stand over boiling sugar syrup.

By quarter to eight, the cupcakes are finished and she’s placing them carefully into her recently-purchased plastic transportation tray. It makes boarding the subway with over two hours’ worth of work in her clutches less daunting.

She makes it to Marine Park a little after eight forty-five, then has close to a twenty minute walk to
the house where the anniversary party is being held. The sun is already hot overhead: she can feel its rays burning her shoulders through her thin cardigan and silently chides herself for not putting on any sunscreen before leaving her apartment.

The neighbourhood is pretty - the kind of place she can imagine herself bringing up a family one day. The thought makes her sad; makes her think of Polly and the life she could’ve been living if only things hadn’t turned out like they had.

Betty drops off the cakes, takes the money which includes a ten dollar tip gratefully, and begins the journey back to Red Hook. She can walk a little faster without the cupcakes, and she reaches Kings Highway station in under fifteen minutes.

She’s back at her apartment in time to witness Archie rising and sniffing curiously at the air.

“Morning!” Betty chirps, heading straight for a glass of water. “How did the gig go?”

“Uh…” he scratches at the stubble on his chin before his bedroom door opens again and a girl emerges wearing only his t-shirt and a pair of panties. Betty’s not sure where to look.

The grin she spies on Archie’s face gives her her answer as to the level of success of his night.

“This is Kennedy,” he says, indicating the fake blonde behind him. “This is my roommate, Betty.”

The girls exchange pleasantries but it’s a little awkward. Betty’s about to announce her intent to shower but Kennedy beats her to it. Ever polite, she smiles before grabbing her a spare towel and instructing her to wait at least five minutes before stepping under the water: the temperature gauge is a little... off.

“So how was your big night out?” Archie asks, opening the refrigerator to locate some orange juice.

“It was okay,” she replies, thinking about the amount of phone numbers Kevin had gotten (and the amount of guys Veronica had turned down)

“Just okay?”

She thinks for a moment, recalling the three plain cranberry juices she’d sipped (one in each bar they’d gone to) and wipes at her forehead with the back of her hand. “Yeah. Just okay.”

She arrives at the imposing building of The New York Times a little after eight am the following morning. Her citrus cupcakes have somehow survived the journey despite the already oppressive heat and she hurries inside to gain some respite provided by the air conditioning.

“Morning Cheryl,” she greets the receptionist who’s already stationed behind her desk with flawless hair and flawless skin and flawless lips. “Would you like a lemon-lime cupcake?”

Her dark eyes peer down at the box in Betty’s grasp. “Where did they come from?”

“I made them,” she answers.

“Are they vegan?”

“Uh...no.”
“Then no,” Cheryl replies. The thanks she tags on the end doesn’t sound sincere.

She drops one each off for Veronica and Kevin, leaving them on their desks with a post-it she takes from the brunette’s stash on which she writes, Love Betty x.

She takes another post-it from the container they’re in and heads to the break room where she stashes them in the communal refrigerator, leaving the note for people to help themselves on the counter next to the coffee machine.

There are a few generic emails in her inbox when she logs onto her computer, plus one from her editor with a few suggested revisions.

There’s also a question:

**Do you happen to have any photographs of the drive in?**

Betty thanks him for the suggestions, annoyed at herself for not spotting the missing capital on Twilight despite the fact she’d read through at least six times, and messages back that she’s sorry but no, she doesn’t have any photographs.

It’s not strictly a lie: she doesn’t have any, but she knows there’ll be plenty back in her bedroom at home. She thinks of the nights she and Polly spent there sharing a tub of popcorn they never managed to eat, all wrapped up in the blanket Alice had given them, taking pictures on their phones.

It had been so innocent, she’d thought.

Now though, she wonders what else besides those pictures was stored on her sister’s Galaxy.

Jughead’s response is quick so she assumes he must already be here.

**No problem.**

She tries not to feel like she’s partly failed with this article, and makes a mental note to source pictures before suggesting anything else.

Betty’s washing her coffee mug in the break room sink late in the day when she hears her editor’s voice.

“I didn’t realise anyone actually did that anymore.”

She turns and is caught off guard at the way he’s leaning against the doorway. His white shirt is unbuttoned lower than it usually is, telling her that he’s pretty free of any chest hair. She swallows and shifts her gaze which lands on his arms: on display too thanks to his rolled-up sleeves.
“Did what?” she asks, setting the now clean mug on the draining rack.

“Cleaned their mugs properly.”

“I...someone else might use it.”

“Precisely.”

She must appear mildly-horrified because he chuckles. “Top tip: keep that one on your desk, then nobody’ll use it. Less germs that way.”

She gets stuck on his words. Your desk. They send a shiver of hope up her spine.

“How was your night out?”

“Oh.” She’s pretty shocked that he’d remembered. “It was good, thank you.”

Jughead nods. “Good.”

“H-how was your weekend?” Betty asks.

“Same as ever,” he replies without elaboration. She doesn’t feel like she can ask him any more.

He crosses to the coffee machine and notes the post-it on the counter. “Cupcakes?”

“In the refrigerator,” she tells him, reaching for the towel. “They’re lemon-line.”

“Did you make them?” he asks, taking one of the only three remaining out of the box. He bites into it before she can answer, making a noise that’s bordering on a pleased groan, which she’s horrified to discover shoots a little something up the back of her neck to the tips of her ears.

“Yes.”

“God seriously Betty, this is amazing.” He takes another bite. “You’ve got a career in baking if writing ever fails.”

The smile she hadn’t realised she was wearing falters. If writing ever fails. He’s the one who can make this internship a permanent job and yet in the two weeks she’s been here, she obviously hasn’t made a good enough impression.

Tears sting her eyes but she manages an ever-polite, “thanks,” while Jughead pulls a mug from the cupboard above them and begins pouring himself coffee.

Betty looks at her scars all the way home. When she reaches the solace of the shower, she allows herself to dig her nails in harder than she has in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Your comments are always hugely appreciated.
Follow me on tumblr at @itsindiansummer13
It’s another day of hot, heavy air. Jughead’s given up on even bringing a jacket with him now: it’s redundant in the oppressive city heat and besides, his hands are occupied with carrying the series of photographs he’s deliberating over for the upcoming launch of Novo, a small gallery in Greenwich Village which will exhibit only first-time artists and photographers.

He’s negotiating the heavy glass doors of the newspaper’s building - and therefore not exactly paying attention to where he’s looking - when he bumps into someone just inside of the lobby.

“Shit,” he mutters, the photographs scattering across the floor. At the same time, a voice he recognises cries,

“I’m so sorry!”

Jughead looks up to find Betty Cooper, bottom lip trapped between her front teeth, gathering up the pictures with a look of utter devastation. “It was my fault,” he finds himself saying. “I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“No, I should’ve seen you,” she replies, picking up the last picture and orientating it so she can see the way the single set of train tracks disappear beyond the trees of York County, Pennsylvania. “Wow - this is… gosh, it’s beautiful!”

He stills his lips before they curl into a smile and takes the picture from Betty’s outstretched hands, adding it to the rest of the collection.

“Are they for a feature?” she asks.

They’re still standing in the lobby - rather close to the doors of the building and Jughead is very aware of Cheryl Blossom’s hard stare in their direction. The redhead has always been impeccable at her job, although he’s not entirely sure she’s not the devil wrapped up in expensive-looking vegan packaging.

“They are,” he tells Betty. “You can have a look at them upstairs if you like.”

She regards him for a moment, like she’s a little taken aback at his suggestion, but then her lips curve into a smile. He notes, silently, the tiny grooves left by her teeth and wonders if she rubs them with her tongue to make them soft again.

The thought startles him and he clears his throat. “Shall we?”

“I’d love to,” she replies. “But uh...I was just on my way to collect some drinks. Can I get something for you?”

There’s a tiny pang of disappointment that he decides to ignore. “No, I’m good,” he says. “I’m hooked on coffee anyway.”

She nods and gestures towards the door. “Okay well, I should go. But maybe I could have a look at the pictures later? On my lunch break?”

Jughead hopes she doesn’t think she has to humour him because he’s her boss. “I was being polite Betty,” he says. “You really don’t need to take a look.”
Her face drops. “Oh, okay.” That lightness in her eyes dulls over and shit, he thinks, now he looks like an asshole. He’d just meant… nevermind. He nods and heads towards the elevator.

Around a half hour later, Jughead has the photographs spread out across his desk, trying to figure out which ones to use in the feature to cover the gallery’s launch. He’s squinting towards the set with his body angled when there’s a soft knock on the glass wall of his office and he looks up to find Betty clutching a large plastic container of translucent brown liquid with the Starbucks logo emblazoned on the side.

“Come in,” he calls.

“I… I know you said you didn’t want anything but….” she trails off, toying nervously with the cuff of her sheer blouse. “Well, it’s hot out and this is a little better for you than coffee so…” She sets the cup down on his desk.

“What is it?”

“Iced ginseng tea.” Her bottom lip is trapped between her teeth again. “It’s supposed to boost energy and increase work capacity.” She bites down harder on her lip. “Not that you need to do more work. I didn’t mean-”

“- Thank you, Betty,” he smiles. “That’s… I appreciate the tea.”

She nods and turns her mouth into the smallest of smiles too. “You’re welcome.”

Just before she leaves his office, she turns and points to the black and white photograph he’d taken of his old neighbourhood in Hunts Point. It shows a line of fire burning behind a tree stripped bare of leaves for the winter, the smoke rising in an almost diagonal line.

“That one’s beautiful,” she says quietly. “I know it shouldn’t be, but it is.”

Jughead can’t form his words into a coherent structure before she leaves. He watches that blonde ponytail of hers swing against her shoulders as she heads down the hallway, then looks back at the photograph in question.

She’s right, he realises.

He gathers the rest of the photographs up, the one of Hunts Point on top, and takes a sip of the iced ginseng tea. It’s horrible, but he drinks it anyway.

Midway through the afternoon, he heads to the break room for coffee though. Thanks to Betty’s delivery of Korean herbal tea earlier, he’s two cups down on his usual daily quota - the fist one because he’d replaced it with the ginseng stuff; the second because he legitimately felt guilty about ruining the supposed health benefits of what she’d bought for him. The afternoon though - for him at least - is always a bit of a hump before both his energy and productivity strangely increase during the evening, and he needs caffeine. Like, physically needs it.
He’s surprised to find Betty in there, making a mug of it for herself.

“Thought you were all about the health benefits?” he can’t help but tease, then immediately wishes he hadn’t.

She watches him carefully, slowing the stirring of the 2% in her mug which, he notes to himself, is the one he’d advised her to keep on her desk. “Sometimes you just need the hard stuff, right?”

His lip quirks of its own volition. “Right.”

“Can I make you one?” she asks, but Jughead crosses over to the machine with his mug and looks at the other five drinks set on the side.

“I’ll get it; I think you’ve probably had enough of being on the drinks run today.”

Betty follows his eyeline and offers a polite smile.

“Do they get you doing jobs like that often?” he questions. “Running out for overpriced fancy iced teas and reorganising old files?”

A telltale blush creeps across her cheeks and Jughead wonders whether the reason she’s at the office so late is because it’s the time she gets away from the menial stuff he knows the other writers have the interns do. It’s not that they’re bullying her: it happens each time they have a new intern and for the most part, it’s all part and parcel of the role.

It’s just that they haven’t had an intern that can write as well as she can. It seems a waste, he decides.

“What’re you doing Friday night?”

“Oh...Friday?” she stutters. “Uh...”

“There’s a gallery opening in Greenwich Village which exhibits the very first works of new artists and photographers. We’re doing a feature on it - you’ve met Josie McCoy?”

Betty nods.

“She’ll be the one attending in order to write the article - that’s what those photographs you saw earlier were for. If you fancy checking it out, it would be a good experience for you.”

Her eyes are wide and there’s a smile turning up at the corners of her lips that’s so genuine it suddenly makes it difficult for him to swallow.

“That sounds amazing,” she replies in little more than a whisper. “Thank you, Mr Jones.”

He lets her off with the name slip and gestures towards the mugs. “You need some help with those?”

“Oh, no! I was going to take the tray. You just make your coffee,” she says. He watches as she places each mug on the white plastic tray before securing her hands either side. Her grip is so tight that her knuckles turn white, but he doesn’t say anything about it.

“Betty,” he calls, just as she’s stepping out of the doorway.

She whips her head around and her ponytail lands over her opposite shoulder. He gets that faint scent of frosting again.

“I’ll be running through the outline for the gallery piece with Josie on Friday morning. You should
come to that meeting too.”

She nods, her grin spreading, and then heads back in the direction of the features desks.

When Friday night arrives, just as he’s on his way to catch the subway to West 4th and Washington Square, Jughead receives a phone call from Josie apologising profusely that she’s come down with a terrible bout of stomach flu and can’t make it to the gallery opening.

“But the intern’s going right?” she clarifies. “So she’ll be able to write the story.”

“Her name’s Betty,” he finds himself saying - unnecessarily. But then again, Betty’s worked there for three weeks: his features team should know her name. Josie should know her name.

“She’ll be there though - Betty,” Josie reiterates. “To write the feature?”

“Yeah,” he clips a little petulantly. The last thing he needs is someone asking him questions throughout the night though, especially when it’s his work in display. He grumbles a, “get well soon,” over the receiver, but puts no effort into making it sound sincere.

Despite having told her to arrive at Novo at seven-thirty for its opening at eight, Betty is already waiting outside when he arrives just a little before seven. She’s wearing a black dress which falls to just above her knees with a split up the side that lets him know she’s not wearing tights beneath. The material appears to be something like silk: soft and floaty and tied at her waist with a bow. She looks like a parcel.

He swallows as a wave of her blonde hair catches the breeze and she tucks it behind her ear.

“Betty,” he greets her, surprised that when he gets close enough, the scent he catches isn’t the usual vanilla-y frosting, but something more musky. Something bolder.

Quickly, he forces the detail out of his mind. “You’re early.”

“Yeah,” she says, smiling apologetically as she wrings her hands together. “Sorry, I might’ve over-budgeted for travel time. I just didn’t want to be late.”

Jughead nods. “That’s conscientious of you.”

“You’re early too,” she observes.

“Yeah, I…” he scratches the back of his neck self-consciously. “I’m exhibiting.” Swallowing, he adds, “Here.”

Those green doe eyes of hers widen in surprise. “Those photographs I spilled all over the floor were yours? You took those?”

“Guilty as charged,” he huffs with a burst of air he means to be a laugh. In reality, it betrays his nerves about the exhibit (he’s not entirely uncertain there aren’t other nerves too).

“Wow!” she breathes. “You’re really talented.”

“Look Betty, I had a call from Josie,” he says, changing the subject. He’s already feeling incredibly
self-conscious and the way she’s looking at him isn’t helping. “You remember everything that was discussed in the meeting for this feature?”

“Yes.”

“Well she’s not going to make it so I’m going to need you to cover the piece on your own.”

Her mouth drops into an ‘o’ shape in obvious betrayal of her nerves, but quickly she rights herself, straightening her shoulders and lifting her chin. “Okay.”

“I’ll be around - if you need to the odd question.”

Betty nods.

“So we should probably go on in.” He reaches beyond her to open the door and gestures for her to lead the way up the wrought iron staircase, forcing himself to look down at his feet when he realises he’s forming inappropriate thoughts about her ass in that dress. “I’ll introduce you to Matilde Reis - Novo’s owner,” he tells her, just about keeping his voice level. “She’s happy to answer questions prior to opening so when you’ve got what you need, just have a look around. Get some info.”

He knows she knows all of this of course - the earlier meeting they’d had in his office with Josie too had outlined what he’s just told her - and he watches as Betty takes a look around the open space they arrive in.

“Forsythe!” Cringing internally at Matilde’s use of his real name, he forces a smile onto his face and pointedly ignores the look Betty is giving him. Great, he thinks. Now three people in New York (if he doesn’t count his dad) know what’s written on his birth certificate.

Jughead hadn’t wanted to give his editorial name to his photography in order to keep it a completely separate entity; hadn’t wanted people to view it under the influence of the magazine; hadn’t wanted anyone to have a preconceived idea of what he might take pictures of (or be shocked when those pictures fail to meet their expectations).

Maybe he should’ve picked a completely different name rather than his actual one, but then this is who he is. These pictures are who he is.

The magazine and its features are not.

“Your work looks stunning,” the gallery’s owner compliments.

“Thank you,” he replies, stooping to kiss her cheek in the way he’s learned to do over the past five years. “This is Betty Cooper - she’ll be covering the feature for the magazine.”

“It’s lovely to meet you,” Betty says, taking Matilde’s hand without hesitation. “This space is fantastic.”

He leaves them to it, a genuine smile crossing his lips as he hears her ask, “What was the inspiration behind choosing this building for the gallery?”
He gets business cards from two other gallery owners in the village and one from a larger, more-established business across the river in Brooklyn, all of whom want him to showcase more of his stuff in their spaces. One interior designer is full of praise (which he finds to be over-the-top, but smiles politely through it, hoping Betty can’t hear) for his work, telling him it would be perfect in a particular client’s penthouse on Park Avenue if he’d consider a price for it.

Politely, Jughead declines and explains that it’s not for sale, despite the fact that with the information he’s gotten regarding the designer’s client, he could probably charge something stupid like a thousand dollars for one photograph.

It’s just, he doesn’t want these pictures on a white wall opposite a Brice Marden piece that someone’s paid millions of dollars for at an auction. He’d rather have it on his own wall in his own apartment and be proud when he looks at it.

He finds Betty towards the end of the evening talking animatedly with Matilde and clutching a champagne flute that she doesn’t appear to have drunk from. Her face is full of expression and as he crosses the gallery towards them, she looks up and smiles at him. Jughead hasn’t before felt the effects of someone’s lips curving within his chest, but there’s a slight thud to the way his heart beats which he tries to brush off.

“Hey,” she says, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. It reveals a dainty earring dangling from her lobe - one that looks like it’s probably real diamond and a gift from wealthy parents. He knows nothing of her backstory, but he assumes it’s nothing like his own, assumes she’s that quiet kind of privileged. “Everyone loved you work tonight.”

He huffs out a disbelieving snort. “Not everyone, I’m sure.”

Betty tilts her head at him curiously, opening her mouth like she’s going to say something before thinking better of it and closing it again.

“Your exhibit was a success Forsythe,” Matilde tells him. “If you’ll excuse me, I should say goodbye to Daniel over there.”

They watch her sweep across the dark wood floor elegantly and then he nods towards her champagne. “You drinking that?”

It’s only then that she seems to register the glass in her hand, looking surprised when she glances down at the bubbly liquid. “Oh, I’m not really….I kind of just took it to be polite after I’d gotten everything I needed for the feature.”

He smiles, that ridiculous sense of unease he feels at seeing and smelling so much alcohol (so casually too) dissolving a little. “Ready to get out of here?”

“I have everything I need, yes,” Betty replies.

“And you came on the subway?”

“The F,” she says.

“To where?”

“Carroll Street.”

“Your building’s in Carroll Gardens?” Jughead asks.
She shakes her head. “Red Hook. Just a little south of Coffey Park.”

He looks at his watch: it’s gone eleven which mean it’ll be dark outside and coming up to midnight when the train she needs will get her to Brooklyn. “I can call you a cab Betty. It’s late.”

“I’ll be fine on the Subway,” she says, like the thought isn’t making him nervous. Maybe she will be, but when she looks like she does in that dress she’s wearing, he can’t imagine she won’t attract attention. And people can get insistent if they’ve been drinking or -

“- Then if you give me five minutes to get everything sorted, I’ll come with you.” It’s easier to cut his own thoughts off sometimes.

“You really don’t need to accompany me home Mr Jones.”

He raises an eyebrow and a tiny grin creeps along her lips. “Jughead,” she adds softly.

“I live that way anyway,” he tells her, which isn’t a huge lie because he does live in Brooklyn. Just, a twenty minute train ride north to Greenpoint. He bends closer to whisper in her ear so the few remaining guests can’t hear. “And I’ve kind of had enough here.”

He thinks he might see her shiver, but it is rather cool with the gallery’s air conditioning unit blasting out a steady stream of chilly air.

Jughead says his goodbyes, makes a promise to update Matilde with any new work he does, and tells her he’ll email over a draft copy of the feature once it’s ready. After that, it’s just him and Betty stepping out into the night air which is much more humid than it had been inside. They don’t hurry to the station - he’s conscious of the fact that the woman next to him is wearing some shoes that might make the village’s sidewalks more difficult to navigate than usual, and the whole point of him accompanying her is to ensure her safety, not risk a broken ankle.

She tells him about the information she’s collected, jotted down on a dainty little notepad which she’s tucked away inside of her purse ready to begin work tomorrow.

“Betty, it’s the weekend,” he reminds her. “Don’t spend it writing this; you can make a start on Monday.”

“I…” she starts, but abruptly puts an end to her sentence without finishing it. Jughead doesn’t say anything else about it and they turn the corner onto 6th Avenue. Despite the fact that the air is pretty warm, he catches her shivering and removes the jacket he’s wearing.

“Here,” he says, offering it around her shoulders.

“I’m fine,” she replies, shaking her head. “Really.”

He makes sure his voice is soft when he tells her to keep it for now. “You can give it back when you get to your building.”

Tilting her head, she peers up at him from under a set of long, painted eyelashes. “It’s incredibly kind of you, but I don’t need you to walk me all the way to my building.”

He knows she doesn’t need him to. But he’s going to do it anyway. “I like the city at night,” he tells her by way of reply. “Even though the noise is still there, it’s different. More honest.”

He thinks he might catch her brow furrow but she’s polite enough not to question what he means. After a while though, she says, “I like the noise.” And, almost inaudibly, adds, “Noise is good.”
On the train, they have a car to themselves save for a young guy who spends the entire ride tapping furiously against his phone screen, and a homeless man preaching about the price of new shoes who thankfully leaves them at York Street. When Betty shuffles just a little closer as the man approaches the doors they’re sitting by, Jughead feels rather vindicated regarding his choice to accompany her on her journey.

“I never got the chance to ask you,” she says as they take a right out of Carroll Street station and begin the walk south to Red Hook. “That picture with the line of fire and the tree. Where was that?”

“The Bronx,” he replies without any further elaboration. The last thing he needs is her asking questions about where he grew up. Feeling sorry for him.

“What made you take it?”

He’s surprised at her question - nobody’s ever really asked him that before, including his sister. “The lines,” he says simply, but then decides to explain more. It’ll be a long walk to her building if he continues to give only two-syllable answers. “The straight line of the fire; the diagonal one of the smoke; the cross of the wire fence. Even the tree - because it had no leaves - was very angular. There’s nothing soft about the scene: everything’s hard.”

“And yet…” Betty starts, seeming to debate internally whether or not to continue. “Because it’s in black and white, there’s a softness to it. Like you were looking at it from a different perspective - not necessarily the destruction.”

He wonders where she’s come from, this girl with her cupcakes and her softness and her goodness. He’d been right when he’d told JB she’s nice.

“You know, my building really isn’t too far from here.”

“If it’s past Coffey Park,” he says, “Then we have at least another fifteen minutes.”

“I can text Archie; he knows I’m coming.”

Archie, he thinks. Betty and Archie. Archie and Betty. Sounds about right. “Like I said, I enjoy walk- hey!” his hands reach out to catch her just as she trips over an uneven section of sidewalk which sends her tumbling against his chest. She collides with an ‘oof’ and Jughead discovers, unintentionally, that his hand fits perfectly in the curve of her waist. Once she’s straightened up and he’s sure she hasn’t sprained an ankle, he lets go, eying those damn heels warily.

“Sorry,” she murmurs.

“It’s okay.”

When they reach her building, he figures he might as well make sure she gets to her apartment considering he’s already more than forty minutes away from his own place; another two added onto that isn’t going to hurt. He’s surprised though, when she reaches on her tiptoes to hug him outside of her door, his hands automatically slipping against the silk of her dress to rest at her shoulder blades.

“Thank you for walking me home,” she tells him softly. “And for giving me this opportunity tonight.”

As much as he doesn’t want to, Jughead forces himself to pull away. She’s intoxicating and he feels like he’s drowning in her. He stuffs the words he was going to say about her literally saving the feature back down his throat and backs away.
“Goodnight Betty,” he says. “See you on Monday.”

He hears the door click as he’s about to descend the stairs and turns his head, expecting her to have slipped inside and closed the door. Instead, she’s leaning against its frame with her bottom lip trapped between her teeth. Her fingers lift in a wave and her eyes are warm as she smiles.

“Goodnight, Jughead.”

The subway ride to Nassau Avenue produces an unfortunate number of thoughts he doesn’t want to be having about Betty Cooper.

Jughead arrives at the magazine’s building a little after seven-thirty on Monday morning having spent a worrying amount of time over the weekend trying (and failing) not to think about the new intern. He has zero idea why she creeps into his thoughts at all manner of unsettling hours, but when he was grabbing a takeout coffee on his way to the station earlier and saw the selection of cupcakes on offer at the counter, his mind had immediately drifted to Betty and the (really quite spectacular) lemon-lime treats she’d made last week.

He didn’t buy the cupcake. (He figures she’d probably have something to say about the quality of its ingredients anyway)

He enjoys a relatively peaceful morning filled with email responses and the necessary preparations for the weekly board meeting with the heads of each department, a task which can be a chore but much more so when there are a lack of high-quality lead features. This week though, he has the gallery opening, a piece about some very promising conservation work taking place in Maui and another on the rise of middle-class terrorism. So all in all, he’s not dreading the meeting.

Jughead realises his leg is bouncing mid-way through typing out an email to Veronica regarding a photoshoot they’ve got booked with a popular Instagram favourite which is due to be published in a few weeks’ time, and that bouncing indicates he needs coffee. He finishes up quickly and is rising from his chair when he looks up to see Betty, hand raised to knock on the glass door. She smiles that wide, genuine smile at him that’s so different from what he’s used to seeing every day and he feels himself beckoning her in before his brain has reminded him that she’s an employee. She’s his employee.

“Good morning,” she chirps like she means it. Like the sweltering heat outside isn’t oppressively terrible.

“Good morning.” He can’t help his lips twitching into something vaguely like a smile. “What can I do for you Betty?”

“I had a question - about the names of the exhibitors at Novo,” she says. “I managed to work the piece so that I have enough words to mention them...uh, and you, I guess...” She grins at that, like it’s their own private joke. He’s appalled at himself for reciprocating. “Are you okay with me including a quick mention of their angle? Subjects, mediums, that sort of thing?”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Oh,” she replies, clearly disappointed.
“Not that it’s not...look, it’s a good idea but I don’t want it to look like a promotional piece. Could you use the space to be general about what’s being exhibited?” He knows he’s feeding her bullshit here. Nobody in journalism should ever be general. Be specific, is what’s hammered in every journalism class. Be precise. Just don’t be general.

“Of course,” Betty tells him, nodding.

“You can email me these types of questions you know,” he tells her. “Save walking up here.”

“Right,” she nods again, “But I don’t mind the walk.” It’s a reference to Friday night and he shifts his lips into what he hopes is one of those polite smiles he’s supposed to be better at than he is. “Besides, I brought you something.” She sets a tiny tupperware tub on his desk. “It’s chocolate malt. My signature cake.”

“You have a signature cupcake?”

A blush creeps across her cheeks and she ducks her head, embarrassed. He feels like such an asshole.

“That’s...that’s really kind of you Betty.”

“A thank you,” she elaborates. “For Friday.”

In his apartment, with Stranger Things playing for what is probably the fifth time, he takes the chocolate malt cupcake out of its little box.

It tastes like heaven and he’s not even surprised.
Five

Betty is thankful for Veronica Lodge and the way she doesn’t even pretend to negotiate. She’s really never met anyone like her before.

“Brunch, tomorrow morning,” she tells Betty as they eat salads in the wonderfully air-conditioned office she shares with Kevin. “And we’re coming to Brooklyn.”

She knows she could use the friendship that the New York native is extending (or, perhaps, forcing upon her, but it’s not like Betty’s complaining) and although she’s not sure exactly what she can offer in return, she’s not going to deny either Veronica or Kevin in their pursuit of hanging out outside of work. She can’t continue to have Archie as her sole hangout buddy.

“I can meet you guys over here,” Betty offers. “Seriously, you don’t need to come all the way out to Red Hook just to grab breakfast.”

“B,” Veronica asserts, using Betty’s initial as she’s come to do over the past two weeks. “We’re not eating in Red Hook. There’s a new place I want to try in Williamsburg that apparently does the best buckwheat pancakes in the borough.”

“And there are no more hot single gays in Manhattan,” Kevin adds. “Thought I’d explore the hipster market across the river.”

At this point, Betty’s almost certain he’s not joking. “Okay, brunch in Brooklyn,” she laughs, then thinks suddenly of Polly and the pancakes they used to eat at Pop’s on a weekend behind their mom’s back. “Carbs and syrup are not our friends girls,” Alice Cooper would say as she put down bowls of fresh fruit salad in front of them at the dining table. They’d eat with faux-grateful smiles, Polly winking at her across the coffee pot, and then make up some excuse about taking a walk into town to do some shopping. She remembers the taste of the strawberry milkshake she’d order and the extra whipped cream Polly would get on her chocolate one; remembers too, Archie’s cherry cola float seated at the booth he and his dad used to occupy: an Andrews’ weekend tradition.

“She’ll catch us one day,” Betty would tell her sister, but Polly had always shaken her head with a knowing smile.

“Mom would never set foot somewhere they don’t have organic granola.”

Betty had laughed and Archie had raised his hand in a wave and Polly had smiled across the table at Chuck Clayton in the opposite booth and everything had seemed wonderful. Until it wasn’t.

“Betty?” Kevin asks, and it’s only when she looks down at her lap that she notices the spinach leaf that’s fallen onto her skirt, soaking the fabric in the citrus dressing she’d made last night.

“You okay there?” Veronica asks as she picks up the leaf and winces at the mark on her skirt. “You kinda zoned out on us.”

She sets down her fork on Veronica’s desk. “Uh yeah,” she swallows. “I’m fine.

Kevin’s eyes are narrowed. “You sure?”

“I’m sure.”
“It’s just, your eyes went kind of glazed and -”

“- Kevin,” Veronica interrupts right as Betty’s heart is hammering away in rhythmic panic against her ribcage. “She said she’s fine.” Her dark eyes are wide and nobody says anything else. “I have wipes,” she adds, gesturing to the mark on Betty’s skirt. “They’re some sort of miracle. They even got red wine out of my cream rug once - I’ll grab you one.”

She fishes around in her purse and eventually pulls out a small packet of Pampers. “Baby wipes?” Betty asks, taking one disbelievingly.

“Don’t question the power of these things,” Veronica replies. “I’m not lying when I say they literally get any stain out of anything.”

“Including the kind of stains you make in the bedroom,” Kevin adds, and as much as Betty’s mildly horrified, this time when she laughs, she doesn’t think of Polly.

Her chest hurts just a fraction less than it did.

She spends most of her afternoon writing a trash piece about the twenty best proposal stories of the wedding season so far (she hasn’t compiled the list: she’s merely writing up the opinion of someone else - someone who gets paid to do this and has more jurisdiction in features writing than she does) and for once, is actually thankful when the time reaches half past five and she can leave for the weekend.

For the first time since they moved to their apartment, Archie has both tonight and tomorrow off work with no gigs scheduled for the weekend either. Betty knows this probably isn’t a good thing, but selfishly, she’s glad that he’ll be in the apartment to keep her company. It’s been a long time since they’ve been really able to catch up. She’d invite him to brunch tomorrow but the fact they’re going somewhere with buckwheat pancakes and Kevin’s sole aim appears to be to check out the men on offer, means he’d be, no doubt, incredibly disappointed.

He’s drenched in sweat when she arrives back, wiping his face on the navy material of his tank top.

“Hey Betty,” he grins at her appraisal of him. “Yeah...kinda sweaty.”

“Kind of?”

“I went hard on my run,” he laughs. “Was just heading for the shower. You need to use the bathroom first?”

“I’m good,” she replies, heading towards her room to change the blouse she’s wearing to a t-shirt so she can start dinner without ruining one of her most expensive items of clothing. “You okay with pizza tonight? I’ll make stuffed crust?”

“You’re the best,” Archie replies and then closes the door behind him.

They eat on the couch with some shitty movie playing in the background and the air conditioning unit whirring loudly over by the window.
“Did your boss like that piece you were writing?” Archie asks with a mouthful of sweet yellow pepper. He lets the piece that’s burning his lips fall from his mouth onto the plate and then wipes the residue with the back of his hand. “Jeez that’s hot.”

“You mean the piece about the gallery?” she asks, taking a careful bite of her own pizza slice.

“Yeah.”

“I think so,” she replies. “I mean, I don’t know if he liked it, but he thanked me when it was done and I haven’t had to make any more revisions so…”

“So he liked it,” Archie grins. “Like I like this pizza.”

Betty rolls her eyes. “You like any pizza Arch.”

He shrugs and she decides that already, the last two Friday nights have been the nicest she’s had since before.

“And what about you?” he asks soberly. “How’s… everything?”

Her palms seem to burn at his words and she pushes them against her knees. “Okay, I think,” she replies. “For the most part.”

“The most part?”

“I think I’m always going to get just a little overwhelmed at times, you know?” she says truthfully. They both know this anxiety or her obsessions - whatever it might be labelled as - will always be there in the background, casting a shadow over some otherwise sunny days (and completely eclipsing the sun on others) and she’s accepted that.

He sighs somewhat sadly and turns to look at her. “Betty, I’m not going to do the whole Alice Cooper act, but you’d tell me if you weren’t taking your prescriptions?”

“Of course.” Her words aren’t entirely truthful and they both know it, but she is still taking those little pills hidden away in the bathroom cabinet.

“You’re not sinking?”

It’s a term they’d used back when all of this had first started: when she’d gotten that awful, awful phone call in the middle of the night from her mom which she’d ignored, more concerned instead, with the party she was at; more concerned with making friends than having what she thought would be Alice Cooper’s scolding over the line regarding underage drinking. The answer phone message she’d listened to at half eight the following morning under a groggy haze of gin-induced headache and mild nausea still haunts her now.

She’s struggling. She’s always struggling.

But she’s not sinking.

“I’m not sinking.”

Archie seems to accept that with a small twitch of his lips and a nod. “Can you make this pizza every night?”

If his mission is to make her laugh, he succeeds and Betty loves him so much for it. “No. There’s no food group balance in pizza - especially when you refuse the salad to go with it.”
In the morning, she showers and dresses before the apartment becomes too hot. Their bathroom fan isn’t working as well as it should be and even opening the little window with the view of the brick wall of the apartment building next to theirs does little to rid the room of shower steam. The concrete jungle outside seems to be swallowing every wisp of breeze before it can reach them.

She takes the laundry she’s amassed over the course of the week down to the little room in the basement with three machines and a solitary dryer. Betty’s never understood this ratio but is thankful she’s up early enough to get her two loads in without a queue forming. Transporting her underwear from one machine to another has always been a little embarrassing in front of other people, she’s found.

Archie surfaces around half past nine, yawning as he stretches his arms above his head upon entry to the living room as Betty’s busy searching the freezer for some ground beef. There’s a buzz on the intercom system and Archie volunteers to get it, letting Veronica and Kevin up when they voice their hello. She locates the beef for the tacos she’ll make for dinner right as there’s a distinct rap on the door: Veronica, she can tell. There’s something regal about the announcement of her arrival and it makes her smile.

She wipes her hands on the dish towel but Archie’s already got the door open when she turns around, Veronica’s surprised “hi,” mixing with Kevin’s awed “Holy shit.”

“Hey guys,” she greets, gesturing for them to come in. “This is Archie - my roommate. Arch, meet Kevin and Veronica. I’ll just grab my purse.”

“Roommate?” Kevin clarifies with wide eyes, and Betty realises what he means. Not boyfriend?

“Roommate,” she affirms, heading quickly to her room to retrieve a purse that’ll match her sundress. Her colleagues (and friends now, she supposes) are early.

“Brunch,” she hears Archie repeat from the living room as she rummages through the collection of purses on her closet shelf, looking for the brown faux-suede one she’d gotten on her latest trip to H&M. Betty finds it just as she makes out her roommate saying, “Yeah, that sounds good actually.” She suspects he doesn’t know about the buckwheat pancakes. Or the scouting on Kevin’s behalf. Grabbing the cardigan she’d left on her bed earlier, she glances at her arms quickly, then to the beaming sunshine outside, and then back to her arms again. The marks there aren’t terribly noticeable, but she’d rather not take the chance of her new friends spotting the outward display of her mental health, so the cardigan and a selection of bracelets complete her outfit. With any luck, wherever they’re going to eat will be blasting out the air conditioning anyway and her extra layer will be entirely justified.

Not that she needs to justify it, she reasons with herself. Still, old habits die hard it seems.

“Archie’s coming with us,” Veronica explains with a grin and a single raised eyebrow once Betty’s back in the living room. A victory face of sorts.

“I like buckwheat pancakes, right Betty?” he asks. Stifling her laugh, she regards her friend affectionately and smiles; she really doesn’t know what she’d do without him sometimes.
“I’m sure there’ll be something on the menu you’ll like,” she replies, and doesn’t fail to miss the way he eyes Veronica in her short summer skirt and floaty camisole combo. For her part, Veronica does little to disguise the way her eyes rake up his body, settling on his abs for a while until Kevin clears his throat. “Are we actually going to eat brunch or are you two just going to eat each other?”

“As much as it pains me to say it Archiekins, you should go put a shirt on,” Veronica instructs. Betty is, as ever, taken aback by the other woman’s boldness, and even Archie has the decency to look a little bashful.

“Two minutes,” he grins, his lips stretching even wider when he passes Betty, and heads into his bedroom.

“How have we known each other nearly a month and yet you’ve never mentioned the fact that you’ve been harbouring a super-hot roommate?” Veronica whisper-shrieks. “Seriously Betty, I could file my nails on those abs!”

The following Monday, Betty rises early enough to swing by the incredibly busy Starbucks nearest the Times’ building. She joins the queue, stands in it for close to ten minutes before being served, and then navigates her selection of drinks in the recycled cardboard carry tray through the throngs of workers and tourists alike to the office.

Kevin’s already there when she makes it to the little room he and Veronica work from, and takes the coffees from her gratefully.

“You’re spoiling us,” he says. “They’d better make you permanent here.”

It’s an off-hand comment that’s meant to be supportive - Betty can recognise that - but it serves as a reminder that she is only temporary. There’s scope for Jughead as the editor to offer her a full-time position but he hasn’t of yet, and already she’s nearing the halfway point of her internship. Forcing a smile onto her lips, she tells him she’ll see him at lunch and turns to leave when she sees a beautiful even gown on the dress mannequin.

“What’s that for?” she asks, reaching out to finger the delicate lace and then drawing her hand back quickly, thinking better of it. “It’s beautiful.”

“We’ve got a shoot with Octavia D’arro,” Kevin says, leaning back against his chair. “That’s one of the pieces she’ll wear.”

“One of them?” Betty breathes. The dress is stunning - she can’t believe it’s not a feature in its own right.

“Yeah, V and I have been playing around with a couple other ideas for the theme. You can give us your opinion at lunch - she wants to go with old-school regal glamour seeing as Octavia’s usually photographed in the more cutting edge stuff and I wanted to go grunge. You know, pair it with biker boots and some leather cuffs.”

“Sounds…”

“Different, I know - but that’s the whole point. You know what else is really cool about it?”
“What’s that?”

“It’s made entirely from recycled plastic.”

She’s overwhelmed. She’d had no idea something like that could even be done and she wonders if other people would know; wonders if it would make for a good article: here’s a beautiful dress made from milk carton lids. “That’s amazing,” she gasps. “You think you could give me a couple more details at lunch? This could be a feature.”

“Sure,” Kevin grins.

Betty heads out, just as he calls her name. “Yeah?”

“I want you to text me the morning you wake up and find Veronica in your roommate’s shirt, standing in your living room.”

She’s pretty sure she’s open-mouthed as he laughs. “It’s totally going to happen.”

Betty spends two days working on the feature about the company behind the recycled plastic dress in between the other tasks she’s allocated from other members of the features team, none of whom include the editor. On the third day, she spends a concerning amount of time fretting over the placement of a semicolon before realising her breathing is shallow and her fingers are pressing against her palms (against though, not into - so she’s counting that as a small win) and so she hits send before she can work herself up any further.

On Thursday afternoon, a little after the single mug of coffee she allows herself, she gets an email from Jughead asking her to go to his office. There is no specific time given for when he wants her to attend, and she pushes back her chair with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“Come in Betty,” he says as she fidgets with one of the buttons on her cardigan, his voice sounding a little echoey beyond the glass. She pushes the door open and he rises from his chair, rubbing his palms against the pants he’s wearing - not jeans exactly, she notes mentally, but not far off.

“The article you wrote about the company making couture clothing from recycled plastic,” he says. “It wasn’t in our draft contents list. Who asked you to write that?”

Her heart jarrs and all of a sudden she’s breathless, her face flaming in shame at taking such a liberty and expecting this poor man who has a hundred other things to do to just read-

“- Nobody,” she says quietly, cutting off her own train of thought before wasting any more of his time. “I’m sorry, I thought…”

“- It’s fantastic,” Jughead interrupts, now leaning against the dark wood shelf behind his desk. “Exactly the kind of thing our readers will take an interest in.”

She processes his words for longer than she needs to, just to make sure - as she turns them over in her head for scrutinising - that she has heard what she thinks she has. “Oh,” she replies, very very quietly. Betty realises at that point that he’s staring at her with a slight frown, and quickly she fights to rearrange her features so she doesn’t appear quite so worried or taken aback (both of which she
“What made you write it?”

“There’s a beautiful gown in Veronica and Kevin’s. In the fashion department,” she corrects. “I noticed it when I stopped by the other morning. Kevin was talking to me about it and I did some further research.”

“The sign of a true journalist,” he says with a small smile. He has no idea, but it makes her day.

“Thank you,” she replies, unable to pour enough gratitude into those two syllables as he regards her from his position against the wall. There’s a thick curl of hair flopping over his forehead at just the right angle to make him look like a young Leo DiCaprio - albeit with a slightly darker edge. It reminds her of her very first school girl crush and she has the horrible realisation that she’s blushing at the abrupt shift in her thoughts.

“I could’ve emailed you that of course,” he begins. “But I wanted your opinion on something. In person.”

“My opinion?”

“Yes,” he replies - like it’s simple. “I need a fresh perspective.”

“On what?” she asks, then immediately feels rude for such a response. Her mother would be horrified.

Her mother would’ve been horrified, she corrects herself. Her mother would’ve been horrified before.

“A feature I’ve been working on for next week’s issue. I can’t…” Jughead sighs and rubs a hand over his face, making the sweep of hair that had been tumbling towards his eyes now stand at a forty-five degree angle. “I can’t work out if I’m being too negative or if it’s just the truth.”

He hands her two pieces of paper - a mock-up of how the feature will look once it’s been printed. “Have a seat,” he instructs, gesturing to the chair pointed at his desk. Betty does, crossing her legs in that way she’d been taught from being a very little girl. Ladies should cross their legs at the ankles, not above the knee Elizabeth.

“Can I get you a coffee?” Jughead asks. “Or one of those awful iced teas?”

“You didn’t like it?” she asks, then spots the jug of water sitting on the shelving unit. “Uh, water would be great actually. Thank you.”

He nods with a smile and pours the liquid into two glasses. “I can’t believe anyone likes it. Give me a milkshake any day.”

She thinks of Pop’s and the strawberry milkshakes she loved so much; can even taste the hint of sharpness cutting through all the sweet. “Which flavour?”


“Sounds good,” she says. Sounds perfect, she thinks.

“Anyway, I should let you read.” He promptly shuts up, taking a large gulp of water from the glass he’d poured for himself, and leans back against the shelf. Initially, it’s unnerving - having him watch
her like that - but quickly, Betty loses herself in his article.

“Wow,” she says simply, once she’s read the final word. “You’re an incredible writer.”

“It doesn’t come off as my being bitter?”

“You’re highlighting the worrying change in values,” she replies. “I think that’s necessary. You’re right too: nobody needs a lazy river to help them study.”

“That’s it!” Jughead says, sliding away from the wall and clicking his fingers. “I should change the heading to that.”

“To what?”

“Nobody needs a lazy river to help them study.”

The grin she hadn’t realised she was wearing grows, and suddenly Betty feels warm inside. Like even her feet are proud.

“Thank you Betty,” he says, taking the mock-up back from her. She rises from her chair and just before she leaves, in a moment of bravery plucked from somewhere indistinguishable, she questions,

“Why did you ask for my opinion in person?”

He clears his throat. “So I could read you.”

“Read me?”

“Your lips twitch when you like something. It’s much easier to lie about your thoughts over email and I wanted to get an honest answer.”

_He wanted to see my lips twitch_, she thinks - and then tries not to dwell on the implications of what that might mean.

(She also tries not to dwell on the tiny skip her heart makes).

Sometimes, Betty bakes because someone has ordered some cupcakes. Sometimes, it’s because she’s been craving something sweet all week and she’s finally given in to temptation. Sometimes, it’s because her anxiety is pulling her under and if she doesn’t do something with her hands, there’s a big risk that her nails will break the skin on her palms.

And sometimes, she bakes because she’s happy.

This is one of those times.

She left the office a little before six, with her editor’s praise echoing in her ears and her apparently twitchy lips set in an easy smile. On the subway back to Brooklyn, she’d seen a woman eating Reese’s Pieces and they’d given her an idea for a new flavour combination so she’d walked the route home from the station which passed the largest grocery store in order to pick up bananas, peanut butter and some dark chocolate.
Now, she’s tempering said chocolate to get the perfect sheen with the air conditioning unit whirring away, the radio playing something new and upbeat and summery that she hasn’t heard before, and for the first time in so long, she feels positive. It’s a strange - almost giddy - feeling. One that makes her chest feel light.

Once the cakes are finished, she sets two on a plate for herself and Archie, and packs the others into the handy carry-case she’d bought at Target ready for transportation in the morning.

Archie brings home a pack of beers, not-so-subtly tries to work the conversation around to Veronica (which makes Betty smile) and they head up to the roof to discuss how, without looking like she’s doing his bidding, she can get her colleague to agree to a date with him.

She even has half a bottle of Corona, sipped slowly so as not to react with her Zoloft and Ativan as they discuss where Archie might be able to take Veronica on a date.

“What about you?” he asks. “Are there any guys in the office?”

She thinks immediately of her editor: that dark wave of hair that always seems to be falling into his eyes; the way he rolls his shirt sleeves up so his forearms are exposed; the striking dark blue of his irises; the length of his fingers; the way he’d walked her home after the gallery opening, despite it being not even remotely on his way. He’s incredibly attractive - she can admit that (to herself). But she shouldn’t be thinking about him like that and he almost certainly wouldn’t be interested in her like that.

“No,” she tells Archie. “There’s nobody.”

“Shame Betts,” he replies. “Maybe Veronica has a brother.”

Thinking of Kevin’s comment regarding texting him if she sees Veronica dressed in Archie’s shirt, she suppresses the giggle, thinks about how she’d love to call Polly and tell her everything she’s feeling, but ultimately, isn’t hit with the twang of pain she half-expects to be.

It’s a good day, and Betty knows it. There’ll be bad ones - she knows that too.

But still. She leans her head on Archie’s shoulder and they watch the sun burn on the horizon.

Veronica and Kevin get first refusal of the cupcakes in the morning. They end up agreeing to share one, mainly because the following day, the former is going to some pool party on the rooftop of a hotel somewhere on the Upper West Side and needs to “look like a smokeshow” in her bikini.

She almost bumps into Jughead in the hallway, only narrowly avoiding tipping the carry case when he steadies her with a hand on each of her elbows. His tilts his head to the side and appears to scrutinise the contents. “What’s with all the cakes?”

“I was trying out a new flavour combination,” she replies. “Thought I might get some feedback so I can add them to my resumé.”

“You make them professionally?” he asks, and immediately, she realises that her words might’ve been a mistake.

“Just something I do on the side for a little extra money,” she says quickly. “I promise it won’t interfere with my work here.”

His lips seem to quirk - not quite into a smile, but he doesn’t look like she might’ve expected. (She doesn’t really know what she’d expected, but it wasn’t this expression)
“How many do people order - typically?”

“It depends,” Betty answers. “Sometimes a dozen; sometimes more.”

Much later in the day, when she’s on her way back from the bathroom, Jughead tells her he’d like to buy a dozen.

“O-of course,” she replies, somewhat taken aback. “What flavour would you like?”

His face drops and a look of panic flashes across his eyes. “I...I don’t...I mean...what do you do?”

She considers whom the recipient might be. A girlfriend perhaps - someone whose taste in cake he’s unsure of. “I can make whatever you want. Are they...uh...for your girlfriend or-”

“- No I don’t...there isn’t... I don’t have a girlfriend. They’re for my sister.”


“Yes.”

Her eyebrows crease in a frown.

“I mean, she likes all of them.” He scratches at the back of his neck. “But uh...maybe not the floral one.”

“I could make a selection?” she offers. “A few of each?”

He looks at her in such a way that her breath suddenly catches in her throat.

“That sounds complicated.”

“It’s no trouble.” Her voice is a little breathy and she forces it to return to normal. “Really.”

As she’s leaving the office with Jughead’s cake order in her head, she passes Veronica in the hallway. Buoyed by the previous two days’ events, she takes her chance in dropping Archie into conversation.

“I want to do some things with that boy,” Veronica says with a soft sigh. Betty grins.

“Actually, he’d like to take you on a date.”

“What? Are you serious?”

“I’m serious,” Betty replies. “He told me last night.”

“And you’re just mentioning this now?!” she shrieks. “B, you need to have him call me. Like, yesterday.”

Betty laughs. “Okay.”
“Okay, or okay you’ll make sure he calls?”

“I’ll make sure he calls,” she says.

“Thank God. I’ve been fantasizing about those abs for days.”

Thinking of her roommate in that way makes Betty feel only marginally uncomfortable, and she can’t help but roll her eyes affectionately at Veronica. As they say goodbye, she pulls Betty in for a hug - arms wrapping around her like it’s an everyday occurrence - and grins, “You’re the best B. I love you.”

The warmth of her words carry Betty all the way to the station on 42nd street, the subway ride home, and remain with her as she unlocks the apartment door and finds Archie lounging on the couch playing video games.

“Veronica wants you to call her,” she says with a smile. The grin that spreads across his face makes hers grow wider too.
Sorry for the wait with this one, but it is pretty long so I'm hoping that'll make up for it :) 
Also, I did tag this as slow burn. I wasn't lying...But good things come to those who wait ;) 
Thank you for the love and support in your comments - they mean so much and make me smile. x

“Let me in, shithead!” Jellybean shouts from the other side of his apartment door, banging again with her fist. Jughead hurries across the living room, almost tripping over the wire from his laptop charger on the way and cursing her not-quite under his breath.

“Jesus,” he mutters, wrenching open the door before his neighbours have any more reason to complain. “Can’t you just wait like a normal person?”

“Nope,” his sister replies, popping the ‘p’ and barging through into what had been - until mere moments ago - his sanctuary. “What the hell took you so long to answer anyway?”

“There’s this thing called the shower,” he starts, and immediately receives the bird. “What’re you doing here anyway?”

She grabs a mug from the cabinet and pours herself a large slug of coffee from the pot he’d made an hour or so earlier. “Food,” she answers, opening the door of the refrigerator and pulling out the plate of remaining cupcakes Betty had made. “Jackpot!”

Jughead watches as she selects one of the chocolate ones, his heart sinking just a little because of all of the flavours, the chocolate ones are the best. (And that really is saying something, because the other three flavours are works of culinary art)

“Why do you have these?” Jellybean asks, sinking her teeth into the frosting and moaning at the taste. “Oh my God, they’re freaking amazing.”

He can’t help but smile at the smear of frosting on her nose; it always happens to him too (which he counts as a bonus because it means the frosting to cake ratio is perfect) but there’s no way he’s going to start eating them with a fork. “Betty made them,” he replies, and then immediately conjures up a picture in his mind of her whipping up the batter in her little kitchen, apron on no doubt, singing something like that yummy, yummy, yummy, I got love in my tummy song from the Kinder chocolate commercial. He groans inwardly: he shouldn’t be picturing Betty at all.

“Your intern Betty?”

“She’s not my intern,” he shoots back - except, technically, she is.

“Why is your intern making you cupcakes?” Jellybean asks, ignoring his comment as she lifts herself onto the counter - probably so she can enjoy the superior vantage point. “Delicious cupcakes,” she adds. “But the question remains.”

“She has this kind of side business. I bought them.”
“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you buy a shit-ton of cupcakes?”

“I don’t see you complaining.”

“I’m not,” she counters. “But I am curious. These must’ve set you back like, fifty bucks.”

Hardly, he thinks, and then wonders whether he should’ve tipped more than the twenty dollars he’d given Betty. He just hadn’t wanted to offend her; hadn’t wanted her to think he was buying them as some sort of charitable thing-to-do (even though the only reason he’d bought them in the first place was because he’d felt guilty about her working without being paid - especially when she’s such a damn good writer).

Jughead sighs. “I thought she could use the money.” he might as well be truthful.

“How many did you buy?”

“A dozen.”

“Fuck!” she exclaims. “You’ve eaten over half!”

He grabs a mug from the cupboard and pours the remaining coffee into it, figuring he might as well join her. “I’m always hungry.”

“Yeah,” she mumbles. “But I think you might be hungry for more than just Betty’s cakes.”

“J.B.,” he warns, and she holds her hands up in defence, cupcake crumbs scattering onto the floor.

“Didn’t she think it was strange - you ordering so many when you live on your own like a fucking recluse?”

“I’m not living like a recluse!” he shoots back. “And I told her they were for your birthday.”

At that, his sister cocks an eyebrow with a smirk but says nothing more. Jughead stuffs one of the coffee cupcakes into his mouth and they eat and drink in companionable silence.

“Thanks big brother,” Jellybean says, hopping down from the counter once she’s finished. She doesn’t even take her mug to the sink - just leaves it where it is (cupcake wrapper included). He can’t help but smile.

“You literally swung by just to eat my food?”

“Yep.” Again, she pops the ‘p’ and heads towards the door. “And to make sure you’re still alive. Someone has to check in if you’re not going to get any real friends.”

Just before she closes the door behind her, she adds, “You know I’m expecting a dozen of these on my actual birthday, right?”

“Goodbye JB.”

She salutes with a wink and then disappears down the hallway.
Monday morning rolls around with the heat wave that’s been engulfing the city seeming only to intensify, and the air conditioning that’s been cranked up in the office building works overtime to keep the stifling humidity from creeping indoors. Jughead’s on his way to his office when he passes Veronica in the hallway.

“Good morning,” she chirps in such a way that he narrows his eyes in suspicion. He’s known the chief stylist for as long as he’s worked for the magazine; both of them having started at the same time and worked their way up to their respective positions. Never once has she bid him a good morning on the first day of the working week.

“You’re chipper for a Monday morning.”

“It’s a glorious day,” she replies.

Again, Jughead isn’t convinced. As far as he’s always known, the humidity wreaks havoc on certain fabrics (usually the kind she’s styled a model in) and hair too - especially when it’s doused in specific products. (Nobody will ever be able to say that as an editor, he doesn’t listen to the complications which arise from the elements)

He checks his watch. “How many shots of espresso did you get in your coffee this morning?”

“Two,” she replies pointedly. “But that’s beside the point. If you must know the reason behind this,” she gestures to her face, “I had a date this weekend.”

Ah, he thinks. That explains it. For a long time, he’d never quite been sure what to make of Veronica, but sometimes he finds himself bordering on jealous when he sees the way she can so easily communicate her feelings. She is, emotionally-speaking, everything he’s not. “I’d advise you not to tell me any more,” he says, effectively putting the brakes on any intimate details she might’ve been about to share. He’d rather not know about Veronica’s sex life. “But I’m happy for you.”

“Well I have you to thank I suppose,” she says.

Jughead’s eyebrows fold into a frown. “Why me?”

“Well, if you hadn’t given the internship to Betty, I never would’ve met Archie. And that would’ve been a crime of epic proportions. Jug, you should see his abs.”

“- Archie?” he interrupts.

“Betty’s roommate. Anyway, he took me to Central Park and he had this whole picnic spread - although I think Betty might’ve had a hand in making it because it was amazing. And yeah, I know Central Park is touristy and kind-of cheesy but he was so sweet and…” she finally catches her breath and smiles sheepishly. “Right. I’ve told you too much.”

He nods, although now he’s curious. “The guy who Betty lives with - that’s not her boyfriend?”

“No,” Veronica replies. “She’s single. Why do you... oh.” Now there’s a smirk tugging at her lips and it’s her turn to narrow her eyes at him. “You like Betty!”

“Shhh!” he hisses, widening his eyes and then silently cursing himself for his reaction. “I don’t like Betty. I mean, I do like her, but not like that.”
“Sure.” Her tone isn’t even remotely unsarcastic.

“Veronica,” he warns, but she’s very clearly not done.

“That’s why you’re always staring at her! I thought it was because she’s the intern and you’ve been trying to decide whether or not to make her permanent but that’s not it at all!” she smirks and he feels himself flush with panic. “This is adorable!”

“Veronica,” he warns again, and thankfully this time, she heeds it.

“Okay, I won’t say anything.”

He opens his mouth to remind her that there’s nothing to say, except it seems pointless. He does like Betty, he realises. Why wouldn’t he? She’s beautiful, intelligent, a damn good writer. But he’s her boss: he’d be a fool not to end her trial period and give her a permanent role. He can’t ruin a professional relationship by asking her for a drink on the tiny off-chance that she might feel the same way.

Jughead nods and Veronica winks as she continues on her journey down the hall.

He’s trying to arrange a meeting with the author of a tell-all book on life inside San Pedro prison in Bolivia’s capital city when there’s a knock on his office door. He looks up to find Betty standing on the opposite side of the glass, wearing a tight skirt that comes to a stop a little way above her knees and a blouse with some sort of bow at the front in a floaty red fabric. As if his conversation with Veronica earlier has ignited something within him, Jughead feels his mouth go dry. He gestures for her to come in but continues to type out his email detailing what he’s hoping to achieve from the article.

Betty waits politely for him to finish, focusing her attention on the window across the room which, when he glances up at her, gives him a perfect view of her side profile. Her hair is pulled back into a ponytail and if he’s not mistaken, there’s a smattering of light freckles high on her cheekbones that he doesn’t recall having noticed before. He figures she got some sun at the weekend.

“I’ll be two minutes,” he tells her, and catches a genuine smile curve along her lips. He spends longer than he should noting the three circular studs in her ear, and has to silently remind himself to focus back on the email.

Once he’s hit send, he sits back in his chair in a bid to at least appear casual. “What can I do for you?” he asks.

“I came to see you about an idea I had for a feature,” she says, turning back so she’s facing him rather than the window. He’s right - she has caught the sun. It looks good on her. “And also, I wondered….did your sister like the cupcakes?”

“She did.” He can’t help but smile. “Particularly the chocolate ones.”

Her face breaks out into a wide grin that reaches all the way up into her eyes and Jughead tries not to flinch when his heart flutters and skips at the sight. “That’s good,” she says softly.

He nods and it’s quiet for a few moments until he realises that cupcakes aren’t the reason she’s here
in his office. “You had an idea?” he asks.

“Yes, I’ve been doing some research,” she begins, taking a seat at the leather chair pointed towards his desk. She crosses her legs at her ankles in that way ladies of high society do in old movies he’s seen, and he likens her in that moment to Grace Kelly: poised and elegant.

And beautiful.

“There’s a huge gang problem in the Bronx - I mean, we all know that,” she starts, and immediately his neck prickles. “And predominantly, it’s men and boys involved, but I managed to find some blogs of members of a gang there who’re women. Some of the things they have to do for initiation are… well, they’re being exploited. And they’re really young, some of them. Definitely minors.”

His ears feel like they’re burning and it’s difficult to swallow. “Where in the Bronx?” he manages to choke out. Don’t let it be the Serpents, he hopes desperately.

“Hunts Point.”

Fuck. His entire body feels like it’s on fire, burning and trembling. He can see Betty’s still talking, her hands gesturing as she makes her point, but he’s lost all ability to hear words now - the syllables ‘Hunts’ and ‘Point’ echoing and echoing and echoing around his head.

He thinks back to high school - to his freshman year where he’d watched his childhood best friend, Toni Topaz, climb up onto the stage in the Whyte Wyrm in front of the gang they’d grown up around. She’d been wearing the tiniest skirt he’d ever seen, in cheap imitation leather, pleated so it flapped against her ass whenever she moved. Her eyes had been lined so heavily with makeup that it had looked like someone had coloured her in, and she’d lifted a hand to the pole as the fifth beat of Nine Inch Nails’ Closer had sounded over the speakers. Jughead had wondered back then (still does now, when he thinks back to that night) if anyone else in that bar had noticed how her hands were shaking.

She’d hooked her leg around the pole as Trent Reznor sung ‘I wanna fuck you like an animal’ and all he’d been able to think about was how, only the previous night, they’d been studying together on the musty couch in his apartment, her wearing Spongebob pajama pants and one of his baggy sweaters, and she hadn’t mentioned a word about her initiation. He hadn’t even known it was happening.

His own fucking father had allowed it to take place; had watched, along with all the other grown men who should’ve known better, as his best friend had given up her last shred of innocence.

Jughead wonders whether anyone besides him knows that after she was done, when she was officially a Southside Serpent, she cried until that makeup around her eyes had stained his favourite flannel.

He hopes she managed to get out.

“Mr Jones?” he hears Betty’s voice come back to him. “Jughead?”

“No,” he snaps forcefully.

“I’ve made contact through some of these blogs; there are girls willing to tell their stories - anonymously of course, but-”

“- I said no, Betty,” Jughead reiterates, the tone of his voice shocking even him. “It doesn’t fit with the tone of the magazine.”
He watches as she nods, lips parted and eyes cloudy with something. He can’t tell what, but it’s *something*.

Nothing good.

“I’m sorry,” she apologises, and immediately he remembers how it felt to run the gauntlet: his own initiation. Brass rings against his jaw; the taste of metal in his mouth; the sound of his pulse in his ears; the feel of the soaked cotton wool balls Toni had used to clean his face afterwards.

Nothing had twisted in his stomach then the way it’s doing now.

“If you have time to write in between the tasks you’re given, ask for a topic. There’s a catalogue of filler ideas; the features are planned in advance. We can’t just add one in.”

It’s the second lie he’s told her regarding journalism and it reeks of a shitty editor.

“Oh.” Her reply is so quiet, he almost doesn’t hear it. “Thank you.”

Betty rises from the chair and he wants so badly to tell her not to thank him for anything; to tell her that she *should* write the piece - it would be a damn good feature: he knows that. But he can’t be the one to publish an exposé on his own family; can’t let Betty get that close to his background; can’t let *anyone* here know where he came from.

He opens his mouth to call her name - apologise - but no sound comes out. He watches her walk along the hallway, back to the desk she works at, with a little less bounce in her ponytail than usual.

He hates himself more than he did yesterday.

Jughead doesn’t sleep that evening. He thinks of Betty’s eyes and that emotion in them (whatever it was, he still hasn’t been able to define it) and the scent of her perfume lingering in the air long after she’d left his office.

He stewed over it all of Tuesday and remains in a foul mood when he doesn’t see her other than across the room while she’s stifling a yawn as she proof-reads an article about the cost of rent in the East Village.

He gets no more than two hours sleep that night and by Wednesday, there are dark circles under his eyes when he looks in the mirror. He snaps at Veronica when she changes the angle of the fashion feature - even though the change results in a better piece - and in typical Veronica Lodge fashion, she calls him out on it. Doesn’t matter that he’s the editor and therefore technically her boss. If he’s being a dick, she’ll let him know.

Which of course, she does.

“You can be a real jackass Jones, you know that?” she huffs, dusting an imaginary piece of dirt off of her skirt. “Between you biting my head off and Betty moping around, you’re really killing my mood.”

His ears prick at the mention of the blonde intern. “Why is Betty moping?”
“I don’t know: she’s kind of a closed book. She’d better brighten up for her birthday drinks on Friday though.”

“Her birthday is Friday?”

“Yes.”

He’s not sure what else to say, so he garbles some sort of apology to Veronica which seems half-arsed but is actually genuine, but she accepts it anyway with a roll of her eyes and a flip of her hair. It smells expensive, like silk and gold, and all Jughead can think, is it’s not as nice as vanilla frosting.

He emails Betty as soon as he reaches his office.

It takes her over a half hour to respond, at which point he realises he hasn’t managed to do any actual work.

**I’ve got an article to proof-read but I can come when I’m done?**

Jughead presses his fingers against the desk and decides that for once, he’s going to abuse his power as the editor.

**I need you to come now.**

He probably should’ve added something along the lines of ‘don’t worry’ judging by the expression she’s wearing when she arrives at the glass door, but he figures it’s too late and by the time he’s finished, it won’t matter anyway.

“Come in,” he instructs.

She does of course, standing primly with her hands clasped in front of his desk. He can see her fingers turning white - the ends of her short nails pressing into her skin - and he wants to prise them apart; rub the colour back into her fingertips.

“Relax Betty,” he says instead, as softly as he can. “It’s good news: have a seat.”

Again, she obeys but doesn’t remove her hands from the vice-like grip they’re in.

“Your work for the magazine has been excellent,” he starts. “Well-informed, well-executed, professional. We’ve been lucky to have you.”

She nods slowly, her face ashen and suddenly Jughead realises she’s misunderstood him. So he elaborates,

“Effective a week on Monday, your trial period ends and you’ll begin work as an employee of The New York Times Magazine - paid and with the specified benefits, of course.”

Watching the realisation spread across her face makes Jughead feel warm inside. It’s a strange feeling: both incredibly pleasant and a little uncomfortable too - knowing it’s a result of him and his
words and *his* decision to award her the position (and the benefits) she deserves.

Betty’s fingers finally unclench and she presses them gently against her legs, just a little way above her knees. There’s a smile reaching all the way up into those big green eyes of hers and he feels his own lips pull upwards.

“Thank you,” she replies in an almost-squeal.

He rises from his chair and holds out his hand to shake hers. Betty does the same, sliding her palm against his, and he feels a tingling sensation creep up his arm. “Welcome to the team,” he says, only just managing to keep his voice level.

“I’m so excited, I could hug you right now,” she laughs, and the timbre of it sends that tingling sensation up his neck and into his ears.

Maybe it’s because he’s stupid. Maybe it’s because he’s a masochist. Maybe his mouth isn’t working in accordance with his common sense, but he says, “I can allow a hug.”

Her eyes flick up to his like she’s trying to work out whether or not he means it. But then she ends up at his side of the desk (maybe she’s floated: he can’t be sure) and she’s slipping her arms around him, palms resting flat against his shoulder blades as his hands lock together behind her.

The only thing he can think about is how good she feels pressed against him.

The hug itself doesn’t last long (not long enough anyway, Jughead thinks) and then Betty’s extricating herself from him. She whispers a “thank you,” one last time, her lips so close to his ear that he can feel her breath burning his skin, and steps back, smoothing down the skirt that wasn’t even out of place to begin with.

“I should get back to work,” she says with a smile and he nods, running a hand through his hair to push it back from his face.

He spends the rest of the afternoon trying not to recall how her breasts had felt when she pressed against him. It’s a futile effort and he knows it.

On Friday morning, Jughead stops by the overpriced coffee place on the way to the subway. He buys himself a large americano with an extra shot of espresso, and then his eyes catch the display of cupcakes behind the glass counter. Before he can think too much about it, he selects one covered in a pale pink frosting and scattered with multi-coloured sprinkles, asking for it to be placed in a box so he can get it to the office without spoiling its appearance.

It remains on his desk for half of the morning (Betty had already been seated at hers when he’d arrived and he didn’t much fancy handing it to her in front of everyone when she’s the very first person he’s ever bought a cake for) and then, by chance, she passes his office.

He calls her name like he’s a sixteen-year-old kid with a crush on the beautiful cheerleader, and she turns her head, the expression on her face giving away that she’s initially a little confused - until she realises that it’s *his* voice she can hear. She pushes open the glass door with that smile of hers crossing her lips and he reminds himself he’s only supposed to be wishing her a happy birthday - that’s it.
“Good morning,” Betty says, tucking a wave of blonde hair behind her ear. It’s down today, as opposed to tied back in its usual ponytail, and it’s skirting her shoulders which are covered by a white cardigan with tiny blue flowers on it.

“Good morning,” he replies. “And happy birthday.”

A tiny gasp leaves her mouth, betraying her surprise.

“Veronica may have mentioned it in passing,” he adds. “I uh...I got…” It turns out that giving someone a cupcake is harder than Jughead had imagined it would be. He hands the box to her. “This is for you.”

She looks at him questioningly but takes the little white box from his hands. “Thank you.”

“It’s not much,” he starts. “I probably should’ve got you more than one, I just -”

“-It’s perfect!” she interrupts, lifting the treat from its box. “You’re sweet to get me this.”

“Didn’t want you to have to make your own birthday cake,” he tells her with a gruff chuckle, and then internally curses himself because now she’ll think he’s been thinking about this (which yeah, he has, but she doesn’t need to know that).

“Here,” Betty says, breaking the cake into two pieces, which incidentally leaves a scattering of crumbs across his desk, handing him one.

“It’s one tiny cake Betty,” he says. “You don’t have to share.”

She shrugs and urges him to take the messy half she’s holding out in front of her. “It’s plenty. And besides, what good is having a cake if you don’t get to share it?” She takes a bite out of hers - a delicate ladylike bite with her hand cupped underneath the sponge to catch any crumbs - and he does the same.

She giggles and his chest feels tight and he wants to simultaneously run away and kiss her. He stays where he is.

“Did you need me for something else?” she asks, once they’ve both eaten their halves.

Jughead kind-of wishes he did. Wishes he’d made something up so that the reason she’s here isn’t solely because he wanted her to have cake on her birthday.

“How’s everything going? You have your desk sorted?”

“It’s great,” she says, and really seems to mean it. He’d almost forgotten how positive new employees can be - it’s been a while since they last appointed someone. “Thank you.”

He nods and folds his arms - the last thing he needs is to end up hugging her again. Betty seems to realise she should head back to wherever it was she was intending to go, but just before leaving, says,

“Tonight we’re…a few of us are going to the Marquis for drinks. Kind of a joint birthday and ‘I got the job’ thing.” She ducks her head like she’s embarrassed and he wants to tell her she shouldn’t be: nobody’s ever gotten an early end to their intern period so they can be made permanent before. He says nothing and she continues. “Veronica organised it. It uh…” she lifts her head just enough that he can see the hesitation in her eyes. “It would be great to see you there - if you want to come.”
“I was planning on working late tonight,” he says, the words spilling out of his mouth before he has any idea his brain was even forming them. “Got a few things to catch up on.”

“Oh,” she replies softly. “Okay.”

Jughead wonders whether he can detect a hint of disappointment in her tone, but decides that there’s no way she’ll care whether or not he’s there. But then,

“We’re heading there for seven-thirty,” she tells him as she opens the glass door to leave. “If you get finished earlier.”

He nods once - it’s all he ever seems to do around her - and forces himself not to watch her walk away.

Thankfully, the author he’s been trying to get in touch with regarding the San Pedro prison story finally emails him back to confirm that he’ll give an interview. He schedules it for just under a week’s time so that it’ll be ready for print in the third issue from their current one, and then begins compiling a list of questions he wants to ask. The planning means that he has something to concentrate on besides the thought of Betty’s birthday/celebration drinks, although by the time the clock hits five-thirty and he sees Veronica leave for the weekend, purse looped over her arm, his concentration dramatically wanes.

By seven forty-seven, having stared at two different shades of muted plum text for at least twenty minutes without actually making a decision, Jughead’s resigned himself to the fact that he’s not going to get anything else done and so he might as well go home. He contemplates whether to order chinese or have the tv dinner he knows is in his freezer somewhere, and then thinks again about the Marquis with its huge buffet and 360 degree view of Manhattan. He’s been there a couple times for work events and even though the food isn’t the best, it’s not terrible. Of course, there’s little doubt that drinks means only drinks, and Betty, Veronica and Kevin et al won’t be seated at a table tucking into strawberries dipped under the chocolate fountain.

He instantly regrets thinking of Betty and strawberries and melted chocolate in the same context.

Once he’s outside, Jughead fully intends to catch the subway at 42nd street but somehow, he finds himself continuing along 8th Avenue until he reaches west 45th - where he takes a right towards the Marquis.

When he gets there, he’s ushered by a woman with a clipboard to a specific number under which to stand, and then closes his eyes as the elevator shoots him upwards at a ridiculous speed. He spends the ride debating whether or not he should just head straight back down again, but gets carried along with the group of people exiting and then he spots Betty, dressed differently to how she’d been earlier in the day, holding a champagne flute and laughing at something Veronica appears to be saying.

She doesn’t need him to be here, he thinks, and is about to turn around when her eyes flicker upward and register his presence. Due to the revolving floor, she is, actually, moving further away from him, but something in her expression changes. Softens. Like looking at him has an effect on her.

Veronica must sense something because she turns around and spots him, her mouth curving into an
amused smirk. The hostess lets him past when he tells her Betty’s surname - and then uses Veronica’s when there’s no record of ‘Cooper’ - and he joins the surprisingly small number of people from the magazine.

He’s unsure of how to greet her, so he doesn’t really - just takes a seat at the table and feels incredibly self-conscious. Betty introduces him to Archie, her roommate, and after they strike up a surprisingly easy conversation about video games, he begins to relax. From the corner of his eye, he can see Kevin and Veronica exchanging glances in his direction, but other than that, he figures it’s not such a terrible way to spend his Friday evening.

Of course, because Jughead is Jughead, the evening goes south.

Josie McCoy joins them for a single Old Fashioned, air-kissing Betty, Veronica and Kevin when she leaves for a date she’s got. A couple other people from the office stop by for one too, and then a little after nine, Kevin leaves. By half past, Veronica and Archie are the only ones left beside him and Betty, and it’s obvious that they’re planning on going home to Veronica’s place together.

“I’ll make sure she gets home okay,” he tells Archie, who laughs a single chuckle and says - rather strangely, Jughead finds,

“Don’t let her hear you say that; she hates it when people feel like they have to walk her home. But that’s cool of you,” he adds.

He nods and glances over at her as she hugs Veronica goodbye. They share a giggle which he assumes is to do with her roommate, judging by the way they both look in his direction at the same time.

Although he hasn’t counted past two in terms of the number of glasses of champagne Betty’s had, by the time they reach the subway station, the alcohol seems to be having quite the effect on her. They’re no more than two stops on the journey and her speech becomes slurred, limbs heavy as she leans into him. She’s warm and smells like sweetened citrus and rose.

“I thought you weren’t coming.” she mumbles, half-jabbing at his chest with her index finger.

So did he, but he’s not about to have this conversation while she’s drunk. Instead, he asks, “How many glasses of that champagne did you have Betty?” while trying to keep the anxiousness from his voice. He knows this is nothing like his dad (nothing like those nights he came home to find his mom in the same state either) but it brings the memories of them back: A finger jabbing at his chest. Slow speech. Smiling with too many teeth on show.

“I should’ve just had one,” she giggle-slurs. “It doesn’t mix well.” A tired sigh. “But I just wanted to celebrate.”

He doesn’t ask what she mixed the champagne with: it’s none of his business. They sit quietly for the remainder of the ride, Betty resting against him with her head on his shoulder. Her hair tickles his neck and he thinks about how he should probably get her some pizza on the way back to her apartment.

He could use some himself anyway.
By the time they reach her building, Jughead is wrestling with a large pizza box and a drunken Betty who is finding it increasingly tricky to navigate the floor in her heels. Or simply navigate the floor at all.

“Where are your keys?” he asks.

“Guess.”

He sighs. “I’m not really in the mood for guessing Betty.”

“Spoilsport,” she pouts.

He’s taken straight back to a night in winter when he was in fifth grade. The heating was broken and he was wearing three sweaters in bed, cocooned in his sheets in a bid to keep warm when his dad had burst through the door.

“C’mon Jug!” he’d yelled. “We’re goin’ over to Tall Boy’s.”

“I’m tired dad,” he’d protested, clutching pointlessly at the sheets. “It’s cold.”

The freezing temperature was, it had turned out, not a factor in his father's decision, and Jughead had left the apartment in only the things he was wearing. No time for shoes or a coat. No time for the crown beanie to be tugged over his head either.

“Want some?” FP had asked later, holding out the brown bottle to him with a grin.

He remembers shaking his head. He had a test the following day and there were upcoming awards to be given out for the most promising students; maybe, if he got a good grade, he'd be in the running (maybe, if he won, his mom would come home).

“Spoilsport,” his dad had laughed, shaking his head.

They’d made it back to their apartment a little after two in the morning.

Jughead got a C- on the test. He didn’t win the award for most promising student. His mom didn’t come home.

He locates Betty’s keys in her purse and somehow manages to get her and the pizza into her apartment without incident. He watches as she half-collapses onto the couch and then sets about getting her a glass of water. He forgoes the plate for the pizza, figuring it’s probably better to just get her to eat rather than worrying about the potential spillage of melted cheese.

“You smell good,” she tells him as he sinks onto the couch beside her.

“Here,” he says, handing her the glass of water. “You need to drink this.”

Miraculously, she doesn’t put up any fight and gulps down the liquid.

“And now eat this,” he instructs, handing over a slice of pepperoni pizza before rising from the
“Where’re you going?” Her voice is almost a whine. It’s almost endearing.

“Getting you some more water.”

“Are you coming back?”

He turns on the tap. “I’m coming back.”

“Good,” she mumbles into her pizza slice.

She falls asleep before he has chance to encourage her to eat a second slice or drink the next glass of water. Her head is resting against his shoulder - much like it was on the subway - but this time Jughead shifts his arm so that it’s resting along the back of the couch. He watches her breathe for a few minutes; notes the steady rhythmic rise and fall of her chest; reminds himself it’s not her fault she was affected quite so much by the alcohol.

And then he reminds himself it’s not his fault either.

After close to an hour, Betty still hasn’t woken and he figures the angle she’s resting at can’t be good for her neck. He withdraws his arm from the back of the couch and stands, stretching out the crick in his back. Peering down the tiny hallway, he locates her bedroom (at least, he’s assuming she’d have the pink comforter) and then bends to collect her in his arms.

She’s easier to maneuver than his dad used to be and he lays her down on one side of the bed so he can draw back the sheets. Her cardigan has fallen down her shoulders and Jughead thinks for a moment, finally deciding she’s probably better with it off. He peels the material carefully down her left arm first, and then her right, folding the garment as best he can (which isn’t too well, but still) setting it on the chest of drawers across the room.

When he goes to tuck the sheets across her though, he notices a series of red marks littering both of her wrists. He looks closer and realises they extend up almost to the crooks of her elbows. They’re not recent: they’re faded enough to be at least a year old he thinks, but then he sees the crescent-shaped marks on her palms. Some are faded but some are red. More angry-looking.

It takes him a moment to figure out how they got there, but then her fingers twitch and he realises: the marks are from her nails.

Jughead swallows the lump in his throat and pulls the sheets up to Betty’s chest, lifting the strand of hair that’s fallen across her face back towards her pillow. At that moment, he eyes flutter open for the briefest of moments.

“Thank you for coming tonight Juggie,” she says, and that lump in his throat grows bigger.

He nods (why is he always fucking nodding at her?) and tries not to let Juggie echo in his head. “Get some sleep Betty,” he says, and closes the door of her bedroom only part-way.

He passes what he assumes is Archie’s room, and then he looks at the couch. After turning out the light, he pulls his arm behind his head to use as a pillow and closes his eyes.
Jughead wakes to the smell of freshly-brewed coffee. He shifts, momentarily forgetting where he fell asleep last night, and almost falls off of Betty’s couch. There’s a crick in his neck again and his left arm is dead.

“Hey,” he hears Betty say softly.

He rubs at his eyes and sits up, turning his head to find her in the tiny kitchen section of the apartment. She’s no longer wearing the dress she’d had on last night, but a long-sleeved cotton t-shirt and a pair of running shorts that aren’t really fair. He notes also, that her hair is in its usual ponytail and she’s washed off the flecks of mascara that had dried beneath her eyes last night.

“Hey,” he replies hoarsely.

“I’m sorry,” she starts, “for last night, I -”

“-It’s okay.”

“I rarely drink. I only had the two glasses, but -”

“-Betty,” he urges, “It’s fine.”

(At least, it should be)

She pulls her lips up into something like a smile, but he can tell it’s forced. “Can I make you some breakfast? I have eggs and bacon.”

“I should get going.”

“There’s cereal,” she offers, “If you’d rather have that?”

“I just want to get home,” Jughead says.

That false smile she’d pasted onto her face falters. He thinks he might see her fingers curl inward too.

“Oh. Okay.”

She follows him to the door and he thinks that as he opens it, she parts her lips to say something. When no words come though, he swallows and heads out into the hallway, hearing the soft click of the door closing behind him.

The air outside is warm, heavy with rain clouds that threaten to spill over, and he’s hit with a movie reel of images as he turns the corner onto Columbia Street: tripping over a bottle of brandy tossed carelessly to the side; wincing as he stubbed his toe; his dad crying at the tiny formica table; “she’s gone Jug - she took Jellybean too”; an empty refrigerator save for spoiled milk; eggos in the freezer compartment one day; an empty box stuffed with more dollar bills than he’d ever seen the next; his grown-ass father lying for days on end on their couch; the permission slip for his school trip waiting for a signature to say he could go to the Museum of Natural History; forging FP’s handwriting; pleading with him to wake up on the morning of the trip; missing the bus; listening to Toni tell him all about the gigantic diplodocus; putting the keychain she’d stolen from the gift shop on his backpack; lying to his dad about how it felt to lie under the constellations.

And then a different movie reel takes over: Betty setting her coffee cup on his desk on her very first day; the little tupperware box with its chocolate malt cupcake; “it’s my signature cake”; her smile when he’d praised her article on the recycled clothing line; hugging him when she found out she’d no longer be an intern; her eyes meeting his at the Marquis; “thank you for coming tonight Juggie”.
He’s stupid for not realising it last night: she’s not like his father.

Her getting drunk doesn’t make her like his father.

Turning around, he heads back in the direction of Betty’s building, quickening his pace to something close to a run. There’s a woman leaving the entrance when he gets there, and he makes it inside without having to buzz up.

She answers the door on the third knock, her face portraying her surprise when she sees it’s him.

“I’m an asshole Betty,” he says breathlessly. “And I’m sorry.”

“You’re -”

“- If your offer of breakfast still stands, maybe I can explain?”

Her face breaks into that honest smile that reaches her eyes and she opens the door wider. “How would you like your eggs?”
Betty is surprised, and somewhat startled not to be hit by a welcome blast of cool air as she enters the New York Times building, but by a wall of heat instead. Somehow, the lobby is actually hotter than it is outside.

She’d thought the intense thunderstorm they’d had on Saturday would’ve cleared the front that’s been sitting over the east coast for the past month or so, but save for a few hours respite on Saturday afternoon, the air has been just as thick and heavy as before.

For the first time since Betty began her internship, Cheryl Blossom is looking ruffled. She’s wearing a red shirt with an embellished black collar and a black pencil skirt that reinforces how absolutely zero-sugar her diet must be. Betty’s glad of the thin fabric of her own blouse, although even that is too warm for the greenhouse that is the lobby.

“Hey, what’s going on with the temperature?” she asks.

Cheryl raises an eyebrow, as if she’s surprised Betty dare even communicate with her. Before Friday, she might’ve (okay, would’ve) withered under her piercing stare but now, she works here. Now, she has every right to ask (or even tell - though she’d never be so condescending) Cheryl to give a message to someone or call her if she gets a visitor.

She’s made it.

“Rumour has it that the thermostat for the air conditioning unit has broken,” she replies in a bored tone. “Or the vent is blocked. Or the power’s tripped. Depends what you want to believe.”

“It is like this everywhere?” Betty asks.

“I don’t venture upstairs,” she replies with a shudder, as if even thinking about taking the elevator gives her nightmares. “But one would assume it’s no better.”

As it turns out, Cheryl is right: upstairs is, quite possibly, hotter than the lobby.

There’s the sound of paper flapping as her colleagues (she thinks of that word with a grin) fan themselves with notepads as she leans to turn on her computer. Maybe, Betty thinks with a little skip in her heart, she can change the background on her desk top now that she’ll be officially working here.

There are a couple of generic emails that’ve been sent to everyone: a reminder about formatting before submitting a piece to be proof-read, plus a notification regarding the scheduled maintenance of the magazine’s website between 2am and 3am on Wednesday morning. There’s also one from Jughead which notifies everyone of the air conditioning issue and explains that it should be resolved by mid-afternoon at the very latest.

“I think I’m literally dying,” Veronica moans, perching herself on Betty’s desk with absolutely no indication that she’s overheating. Even the set of pearls that adorns her neck remains in place. She is, as always, immaculate. “And why does the whole issue have to be focused on sex?”

“Because it’s sixty years since the supreme court overturned a state law prohibiting the dissemination of contraception information,” Jughead replies bluntly in passing. “I think that’s important.”

“I can’t concentrate on the lingerie we’re going to feature,” she mutters. “It’s too hot.”
“We’re all hot, Veronica,” he counters, and Betty feels a blush creep up her cheeks as her mind wanders to somewhere she allows herself to think about him being hot. And not just in the temperature sense.

At that moment, she catches Jughead’s eye and the look he gives her makes her stomach flutter. She remembers their conversation from Saturday morning before they ate eggs and bacon and toasted sourdough at her kitchen counter; remembers too, the expression he’d worn as he told her about his father and why he himself doesn’t drink.

“You didn’t have to stay here,” she says, cracking an egg against the side of her glass bowl.

“I know.”

She wants to ask why he did: it was still pretty early in the night when they’d gotten back to her apartment so he could’ve easily caught the subway back to his place. It occurs to her then, that even though she knows he lives somewhere in Brooklyn, she actually has no idea where.

“Alcohol and I don’t have the best relationship.”

Betty lets the yolk from the second egg fall into the bowl and then turns to face him. He’s leaning against the counter with a mug of coffee, hair sticking up at various angles making him look younger than usual. He’s still in yesterday’s clothes, and they’re pretty creased, yet somehow, he’s pulling it off. She wonders what he’d look like first thing on the morning if he’d slept in a bed.

(See wonders what he’d look like sleeping in her bed)

Jughead sighs and Betty thinks that might be as much as he’s going to say, but then he adds, “When I was a kid, my dad drunk himself into such a state every night that my mom left when I was thirteen.”

She turns fully at that, angling her whole body towards him. “I’m sorry, Jughead, I-”

He shakes his head, effectively cutting her off. “You have nothing to apologise for. Just, when I see people drunk, that’s what I think about.”

“I shouldn’t have had the champagne,” she tells him truthfully. “I thought I’d be okay. I felt okay.”

Jughead steps closer, setting his hand lightly on her arm. It’s covered by thin, cotton material now but when she’d woken earlier, her cardigan was off and her skin was bare. She hopes he didn’t see.

Goosebumps break out beneath her long-sleeved t-shirt and Betty draws her eyes upwards, only realising she’s dipped her head when he says her name gently. So, so gently.

“You deserved to celebrate. And you weren’t bad drunk - not like him. You were just…”

“Drunk,” she finishes off. She should probably explain. Hell, she almost wants to explain, but the words won’t form properly in her mouth and if she shows him the prescription bottles in the bathroom cabinet and the Neosporin and dressings she keeps in her drawer, he’d probably regret hiring her.
“Can I help with anything?” he asks, dropping his hand from her arm, and Betty assumes that’s the conversation over with. She tries not to feel disappointed at the loss of contact (but does anyway) and silently reminds herself that she’s not supposed to want her boss to touch her the way she does.

For some reason though, when she opens her mouth to say ‘it’s okay; take a seat - it won’t take long,’ the words “You can slice the bread for toast,” tumble out instead.

Once everything is ready, they sit at the high stools facing the counter - a rarity these days; she and Archie have taken to eating on the couch for the past few weeks - and Betty watches as Jughead practically inhales his food.

He glances over at her and then must catch her expression because he chuckles, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. “Sorry. Didn’t realise I was so hungry.”

“Don’t apologise,” she smiles, taking a delicate bite of toasted sourdough. “It makes me feel good when people like my cooking.”

“I can’t imagine anyone not liking it,” he replies, shovelling in another mouthful of eggs. “Seriously, I’m pretty jealous of Archie if he gets to eat this every weekend.”

A smile spreads across her face before she can catch it, and she turns her head so he can’t see. “You’re always welcome,” she says before she loses the nerve. “If you want to join. Breakfast’s my favourite meal of the day.”

“And the most important!” he faux-lectures, pointing his finger at her with a smile. The sight of it makes her think of things she shouldn’t, and the image in her head steals her breath. Quickly, she occupies her lips with her coffee mug, taking a large gulp.

They eat the rest of their food in companionable silence and for the first time in as long as she can remember, Betty doesn’t jump up to clear the plates straight away. Rather, she sips slowly at the remainder of her coffee while Jughead does the same.

“Do you have plans for the weekend?” he asks.

“Not really. Archie’s working tonight so I’ll probably just watch some trashy movie,” she tells him.

“No birthday plans with your parents?”

She feels herself stiffen and then tries to disguise it - but he seems to notice. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to pry.”

“No I…” she starts. “You weren’t. Just…”

“I get it.” He offers her a smile. “If there’s anyone who knows what it’s like not to want to discuss parents, it’s me.

Betty nods and returns a small, grateful smile.

“Look, I should probably get going. I’m kind of in need of a shower and I don’t think the subway’s gonna help.” He stands and rubs his hands on his pants, either to emphasize his point or because he needs to do something with them - she’s not quite sure which.

“Thank you,” she tells him. “For last night. For coming...and...making sure I got home.”

“Don’t mention it.”
She walks him to the door despite the fact that it’s literally six feet away and now she’s lingering somewhat awkwardly.

“Thank you for breakfast,” he adds.

A smile is already tugging at her lips when she says, “Don’t mention it.”

Jughead stares at the door for a few minutes, as if contemplating something. She’s about to ask if he’s okay, when he turns around and says, “Have a good weekend Betty.”

And then he leans in to press the most gentle kiss to her cheek. It steals her breath and speeds up her heart rate and all she wants to do is grab his arm to pull him to her. His lips are soft and she can feel the heat leaving his mouth; can feel a wave of tingles rolling up the back of her neck.

He draws back and leaves without another word.

And of course, she remembers the feel of his lips on her skin.

Veronica does, eventually, leave her perch at Betty’s desk in order to do her job (selecting various lingerie sets for a feature on ‘dressing to impress in the bedroom’) which means that the magazine’s newest employee can also do hers with a hundred percent concentration.

Okay, not a hundred percent. (That’s rather difficult when she has Jughead working across the room from her due to the fact his glass-walled office is stifling without any air conditioning.

Whether or not she’s imagining it, Betty’s not sure, but as she types away, she feels his eyes on her. She’s careful to keep her head down - glancing up only to look at her screen for proof-reading purposes - but it’s taking all of her restraint not to chance a quick peek in his direction.

The subject of the article she’s writing is also not helping. The idea to have this upcoming issue centred around sex for pleasure in order to commemorate sixty years of birth control pills, added to the fact that they’re all suffering in the heat makes a cruel cocktail of tension.

A movement across from her tears her eyes from her screen (and the numerous spelling mistakes she’s made) and Betty looks up to see Jughead - now with the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up to expose his forearms - rubbing at the back of his neck. He’s standing, bent at the waist to look at the computer screen in front of him with his hands splayed across the desk, and she feels something stir low in her stomach. Her mouth is dry and she reminds herself it’s because it’s hot and she hasn’t drunk enough water, so she rises from her chair to head to the cooler at the other side of the room.

The entire walk there (which, in reality, isn’t anywhere near as long as it feels) his gaze weighs heavily against her back and remains there as she fills the plastic Evian bottle with fresh water. Betty almost doesn’t want to turn around.

She does though, toying with the material of her blouse which is starting to grow sticky against her skin. She won’t look at him, she tells herself, but as she takes her seat again, their eyes meet. His adam’s apple bobs and she looks at his lips and thinks fuck.

Quickly, she takes a mouthful of water for something to do with her hands (and her mouth too) and
then attempts to swallow it slowly while reading through the words she’s written so far. Jughead exhales loudly not long later, and she can sense him rubbing harshly at the back of his neck again. She doesn’t need to glance up to know that he’s looking in her direction.

Midway through the morning, Betty pulls her hair up into a ponytail in an attempt to cool down. A few strands, damp with sweat and slightly wavy, cling to her skin and she blows a burst of air upwards towards her upper lip.

“I wish they’d hurry up and fix the damn unit,” Jughead mutters just loud enough for her to hear. Betty lifts her eyes to find him wiping at the sweat on his brow, hair still tumbling towards his eyes as usual. The white material of his shirt is moist with perspiration, and she can see the dark ink of what must be a tattoo beneath. She thinks she’s seen it once before - the time she’d asked about his plans for the weekend and he’d very carefully avoided giving an answer.

She wonders who or what he loves enough to have it etched into his skin for the rest of his life.

“It’s pretty uncomfortable,” she replies, and then watches Jughead’s lips twitch. It’s only a minute action, but it’s enough to remind her again about how they’d felt against her cheek on Saturday morning.

“How’s your piece coming along?”

“It isn’t really,” Betty answers with a sigh. “I’m uh.... I’ve got a bit of a block.”

“Remind me again which one you’re doing.”

She swallows heavily. “Who decides what’s sexy?”

He nods but says nothing, and she’s about to start typing again (or, at least, correct her spelling mistakes) when he gets up from the opposite desk and comes to stand behind her.

Instantly, her breathing grows shallow, like his proximity means there isn’t enough oxygen for them both and her lungs can only snatch at pockets of it. She shifts in her seat and presses her thighs together for no other reason than she needs something to focus on besides the pine-coffee scent currently dancing through the air.

(And the hand that’s now resting on her desk, effectively trapping her between the wood and his chest)

“I was just about to edit the spelling mistakes,” she manages to say, although her voice is unsteady.

“What’s making it difficult?” Jughead asks, so close to her ear as he’s bent towards the screen that she can feel every syllable against her antitragus.

*This*, she thinks. *The heat*. *You*. “I don’t really believe it.”

“You don’t believe what?”

Betty wonders whether she’s imagining the hint of amusement in his tone. It’s not like she can turn around to check. “The opinion polls I’m working from. For example, people were asked what they thought the sexiest scent was, but they were only given five options.”

“Okay,” he replies, and this time, she *can* tell what it means: elaborate.

“So if your options are musk, jasmine, vanilla, exotic leather and magnolia, you’re being
pigeonholed. What if there are more people out there who think it’s sexy when they wear their shirt and it smells like their partner? Or they prefer the smell of a particular moisturiser because it makes them think of a vacation and a particular moment with their significant other?”

It’s only a single syllable, but when he says, “Yeah,” there’s a distinct crack in his voice. Jughead clears his throat. “That could be your angle.”

His hand inches closer and a wave of heat rolls up her body. She’s almost certain there are beads of sweat on her forehead and neck. When she hears him swallow, loudly - almost like it’s painful, Betty wonders whether this is what lust is. She’d thought she felt it before (the handful of times she’s actually had sex with someone) but it had never felt like this: like simultaneously being on fire and having chills; like being thirsty and somehow parched at the same time; like not being able to breathe properly but wanting to be smothered anyway.

“Thanks,” she whispers thickly.

He straightens up and she takes a breath. “No problem.”

At one thirty-eight exactly, the air conditioning begins to work again. At one forty-two, Jughead leaves the desk opposite Betty and goes back to work in his office. It’s both a relief and a disappointment - yet another juxtaposition when it comes to her boss - but finally, she can breathe with comparative ease again.

By one fifty-seven, the office is back to an almost normal temperature, and she decides she’s now hungry enough to eat the kale-watermelon salad she’d stowed away in the break room refrigerator when she’d first arrived in the morning.

She takes it to Veronica and Kevin’s office where the temperature drops a further few degrees again and she can perch on Veronica’s desk to lift forkfuls of fruit to her mouth in relative comfort.

“Thank God,” Veronica says dramatically as she enters. “I thought we were never going to get a chance to discuss Archie. Did he say anything about me?”

Betty can’t help but laugh at the way her newest friend doesn’t even try to hide her transparency. “He likes you Veronica.”

“And?” she urges.

“Well he didn’t say much more.”

(Mainly because she’d asked him not to tell her anything about her colleague's bedroom preferences when he’d begun relaying that Veronica had undone all the buttons on his shirt in the elevator before they’d even reached her apartment on Friday night, although Betty decides not to divulge this information. She does, however, suspect Kevin already knows)

“Oh,” Veronica replies, a little dejectedly, and she instantly feels bad.

“I mean, I kind of asked him not to go into specifics.”
“But he was going to?” she asks eagerly.

“What V means,” Kevin interjects, shoving a tortilla chip into his mouth, “is, does Archie want a replay any time soon? Preferably following a dinner where she gets to look fabulous in public.”

Betty giggles and Veronica narrows her eyes at him.

“Oh come on, that’s precisely what you want,” he retorts.

Veronica sighs with an arched eyebrow. “True.” She pops a forkful of quinoa into her mouth. “So?”

They both turn to Betty and she takes a sip of water. “I’m pretty sure he had a great time so I’ll work the conversation round to you later tonight,” she says. “And let you know.”

A few moments later, Veronica’s phone vibrates on the desk and she snatches at it, a grin spreading across her lips when she reads the message.

“No need B: he wants to meet up tomorrow.” She waves her phone in the air excitedly and Kevin rolls his eyes. He catches Betty’s gaze and then winks, and she laughs again.

As Veronica types back, Kevin turns his attention elsewhere. “What about you Cooper - anyone giving you sleepless nights?”

Yes, she thinks, and doesn’t miss the way Veronica’s head snaps up. “No,” she replies.

“Nobody?” Veronica pushes, and Betty thinks there might be an underlying tone of...

“What’s your type?” Kevin asks.

“I uh...I don’t know. I guess I don’t really have one.”

“But you’ve had boyfriends before?”

She’s not exactly sure she’d call them boyfriends. “There’ve been guys, I guess,” Betty replies.


“Just because that’s what you like, doesn’t mean it’s what my girl here’s into,” Veronica chides. “But do tell us. We might know someone that fits the bill.”

She thinks of Jughead, just a little way along the hall in his office, typing away with those long fingers of his. She thinks of his dark hair too - and the unruly wave of it that’s forever sweeping forward, the same one that, she’s found on several occasions, she wants to run her fingers through. Blue eyes. Slightly olive skin. Rolled up sleeves.

Maybe all of those things are her type. Maybe he’s her type.

God, she hopes not.

(And yet, there’s a tiny part of her that hopes he is)

“Betty?”

“Yeah?” she asks Veronica, who’s now wearing a smile that turns up only at one corner of her mouth.
“Do you like guys who are quieter? More guarded?”

“I uh...I guess.”

“What about ones that’re in a position of power?”

She sighs quietly to herself. “I just like people that are honest. And kind. The rest doesn’t matter so much.”

At that, Veronica seems satisfied, and goes back to the last few forkfuls of her lunch. Kevin though, it seems, isn’t quite done yet.

“Okay, so imagine we’ve got three of the kindest, most honest guys on the planet. One’s got red hair, one has dark, and one has light. Which do you pick?”

“Dark, I guess,” she says after a moment, and then catches Veronica grinning out of the corner of her eye. She decides to say nothing more - the last thing she needs is to walk into work tomorrow and have some random guy Veronica knows asking to take her on a date.

Talk then turns to Kevin’s love life and Betty feels herself relax. She is though, on her way back to her desk after her lunch break is over, pleased to discover that her fingernails haven’t found their way into her palms.

Later, she’s in the break room indulging in a mug of coffee in the hopes that it’ll help her write the final few paragraphs of her feature when Jughead joins her, reaching for the pot as she steps to the side. After earlier, the last thing she needs is to end up accidentally touching him.

“You get past that block yet?” he asks, pushing his left hand through his hair.

“Just about,” she replies, taking a sip of coffee. “I think.”

“It’s a little easier to concentrate now that it’s not so hot,” he says.

Betty finds herself thinking that the only reason it’s less difficult to become distracted is because he isn’t working across from her. What she replies with though, is “Yes.”

Having poured the liquid into his mug, he turns to face her, glancing quickly towards the door and then back again. “Are you okay?”

It’s a loaded question and they both know it, but she really, really doesn’t want to have any kind of conversation about how not okay she is here in a room where anyone could walk in.

“I’m fine,” she says. “Thank you for asking.”

Jughead lets out a breath of air that’s not quite a sigh and Betty curls her hands tightly around her coffee mug. “We can forget about Friday,” he says. “If uh...if you want.”

Suddenly, she’s overcome with relief that that’s what he was referring to. “I…” she takes a sip of liquid. “Why did you stay?”
His voice is so low when he speaks that she has to strain to hear him. “I didn’t want you to wake up
alone.”

Her breath catches high in her throat and when she looks up at him, she finds his lips drawn down,
eyes soft. “Just in case you were sick,” he adds, “Or...my dad used to get...sad, I guess, when.....
when he woke up without anyone there. I figured it reminded him that my mom had left. And I
didn’t want you to feel like that - sad.”

“Jughead,” she whispers, her right hand leaving her mug so it can squeeze his. “That’s…” she wants
to kiss him. Wants to curl up against him; have him hold her while she presses her lips against his
skin. “Thank you.”

He adjusts his hand so that he’s the one able to brush his thumb softly across her palm but quickly
snatches it away when the door opens and Josie walks in.

“I should go finish my piece,” Betty tells him with a grateful smile. He nods and twitches his lips
enough that she knows he wishes he could say more.

Her heart thuds heavily as she sits back down at her desk and she thinks, maybe she should call her
mom.

Archie is on his way out to perform at the bar he works at as she gets home, and they manage a very
brief exchange regarding Veronica.

“She’s something else Betty,” he says with a grin, and she can’t help but return it.

“That she is.”

“So she’s excited? For tomorrow?”

In this moment, her best friend reminds her of the cutest puppy, and she hugs him. “She’s excited,”
she tells him, and then adds, “Don’t ever change Arch.”

He squeezes her back and then they part. “I should be back before two,” he says. “Have a good
night.”

After he leaves, Betty makes herself a sandwich, has a longer-than-necessary shower, and then, with
her bedroom window open and the hint of an evening summer breeze catching the curtains, she dials
the number she spends most of her time avoiding.

“It’s me,” she says quietly into the receiver when her mom answers with her usual, ‘ Hello, Cooper
residence’. ‘

“Betty?”

“Yeah.”

“How are you?” Alice asks.
She pauses, but finds her answer after a moment. “I’m okay.”

“Did you get the card I sent?”

Betty recalls the pink envelope that had arrived almost an entire week before her actual birthday. “Yes, thank you.”

It hadn’t made it any further than the recycling. Displaying it would’ve only drawn her eyes to the empty spot beside the card - where Polly’s should’ve been.

“Mom, the magazine gave me a permanent job,” she says, the brightness in her tone coming naturally as she thinks of standing in Jughead’s office, hugging him after he’d told her.

“That’s great honey.” The reply is only just not flat, and it stings. “We’re proud of you - both me and your father.”

Betty wonders whether Polly is too - wherever she is (if she even is anywhere - or if the whole spirit idea is just a fantastical notion created for people in denial. Her mind drifts to two tiny voices saying, “My Aunt Betty works for the second biggest newspaper in America,” and she suddenly hopes that it’s not).

“Betty?” her mom’s voice filters back.

“Yeah?”

“Polly would’ve been proud too. The proudest.”

She knows that - knows the smile that would’ve graced her big sister’s face would be huge. The kind of smile that’s untainted; not a single hint of jealousy.

“Yeah,” she whispers. “She would.”

She doesn’t stay on the line much longer but agrees to think about going home to Riverdale for Labor Day weekend. Her mom tells her, “I love you honey,” and for the first time in as long as she can remember, she murmurs,

“Love you too.”
Eight

Thankfully for Jughead, the heatwave that’s been smothering the entire east coast for weeks finally passes and the temperature returns to normal. Granted, it’s still hot, but it’s not the kind of overwhelming pressure that feels as though it’s weighing down on him. It’s another reminder that he prefers the colder months, which won’t be coming for a while yet so he also knows he’s going to have to grin and bear it.

Okay, maybe not grin, but -

“We’ve got a problem,” Veronica barks over the phone as soon as he accepts the call on his direct line. She’s at a location in Brooklyn - an old distillery - for a shoot that’s apparently not going well.

“Which is?” he asks, suppressing the sigh building in his chest.

“The model - she’s not here! Unbelievable!”

He’s about to ask whether there’s anything else they can run with instead - anything she can create a feature out of - when she begins a monologue about unreliable fakes and drug rumours. Jughead knows better than to interrupt Veronica Lodge mid-flow, so she when she reaches a natural pause, he figures she’s calmed down (slightly, at least).

“I’ve had an idea.”

“Why didn’t you just open with that?”

“Because I was setting the scene!” she counters with a hint of venom. “Now hush and listen.”

He does as he’s told and silently chides himself for allowing someone who, technically, works for him to order him around. And then he hears Betty’s name and he’s all ears.

“What?”

She sighs exasperatedly. “I said, the photographer was threatening to leave so I told him the model’s on her way, and then I texted Betty. So if you’re wondering why she’s not at her desk when you do that lingering walk to the break room just so you can check her and her blonde ponytail out, this is why.”

He decides to ignore the blatant calling-out of his motives for getting coffee from the break room as opposed to the machine in his office, and focuses on the other piece of information. “Betty’s going to be your model?”

“Yes.”

It is, quite possibly, one of the last things he’d imagine she would agree to do. “Oh.”

“That’s all you have to say? Not thank you Veronica for saving the feature.”

“Well technically, it’s Betty who’s saving the feature,” he replies. “I’m just surprised she agreed to it.”

“She hasn’t,” she replies. “Yet.”

“What do you mean?”
“I just texted her that I had an emergency and she needed to meet me. I gave her the address of the distillery, said you already knew about it and had okayed it, and told her to get here as fast as she can. She’s currently on the subway, by the way.”

It’s a lot to process when, only a few minutes ago, he’d been proof-reading an article about the best potted plants for a small, humid bathroom space.

“Does Betty like having her picture taken?” he asks. Granted, he knows very little about his newest features writer but based on the small amount of information he does have about her, he can’t imagine posing for photographs would be high on her list of favourite things to do. (Although he can imagine how beautiful she might look doing it)

“No, she’s a smokeshow and she’s the closest thing we have to a model in our current situation so we’re rolling with it. I’ve got to go.” Veronica ends the call and he doubts very much that she really had to go, but says nothing - can’t really say anything when there’s a simple bleep at the other end of the line and nothing else.

The fashion features are a different process to most other articles in that they aren’t always put together by the people who have the biggest hand in them. For the Brooklyn shoot (the same shoot that Betty had modelled for - very reluctantly, Jughead had discovered later) it’s supposed to be him deciding on the layout and the specific shots. He’d initially been interested in taking the pictures himself - the building they’d selected has a kind of sad, forgotten aesthetic that he’d found to be somewhat charming - but when he’d heard who Veronica had initially secured to model the clothes, he’d decided it didn’t quite fit with the angle he’d have gone for.

Now, as he’s staring at the numerous pictures he has of Betty Cooper dressed in 20’s-inspired lace, he’s not at all sure whether he’s glad he wasn’t there to get completely distracted or whether he’s devastated he wasn’t there to get completely distracted.

Either way, what he is now, is precisely that. So much so, he doesn’t realise Veronica has entered his office until she’s taking a set opposite him and announcing,

“We need to talk.”

“What about?” he asks, tearing his eyes away from the picture that’s his personal favourite: a black and white shot taken of Betty in lace gloves and a dress that highlights how tiny her waist is. She’s leaning against a crumbling wall with a ray of sunlight striking across her jawline and she looks flawless.

“Betty,” Veronica replies simply.

“Look Veronica,” he starts, “I really don’t -”

“- Not about that,” she cuts in, one perfectly-manicured eyebrow raised knowingly. “About something else. Something I saw when we were taking these.”

Jughead already knows where this is going and he’s pretty powerless to stop it.

“She has these marks - on her hands and arms. They’re...I think she made them.”
He nods, slowly, and wonders what expression he’s currently wearing. Wonders what expression he’s *supposed* to be wearing.

“She saw me looking and maybe I wasn’t supposed to, but I asked. And you know what she said?”

*No*, he thinks. (He’s also not sure he *wants* to)

“She asked me not to tell *you*,” Veronica says softly. “And now I feel guilty for completely betraying her trust, but she said - on the subway back over here - that they’re her feelings. I don’t even know what that *means*, and then she said she’s okay but that if you saw, you might revoke the whole permanent position thing if you thought she was a liability.”

He feels like he’s been punched. He hates himself for ever having given Betty the impression that he might revoke her position; that whatever the reason those marks are there is something she feels she can’t tell him.

It’s almost impossible to breathe, let alone swallow.

“God Jughead, I didn’t know what to do and I’ve sat on this for two days now -”

“- Veronica.” It’s his turn to cut in now.

She sighs out a breath and looks up at him. “Will you…”

“I’ll make sure Betty knows she’s not going anywhere,” he says, running a hand roughly over the back of his neck to tug at his hair.

She nods and pulls her lips into something like a smile, though it’s tight and there’s a worry frown etched into her forehead. “Okay.”

She rises from the chair and smooths down her skirt. “The pictures came out great, by the way,” he tells her, tone somber. “Really great.”

This time, Veronica’s lips pull up a little further so the smile reaches her eyes - if only briefly. “Of course they did.”

The door of his office is halfway open when she turns back around. “Jug?”

“Yeah?”

“For the record, I think she likes you too.”

She leaves him with that, and he spends the remainder of the day unable to do anything besides think about the marks on Betty’s arms and how badly he must’ve screwed up to have her perceive him as someone who’d use this as a reason to destroy her dream.

He wonders if things like this are why his father drank into oblivion.

It would seem preferable to block out the way he currently feels.

Jughead avoids the main room of the office for most of the remainder of the day. He keeps his head
down at his own desk under the guise of working on the layout for the distillery shoot (the Betty shoot) where, in reality, he’s actually just staring at a single photograph.

He wonders what the photographer had said to her to get her to look the way she does, staring into the camera in a manner that’s utterly haunting. She’s dressed in one of those flapper-style dresses that people wear for costume parties where the theme is The Great Gatsby (although he strongly suspects that the garment will cost more than his year’s rent) and her arms are covered in black lace gloves that extend all the way to the crooks of her elbows.

It’s her eyes though, that he can’t tear his gaze away from.

He’s been toying all afternoon with whether or not to talk to her here or whether it would be completely inappropriate to swing by (or, if he’s being accurate, take a trip to) her apartment after work. He knows which he’d rather do, but he can’t be selfish with this. He’d had the chance that Saturday morning - or even the Friday night - but out of respect for her privacy, hadn’t mentioned it.

Maybe he’s a coward.

Scratch that, he thinks. There’s no maybe about it. He just knows what it feels like not to want to talk about the things you’re trying to hide.

A little after five, he heads to the break room which will take him via Betty’s desk. She is, of course, working away when he sees her, arms covered by a light blue cardigan as her fingers stroke the keys. There’s an overwhelming feeling of something he thinks might be relief when he sees her, almost as if he’s actually missed her.

It’s ridiculous, he tells himself, and completely inappropriate, and -

She looks up at that moment, glancing beyond her computer screen, and Jughead gets to watch the exact second her eyes register his presence; gets to be privy to the smile that lifts the corners of her mouth. His legs are carrying him across to her before his brain has caught up.

“Hey,” he says, like a fumbling teenager having had his words stolen by how nervous she makes him. (He thinks about the day the air conditioning broke last week and almost can’t concentrate)

“Hi.” Her voice is light as she sits back a little in her chair. “I haven’t seen you much this week.”

Betty’s words don’t seem planned: she reddens as soon as they’re out of her mouth, like they’ve escaped without her permission, so he leans against her desk with what he hopes is a reassuring smile - not an easy ask when he’s remembering the beads of sweat he’d watched slide from her collarbone to the hidden skin beneath her blouse.

“It’s been a busy one.”

That’s not strictly true. He’s actually had less work to do than usual, but he needs to say something other than I’ve been avoiding you.

“At least it’s not a hundred degrees in here,” she replies.

“Yeah.” the laugh that bursts from his lips in a single sound seems false. “Thank God.”

Josie McCoy passes Betty’s desk and offers him a polite smile, accompanied with a, “Hey boss.”

It’s enough to help him make up his mind: talking to Betty here about those marks on her arms isn’t a good idea. At least, if he offends her by bringing them up, she’ll feel like she’s able to ask him to
leave; that she doesn’t have to be polite because they’re at work and he’s technically her boss. He’s not her boss in Red Hook, where she can yell that it’s none of his business if she wants to.

Josie doesn’t wait for any sort of reply, and Jughead realises she’s disappeared towards the bathroom anyway.

“Don’t stay too long tonight Betty,” he tells her. “This place will still be here in the morning.”

“I should say the same to you,” she says with a slight laugh. His own lips crinkle into a smile and his heart judders in his chest. He doesn’t get how she can emit so much light when there’s clearly something darker stealing her happiness.

“I’ll take your advice if you’ll take mine?” he offers.

She inches her little finger towards him, flat against the material of her desk, and for a moment, he thinks she’s going to place her hand on top of his. In the end, she scrunches all of her fingers back in towards her palms - so her hand is almost curled in a fist - and says, “Deal.”

Both his throat and his fingers ache as he walks away.

Jughead arrives at Betty’s building clutching a bag of now-cold donuts. It takes him at least five minutes to bring his finger to the buzzer, at which point a man exiting through the door holds it open for him so he’s pretty much forced to go inside.

That is why he’s made the trip over though, he reminds himself. To go inside.

Although, after that point, he’s not entirely sure what he’s supposed to do. He’s not even sure whether he’s supposed to do anything.

He climbs the stairs to her floor and before he can panic, knocks on her apartment door. It takes her a while to answer and he’s about to raise his hand again against the wood (or whatever material it’s made from) when it opens to reveal a legging-clad Betty, hair pulled back in some sort of messy bun that looks both effortless and perfect. Her surprise is evident on her face and he shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” he says softly. “Is this...uh...is it a bad time?” he should’ve called first. “If you’re busy I can -”

“- I’m not,” she interrupts, pulling the door open wider. “Busy, I mean.”

He nods and steps inside.

“Would you like something to drink?” she asks. “I can make coffee or there might be some beer in the...” she catches herself and tugs self-consciously at the hem of the cardigan she’s wearing. “Sorry, I-”

“It’s okay,” Jughead interrupts, sensing her worry.
“I didn’t think.”

He reaches out to graze his fingers across her elbow. “You don’t have to think. Alcohol doesn’t offend me Betty. I just don’t like it - that’s all.”

She nods. “So coffee then?”

His smile is genuine. “Sounds perfect.”

He watches her make the fresh pot, more fixated than he should be on the way her leggings highlight the obvious leanness of her legs. When she turns to ask if he’d like something to eat, he holds out the bag in his hand.

“I brought donuts.”

Betty smiles her first real smile of the evening. “That’s sweet of you.”

“I uh...I wasn’t sure what you’d like so I just got powdered sugar. Everyone likes those right?”

“They’re my favourite.”

He’s not entirely sure that’s true, but regardless, he feels like he knows just a little more about her, even if it’s only based on the snacks she likes. He stores the information away in case he needs it again.

There’s a slightly awkward pause when Betty hands him a mug of coffee and his fingers brush hers. She doesn’t pull away and she doesn’t relinquish the mug either - at least, not until he gruffs out a,

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she replies, taking a seat on the couch with a glass of water rather than coffee.

“You’re probably wondering why I’m here.”

Betty doesn’t reply, just looks at him curiously. He takes a seat beside her on the couch, drawing his right ankle over his left knee, then setting it back on the floor. He takes a single sip of the coffee and then sets the mug on the coaster on the coffee table in front of him.

“I uh...I have a tattoo,” he says. “On my arm. Got it in my sophomore year of high school.”

She watches him but says nothing.

“My dad was in jail and I was living alone in our shitty apartment in Hunts Point. I made a series of decisions that, in hindsight, were pretty stupid. Maybe even at the time they were pretty stupid,” he adds. “But I couldn’t see another way. I joined a gang.”

He hears her sharp intake of breath but still, Betty doesn’t say anything.

“They had this initiation - the gauntlet. It’s...you walk down the line and the members inflict pain. Punching, chains, that sort of thing. You make it through, the tattoo’s yours.”

Her voice is uneven when she says, “You made it though.”

Jughead nods. “Have you ever had pain feel like a relief?”

Her head snaps up and he sees the water pool in her eyes before she can blink it away. And then,
almost inaudibly, she whispers, “Yes.”

Something inside of his chest releases and it’s only at that point that he realises how tight it had been. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” Jughead tells her. “But if you do…”

Betty nods and sniffs, quickly pressing her fingertips beneath her eyes.

“Just know that as an employee of the magazine, you have my full support.”

Her fingers catch another tear.

“And when we’re not at work,” he adds. “You have it then too - if you want it. And I just wanted you to know, it would never jeopardize your job.”

This time, Betty covers her face with her hands and he reaches over, resting a hand on her knee so as not to frighten her. When she doesn’t flinch, he rubs gently, just enough to let her know he means it.

They stay like that for a while in the quiet of her apartment until finally, she lets her hands fall from her face to her legs, palms facing upwards so he can see the deep red crescents he’d caught a glimpse of the Friday of her birthday drinks. It takes her much longer to lift her eyes to his, so when she does, he holds her gaze for a moment before sliding his thumbs over the marks.

He strokes them as gently as he can, continuing despite her gasp before she whispers,

“My sister died when I was in my freshman year of college and this is the only thing I could feel.”

He sighs softly and she adds,

“And then when I couldn’t stop feeling, this was the only thing that would take it away.”

His tongue feels clumsy in his mouth, too big and too heavy to form any word other than, “Betty.”

She cries at that, her hands still resting beneath his so they’re unable to catch the tears. As gently as he can, he folds her fingers in so that they’re resting against unbroken skin before bringing both of her hands towards him, cradling them safe against his chest. He inches along the couch so that his legs graze hers and he can wrap an arm around her body. She’s warm and soft but so fragile that he’s almost scared to tighten his hold incase he breaks her.

Jughead isn’t sure how long they stay like that, but he does register the exact moment she leans into him, letting her head drop so it rests in the crook of his neck. His coffee grows cold in the mug on the table and when Betty finally pulls back with red-rimmed eyes, he stops her before she can put up a wall.


She tilts her head so she can peek up at him. Maybe he expects her to say something, but no words leave her mouth and so he swallows thickly and takes a chance.

“Do you.... Do you want to watch a movie?”

Again, she looks at him without speaking - a look that shows whatever she’d thought he might be about to say, she hadn’t expected it to be that.

“And if you want me to go, I can -”

“- I don’t want you to go,” she whispers. He tries not to let his heart jump but it does anyway.
“A movie then?”

Betty nods and pulls her legs up onto the couch.

It’s the sound of her breathing evening out that lets Jughead know she’s fallen asleep. Her head is resting against his shoulder, knees drawn up so that they’re grazing his thigh, but all of his attention is on her palms that he’s cradling in one hand and the silky strands of her hair that he’s carding through with the other.

He’d taken a chance when her elastic had loosened the bun in her hair, unwinding it so that the blonde waves could fall free. The fingers of his left hand had made their way to her scalp, massaging lightly until they were doing what they are now: combing through rhythmically.

Betty’s palms are cupped together and resting against his chest and he wonders now whether he’s ever going to be able to look at her without checking for marks first. He knows there’s a lot more to uncover - she’s barely told him anything, but at least it’s a start. It’s one less thing she has to carry around alone. He hadn’t expected telling her about his dad and the serpents - albeit incredibly briefly - to make him feel a little lighter too.

He hadn’t expected holding her would make him not want to let her go.

She wakes with a slow twist of her head towards his chest so initially, she’s burying herself into him. It feels nice, he thinks, despite the reason they’ve ended up on the couch like this. Jughead’s certain he’d come over every night for her to fall asleep on him this way (and then of course, to wake up with her face buried into his chest) It reminds him very faintly of a time when his sister would curl up beside him, her little arms wrapped tightly around his waist as he told her stories of the mythical creatures he made up to be living in the East River. With Betty though, snuggling together like this (because that’s what he supposes it is, really - snuggling) is as much for him as it is for her. He wants her to burrow further against him; wants to kiss the crown of her head; wants to murmur, “It’s okay baby; go back to sleep.”

She hums in her throat and stretches out a little, the movement taking her limbs away from him as she opens her eyes. The skin beneath them is still a little puffy and sore-looking but when she says, “I missed most of the movie,” her voice isn’t quite as cracked as before.

Truth be told, he’s missed most of the movie too. He’s been more concerned with her hair and keeping her palms safe than whatever’s going on with Chris Pratt and Jennifer Lawrence’s characters. Besides, the volume’s so low Jughead can barely hear what they’re saying anyway - he hadn’t wanted any sudden bursts of dramatic music or sound effects to startle her awake.

“We can always watch it again,” he says, “Another night.”

Betty lifts her head so she can look at him properly. “Yeah?”

A slow, lazy grin starts its journey across his face at the hope in her tone. “Of course.”

She smiles too. “I’ll try and be better company next time.”

Her words jolt him and the smile drops from his mouth instantly. Her eyes seem to register the effect and her smile falls too, her gaze dropping to her palms. He uses the underside of his index finger to
Tilt her chin upwards.

“Don’t say that. I like your company Betty. You don’t have to be anything else. Anything… more.”

Her pupils flicker and he watches the words sink in, and then, catching him off-guard, she throws her arms around him, turning her face in towards his neck. He brings his arms around her too, pulling her closer so that when he tilts his head slightly, he can smell her shampoo.

He wonders whether her pillow smells like vanilla frosting too.

“It’s getting late,” she says after a while, the words muffled against his neck.

“I know.” (He still doesn’t pull away)

“Thank you,” she adds. “For coming over.” He almost doesn’t hear the next bit. Almost. “And for staying.”

“Any time.” Jughead squeezes her just that little bit tighter and then, reluctantly, shifts backwards so he can stand.

She walks him to the door, much like she’d done the morning they’d had breakfast together. He sees a red crescent just peeping out from under her cardigan’s cuff, and before he can stop himself, he’s taking her hands in his and bringing them to his lips. He kisses them in their cupped form and slowly exhales a long breath. When he meets her eyes, there’s liquid pooling in them again, but this time he doesn’t think it’s tears.

Keeping her hands in his, Jughead then leans so he can press a kiss to Betty’s forehead. His eyes close without his permission and he wonders, for a few seconds, what it might be like to stay like that for the rest of the night.

“Jughead?” she whispers.

He opens his eyes and takes a step back. “Yeah?”

“I’ve never told anybody either.”

All the way back to his apartment, he thinks about the years she’s kept everything about her sister to herself.

He thinks about his dad, rotting away in some jail cell on Rikers Island.

He thinks about Toni and the Whyte Wyrm and the Serpents, and that damn tattoo on his arm seems to ache.

And then he thinks about Betty’s smile when he’d left his number in case she ever wants to talk (or in case she doesn’t want to talk, but she also doesn’t want to be alone). There’s a swooping feeling in his stomach when he sees a message from her light up his screen just as he’s approaching his building.

Thank you again for tonight, it reads.

He spends way too long staring at it - and then much longer still trying to compose a reply. In the
end, he types out,

I meant what I said. You can call or text any time.

Three days later, she does.

There’s a little stall selling flowers just past Coffey Park, and Jughead spends at least five minutes internally debating whether or not to pick up a bunch of pink camellias to take over to Betty’s. She’d told him she was cooking chicken fettuccine alfredo and that, if he didn’t have any plans, there would be plenty if he wanted to join her.

He’s trying not to allow the hope stirring somewhere within him to rise - is trying to douse it with the mental reminder that they work together and that it would be a bad idea to make their relationship anything other than a professional one. Except, he thinks they might already be past that - even if things don’t develop into a romantic relationship, he supposes they might be something like friends at least.

He buys the bunch of camellias when the vendor asks if he needs any help, and carries on towards her building in the early evening sun.

“Hi,” she breathes softly when she opens the door to her apartment and her eyes register the flowers in his hand. He thinks there might be a little gasp that leaves her mouth too, but he’s busy registering that she’s wearing a sundress without a cardigan and aside from the night of her birthday drinks, it’s the first time he’s seen her arms.

“Hi,” he stammers. “I uh… I got you these.”

She accepts the camellias with a wide smile and then, without warning, presses a gentle kiss to his cheek. “They’re beautiful, thank you.”

“I…” he starts, but then falters, because she’s stolen his words. He’d wanted to tell her she looks beautiful in her floaty little flower-patterned dress and her hair down around her shoulders in waves. He settles instead for,

“The food smells great.”

Betty must realise at that point that he’s still standing in the doorway because her eyes go wide and she says, “Come in! It should be ready soon. Let me get you something to drink.”

She’s made lemonade and pours him a glass full as he takes a seat at the counter and then watches as she tosses salad leaves in a dressing before adding what look like homemade croutons.

“It’s panzanella,” she says when she turns and finds him watching her. Jughead finds himself nodding, like the information means anything to him other than it’s going to taste good. His mouth waters as she brings everything together, mixing the creamy sauce with the pasta before slicing the cooked chicken and placing it on top. Never in his life has he seen a home-cooked meal look like this.
“This looks incredible,” he tells her as she sets the dish of food in front of him and he can inhale the wonderful smell from closer range. As she draws her hand away, he catches sight of the faint red lines littering her arms, and a pang of sadness stabs at him. He is though, careful to avert his eyes so she doesn’t see him looking, and by the time she sits down next to him he has a forkful of fettuccine poised ready to eat.

“Oh my God,” he moans as he swallows. “Do you always cook like this?”

Out of his side vision, he spies a blush creeping up her cheeks as she dips her head at the praise. “It’s not always this unhealthy,” she replies, piercing a dainty piece of chicken with her fork.

“I thought your cakes were good but this might be the best thing I’ve ever tasted.”

She says nothing to that, but there’s a smile tugging at her lips and lighting up her eyes so if anything, Jughead decides that’s better than a thank you.

After they’ve eaten, Betty clears their dishes to the sink but doesn’t make any attempt to wash them. She stands facing away from him for a few moments, fingers toying with the hem of her dress and he wonders what it is that she’s nervous about. Just as he opens his mouth to ask if she’s okay, she says - in not much more than a whisper,

“Do you want to watch a movie?”

A grin spreads wide across his face before he can stop it. “Sounds perfect.”

Her fingers release the hem of her dress and she turns back to face him. “Should we try Passengers again? I promise not to fall asleep.”

He couldn’t care less if she snored her way through the entire movie if it means she’ll be snuggled into his side. Of course, he doesn’t tell her this, but he hopes that if he thinks it hard enough, she might somehow feel it in her bones.

Betty excuses herself to the bathroom and Jughead settles himself on the couch in front of the tv. When she returns, he’s already got the movie ready and tries desperately not to feel disappointed as she leaves a gap between their bodies.

Ultimately, he fails.

They’re around a half hour into the movie when Betty turns to him and says, “I have popcorn in the cupboard if you’d like some.” There’s never been a time when he hasn’t wanted food.

“I’d love some. Want me to pause?”

“That’s okay,” she replies, getting up. “I can listen while I make it.”

He does pause it though, turning his head so he can watch her throw the bag into the microwave and locate a bowl big enough for the popped kernels. After a minute or so, the sweet aroma begins to fill the living room and Jughead sniffs appreciatively. He wonders whether the smell will linger on his clothes so that he’ll have a reminder of their night on the subway ride home.
After she’s tipped the contents of the bag into the bowl, she takes a seat on the couch again, only now she’s close enough that their bodies brush each time either one of them leans forward to grab some popcorn. He chances resting his arm on the back of the couch and is rewarded with her head against his shoulder. Betty is, however, seated at an angle he thinks might not be particularly great for her back, and so he asks,

“You comfortable?”

She bites her lip, leaving it trapped between her teeth as she scoots closer still, bringing her legs up onto the cushions. She’s nervous, he can tell.

So is he.

Pressing his luck just a little further, he takes her left hand in his right one, tracing the scars on her palm with his thumb. Her fingers flex and twitch a couple of times until she curves her hand so that she can entwine their fingers.

That hope from earlier soars in his chest and he slides his left arm from the back of the couch to hers, his fingers tracing indiscriminate patterns on her skin. When she hums contentedly, Jughead takes it as his cue to hit play.

He doesn’t concentrate on the movie. He concentrates on the way her hand feels in his: small and soft and a perfect fit, He concentrates on the weight of her pressed against him and the warmth of her skin. He concentrates on the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest.

He’s never wanted to kiss someone as badly as he does now.

When Jim’s tether snaps on screen, Betty lifts her head. Jughead glances down to find her looking at him. Her eyes leave his after a moment and he watches as they reach a stop at his lips. He swallows heavily and feels his pulse thud in his ears.

Her hand is still in his when he leans in to kiss her.

Like everything about her, Betty’s lips are gentle and soft as they move against his. She tastes like the popcorn they’ve been eating and he wants more. Keeping her fingers joined with his, he turns so that he can use his left hand to stroke the skin beside her ear, his fingers massaging her neck lightly as she makes a tiny sound of approval. Jughead continues to kiss her, bringing their joined hands up to her face so he can frame it.

When they finally part, her eyes flutter open slowly and her bottom lip disappears between her teeth. He kisses her forehead and then both of her palms, breathing into them as his thumbs stroke the marks there.

“Are you okay?” he asks. “Uh...I don’t just mean what….uh...what we just did. I mean…” he presses his thumbs into her palms.

“I’m okay,” she says in a hushed voice, like she wants nobody beside them and the couch to know. To see. She leans her forehead against his and closes her eyes again, exhaling softly. “I like being here with you - like this.”

“God Betts,” he breathes, the shortened version of her name slipping out effortlessly. “If I could stay here just -”

“- Can you?” she asks. “Can you stay for a little while longer?”
He’d stay all night if she wanted him to. “Of course.”

He covers her lips with his again, kissing her until she breaks for air and then rests her head back on his shoulder. When she buries herself closer and whispers, “Jughead? Are you okay?” he feels his throat close up.

“Yeah,” he chokes out, holding onto her that little bit tighter. “I’m okay.”
Thank you for your love and comments last chapter :)  
You may have noticed that I’ve succumbed to peer pressure and we now have an extra chapter to this story. I’m excited for the other parts I get to write for this little universe.

Betty sucks in a deep breath and forces herself to exhale slowly through her mouth as she stares at her emails without really taking in any of the information. The knots in her stomach have loosened a little since she’d first gotten into the office, but they’re still there and she really just wants to catch a glimpse of Jughead in order to know that they’re okay.

Although she doesn’t like to use the word, Saturday night had been pretty perfect and even though she hadn’t wanted him leave, she knows not asking him to stay was the right decision. The few hours she’d spent snuggled against him on the couch makes her think of what it might be like to lie in his arms in bed, wrapped in sheets that smell like him with his lips resting against her skin.

He’d messaged once he’d gotten back to his apartment late on Saturday evening with a container of the spare pasta, to wish her a good night and a restful Sunday. She’d been hoping he might ask if he could come over again or maybe if she wanted to go out for dinner some time, but since his goodnight message, she hasn’t seen or heard from him. She’d stopped by his office earlier but he’d already been in a meeting and so now here she is, trying (and failing) not to panic about any potential awkwardness that might arise.

With an incredible amount of effort, Betty manages to focus on reading through her emails again with increased attention, and then, when she’s clicking on the final one, she sees him. He’s wearing a light blue shirt with the top two buttons undone, the sleeves rolled up to expose his forearms, and when he catches her eye, he gives the slightest nod as his lips twitch into a smile. He looks away and she finds she’s smiling too.

From the corner of her eye, she watches as Jughead navigates the desks, stopping occasionally to talk to people or say good morning. Finally, he reaches her desk, his mouth sliding into a smile when he meets her gaze.

“Good morning,” she says quietly, her heart rate picking up as he stands behind her chair, much like he had on the occasion the air conditioning had broken. She supposes it looks to everyone as though he’s reading over her shoulder when, in reality, he’s whispering, “How are you?”

“How are you?”

“I’m good,” she whispers back, inching her right hand closer to his. “How are you?”

“Good,” he breathes against her ear, the vibration sending a wave of tingles up her neck. His hand slides carefully along the desk until his fingertips are dancing lightly over her knuckles and she’s forcing herself not to grin too widely.

“I should go,” he says somewhat reluctantly. She wants to grab his hand and hold him in place; lean back in her chair so she’s pressed against his chest. Instead, she reminds herself that she’s at work
and she has emails to answer and articles to write. “But you’re okay?” he asks again, sliding his fingers from her knuckles to the underside of her hand, stroking across the marks in her skin. Her eyes suddenly prick with tears at how gentle he is. Betty nods, throat too thick to speak properly and he squeezes her fingers.

She already misses him as he walks away.

Later, during her afternoon trip to the break room for her daily cup of coffee, Jughead joins her with his usual mug in his hand.

“Hey,” he smiles, setting it down on the counter so she can pour the liquid into it. He leans against the counter, muscles flexing effortlessly beneath his shirt and Betty almost misses her target. Her heart thumps against her chest and heat rises in her cheeks. She wants to kiss him. Badly.

“Do you want to come over tomorrow?” she blurts. “Archie’s taking Veronica on a date and I could cook. Or…” she chances a look up at him. “Don’t feel like you have to just because -”

“- Betty,” he cuts in, eyes flicking quickly to the door before he takes her free hand in his, smoothing the skin with his thumb. “Of course I want to.”

She feels her face breaking out in a grin that she tries to tame, but it’s no use when he smiles shyly too - happiness stretching all the way up into his eyes.

“You look beautiful when you smile like that.”

Her breath hitches high in her throat and she feels her eyes slip closed. His fingers squeeze hers and she wonders what she’s done to deserve this. Him.

“Compliments make you uncomfortable,” he observes quietly.


Jughead nods like he always does - like he understands - and squeezes her hand again. “I’ve got a meeting in a couple minutes.” he says. “I just wanted to see you.”

Her heart jumps into her throat and she slides her eyes from their joined hands up to his. “I’ll make tacos tomorrow - if you like them?”

“I’m pretty sure I’d like anything you make if that pasta was anything to go by.”

Betty knows she’s blushing but can’t prevent the heat from turning her cheeks pink. The sound of approaching footsteps makes them both drop their hands at the same time - just before another of the features writers enters the break room. She feels simultaneous relief and emptiness, but is forced to hide the full extent of the smile that breaks out when he says,

“I look forward to seeing that tomorrow Betty.”

He has the blatancy to wink when their colleague turns to face the coffee machine and Betty’s grin grows wider still. She raises her fingers in a wave and watches as he ducks his head, eyes sparkling,
Back at her desk, she gets back to work on the research for her main feature this week: Selling airborne opulence to the upper classes. She’s managed to secure an interview via phone call with the owner of a luxury private jet business and as much as she finds such ostentatious displays of wealth a little hard to stomach in the country’s current political climate, she has to admit that she’s somewhat intrigued.

She’s immersed in the company’s website when Veronica announces her arrival by perching on the desk beside Betty’s computer, sighing dramatically.

“Hey V,” she says, quickly skimming the last sentence of the paragraph she’s reading so she can offer her full attention. “What’s up?”

“Betty, I’m legitimately agonising over my date with Archie tomorrow night.”


“Because he won’t tell me where he’s taking me so I have no idea what to wear. Kevin’s still in his sleeping-with-as-many-people-as-he-can-to-get-over-Joaquin phase so everything he suggests symbolises that and...I don’t know, I want Archie to think I look both hot and elegant at the same time and –”

“- Veronica,” she says gently, squeezing the brunette’s hand. “Archie’s crazy about you. And you always look elegant. Seriously, you have a better closet than the fashion one here.”

Veronica sighs again. “I really like him B. I was hoping he might ask me to be his girlfriend tomorrow.”

She clamps down on the insides of her cheeks so she doesn’t give the game away: she and Archie had spent the previous night discussing his plan to take Veronica to Alma, a latin-american restaurant with views out across the river to Manhattan so he can ask her to be his girlfriend. Tuesdays are taco night, hence Betty’s inspiration for her own dinner.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have slept with him straight away,” she muses aloud, but Betty really doubts that would be a problem.

“Wear a dress,” she decides. “Maybe something silky.”

Veronica raises an eyebrow. “You know something.”

“I might,” she smiles, “but I’m not spoiling the surprise.”

“Heels?”

“Yes.”

“Underwear?”

“Veronica!”

“Kidding,” she replies. Betty does, though, get the distinct impression that she wasn’t. Veronica’s voice is low when she says the next bit. “I also wanted to see how you are. If you’re…” Her gaze flits to her hands.

“I’m okay,” she tells her, realising what she’s referring to - their conversation on the subway back and leaves.
from Brooklyn after the surprise shoot she’d ended up participating in. After Veronica had *seen*.

She regards her for a moment, but must believe her answer because her eyes soften and she says, “Okay. But if you ever want to talk -”

“- Thank you.”

She’s grateful to the other woman, but really, *really* doesn’t want to have this conversation here.

“So silk,” Veronica clarifies, hopping off of the desk.

“And underwear.”

She winks at Betty’s answer and heads back in the direction of her office. Before turning her attention back to the screen in front of her, Betty turns her hands over so she can look at her palms. The scars are less sore than they were a couple days ago - less red too - and she folds her fingers in, then rests her left hand in her lap as the other works the mouse.

Jughead arrives at her apartment around twenty minutes after Archie had left to pick up Veronica. Betty finds it incredibly endearing that her roommate hadn’t wanted to simply meet her at Alma, despite the fact it’s only in neighbouring Columbia Street Waterfront District, and had taken an Uber to Veronica’s place so they can head to the restaurant together. She’d wished him luck - not that he needs it given Veronica’s feelings - and then turned her attention back to the ground beef she was frying before her own date showed up with a short-sleeved shirt, this time in grey, looking all kinds of handsome.

He kisses her as soon as he’s inside, cupping her face in his hands and breathing in deeply as she reaches on her tiptoes to meet his lips.

“Hi,” she smiles as he pulls away, fingers still stroking her face.

“Hi.”

“You look,” she swallows. “You look really good.”

He dips his head self-consciously and Betty finds it curious that he can observe her struggles with compliments whilst sharing the trait too. Perhaps they’re even more alike than she’d thought, and yet, despite how sad that is, she finds there’s something hopeful about it too.

“That was my line,” he says with a tentative grin, and so she kisses him again - a soft brush of her lips over his.

“The food smells amazing,” Jughead tells her once they’ve parted and he’s sniffed the air appreciatively.

“It shouldn’t be much longer,” she replies. “Have a seat.”

He does, flopping down on the couch with his arms resting on the back of the cushions after he’s turned on the tv. She watches him for a moment, quietly observing until he must sense her, and turns
his head to catch her gaze.

“What’re you thinking?” he asks.

Her voice is quiet but honest when she replies, “I like it when you’re here.”

His lips twitch into a smile. “I like being here too.”

They eat the tacos and Betty’s glad she bought the larger pack of ground beef - for someone who looks incredibly lean, Jughead sure manages to eat a lot. She’s careful to keep this observation to herself though, smiling when, with his mouth full, he tells her that the old Mexican lady in his apartment building is going to have to up her game if she wants to hold onto her self-professed title of ‘best tacos in New York’.

“Are we watching a movie?” he asks once he’s finished the slice of key lime pie she serves him for dessert - extra whipped cream piled on top (she remembers him ordering it on the fictional milkshake they once talked about all of those weeks ago). He says it as though it’s just something they do now - watch movies together - and it makes her feel warm inside for some inexplicable reason.

“Sure,” Betty replies. “If you want to?”

“Tradition, right?”

She’s not sure it can be classed as that when they’ve only done it twice (and even then, it was the same movie) but she’s not about to pass up the chance to snuggle up on the couch.

“You go choose,” she says. “I’ll just tidy up here and I’ll be right over.”

Jughead regards her with an unreadable expression but then says, very quietly, “You don’t always have to think of others Betty.”

He doesn’t elaborate, but rises from his stool and collects both of their plates, placing them beside the sink before turning on the tap.

“What’re you doing?”

“Washing the dishes.”

“Jughead, you really don’t -”

He steals the rest of her sentence with a kiss, pressing his lips almost urgently against hers. He still tastes like the creamy citrus pie filling and her mouth waters. “You cooked,” he tells her breathlessly. “I’ll clean.”

In theory, it seems like a fair trade but she won’t have him working while she sits there. She joins him at the sink, taking the towel off of its hook so she can dry the clean plates and glasses.

“It’s faster this way; we can watch the movie sooner.”

“Not just a pretty face,” he grins, dipping his head to kiss her again before she can get embarrassed (which, inevitably, she does, but when he nibbles lightly on her bottom lip, the pinkening of her cheeks is for a very different reason). The bubbles from the sink are spilling onto the counter when he pulls away.

He makes no pretence about the fact he’s going to hold her while they watch Girl On The Train, stretching out on the couch with his arm slung over the back of it in invitation.
It’s an invitation she’s more than willing to accept.

She joins him with the bowl of fresh popcorn, setting it on the coffee table so he can easily reach, and then settles herself against him so that her head’s resting on his chest. When his arm doesn’t drop from the back of the couch to hers, she wonders whether she’s read the situation wrong, and her whole body tenses, ready to pull away.

And then he says, in only a fraction louder than a whisper, “Betts? Is it okay if I hold your hand?”

She hears him swallow as her heart stutters out of rhythm, a lump forming in her throat which is too big to allow her to speak. Reaching up, she slides her palm along his until their fingers link together and he brings their joined hands down so they rest against her stomach.

Jughead hits play and she already knows she’s not going to be following the storyline when his nose and mouth come to rest in her hair and she feels every one of his exhaled breaths.

Betty only realises she’s fallen asleep when she feels him shift beneath her, his hands cupping the back of her head as he lays her down on the couch.

“Did the movie finish?” she asks hoarsely, at which he chuckles.

“A couple hours ago.”

“Oh,” she blinks in the waning light. “Are you leaving?”

She desperately doesn’t want him to; is mad at herself for drifting off and missing the feel of him holding her.

“I was just going to the bathroom,” he says, his hand coming to tug at the hair at the nape of his neck. “Uh… I can leave if you want me -”

“- No,” she cuts in quickly. “I mean…”

He grins and she realises her lips have curved upwards in symmetry.

“I like lying here with you.”

“I like it too,” she replies. “And I like it when you hold my hands.” She chews her bottom lip at the admission, and he bends down to free it with his thumb.

“They’re safe,” he tells her. “When I hold them.”

He leaves, reluctantly, a little after midnight having asked her if he can take her out to dinner on Saturday evening. She kisses him yes in response, her palms framing his face and her thumbs stroking his jawline as his own fingers wrap gently around her wrists.

Jughead texts her from the subway and when they’re still typing out messages gone one in the morning, he tells her to go to sleep and he’ll see her at work. The instruction is accompanied with a series of kisses which make her smile.
And then as she climbs under the covers and turns out her light, seemingly because she’s had such a lovely evening, her brain reminds her that she can’t tell Polly any of this; can’t ask her for advice about whether, if the chance arises, it’s too soon to sleep with him; can’t say,

*Polly, his kisses make me the best kind of breathless.*

She *doesn’t* curl her fingernails into the skin of her palms. (But God, she wants to)

Betty’s careful to avoid any coffee during the week and makes sure she goes for a run each night after work. Despite the fact that the city air is pretty polluted and therefore not exactly the fresh kind she’s supposed to be getting in order to keep her anxiety at bay, she sees the sun, low in the sky, spilling orange and gold over the river and is reminded that there are good things amongst that bad; there are bright spots and warmth in the grey and the cold.

She completes the feature on the private jet company and sends it to Jughead, who, in the relative privacy of the break room, tells her she’s a really great writer.

(And then he whispers that she looks beautiful and despite the overwhelming urge she has to dip her head, Betty feels the smile on her lips reach her eyes)

By Friday, he must realise she hasn’t been drinking coffee because as he walks past her desk mid-afternoon he sets down a raspberry-chamomile iced tea, quickly scans their nearby colleagues to see if anyone is watching, and then strokes his fingertips over her hand. Her words stall somewhere between her lungs and her mouth and by the time she’s found them again, he’s already walking away. When he turns his head - just fractionally - she tries to use her eyes to say *thank you*.

Jughead nods and she figures it worked.

On Saturday, she’s nervous. She’s been nervous around him before (hell, she’s spent *most* of her time around him being nervous) but this is different. Eating dinner and watching a movie in her apartment is one thing; going to a restaurant is something else. She can’t rely on casual; doesn’t have the relative comfort of her safe space to be able to flee to if something goes wrong or she panics.

The entire place is sparkling once she’s finished her cleaning rampage, and even Archie immediately washes the glass he brings from out of his bedroom rather than just leaving it beside the sink like he usually would. He leaves for work around four, after asking her for the fourth time, “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yes,” she answers, and it’s not like she’s not being truthful. But both she and Jughead want to keep things between them (whatever they are) quiet and that involves neither of them telling anyone. She feels a little guilty about it but is pretty sure Veronica would understand.

“I can come back here after work rather than going to Ronnie’s.”

*Ronnie*, she thinks, and smiles. The morning after he’d officially asked the brunette to be his girlfriend, Archie had returned to the apartment with a wide grin and a nickname for the girl who’s stolen his heart.
“Seriously Arch, I’m fine. Stay at Veronica’s.”

“You sure?”

Betty rolls her eyes pointedly but smiles and it earns her a chuckle.

“Okay.” He hugs her and she squeezes back. “Have a good night.”

Jughead arrives at her building just over ten minutes later than he’d said he would be there, a little breathless as he gasps over the intercom,

“I’m so sorry I’m late…. Uh, it’s Jughead.”

She grins and feels the clenching in her chest release a little. She’d known deep down that ten minutes behind schedule (plus two apology texts from the subway) didn’t equate to him deciding this was a bad idea and that it would be better if he didn’t come, but the persistent voice at the back of her head was telling her precisely that on repeat until she’d finally heard that buzzer.

She waits with the door open until he reaches her floor, and then her heart feels like it’s forgotten how to work properly when she sees him. He has flowers - again - and hands them to her with a bashful expression and a nervous hand rubbing harshly at the back of his neck.

“You look beautiful,” he whispers, right before he kisses her against the door and she’s stretching on tiptoes to meet his lips.

After dinner, Jughead insists on taking her home and this time, Betty doesn’t protest. The night air is warm and they walk the numerous blocks back to her building with their hands clasped together and his thumb rubbing circles across her skin. She leans her head against his shoulder as they pass Coffey Park, and only then does she realise how tired she is.

Not giving into the thoughts in her head takes so much energy that she wonders what she’d do if those voices would just quieten for a while. Wonders if she’d find more time to bake and read or if it would be, simply, that she didn’t ache quite so much all of the time.

And then Jughead presses his lips to her hair and she thinks that, exhausted or not, walking the neighbourhood with him like this gives her enough energy to keep going regardless. Because, despite the heaviness in her limbs, the last thing she wants to do right now is go to sleep.

It’s situations like this (or, not exactly like this, because she doesn’t suppose she’s ever experienced anything remotely similar) that Betty wishes she had that innate understanding some girls have - like Veronica for instance - about whether or not it’s okay to invite the guy you’re on your first official date with inside of your apartment under the pretence that you’re going to watch a movie. She wants to know whether Polly had that understanding with Chuck Clayton or if he made all of the moves so
she didn’t have to. There aren’t many things she’s certain on, but she does know that Jughead would never engineer that scenario - he’s always so careful. So respectful.

They round the final corner and Betty sucks in a breath and says, “Do you want to come inside?”

He twists his neck so he’s looking down at her, those eyes of his so soft and warm. “Yes.”

“Coffee?” she asks once they’re inside, not really waiting for the answer before she starts up the machine. The faint smell of lemon-scented cleaning fluid still hangs in the air as she toes off her shoes, wiggling her feet against the floor. Jughead flips on the tv and it drowns out the whirring of the air conditioning unit. Since the one in the office broke, she’s had a new-found appreciation for the crappy model working overtime to cool the apartment, and regards it with slightly more affection than she had two weeks ago.

Betty joins him on the couch after the coffee’s done, settling herself against his side with her own mug - a questionable choice perhaps, but she doesn’t want to fall asleep again and miss this time with him.


She doesn’t care - just wants to sit here with him. The movie’s simply background.

“Cheerleading crisis solved with a charity car wash?” he adds, and it makes her giggle.

“You’d really watch something about cheerleaders?”

His fingers begin combing through her hair and he says quietly, “I don’t care about the movie.”

She kisses him, sinking her lips against his in a way that feels like a relief, like that’s where they’re meant to be. Jughead’s right hand comes up to massage her neck, fingers pressing into her muscles with just enough pressure that a soft groan of appreciation tumbles out of her mouth and into his before she can stop it. His thumb traces upwards along the column of her neck so that it rests just beneath her chin and then, somehow, she finds her way onto his lap, her fingers tangling in the unruly waves of dark hair at the back of his head.

When they break for air, he rests his forehead against hers, eyes still closed, and gasps, “God Betty.”

The way she’s pressed up against him makes it hard not to feel what effect the kiss has had on his body, and although he’s not sporting a full erection, Betty can tell it was good for him too. He seems to exhale in a way that announces he’s fighting an impulse, and she’s not sure whether to be happy or disappointed.

When he lifts his chin to lays his lips on her forehead, she decides it doesn’t matter.

Inevitably, she does fall asleep while they’re watching the movie. Betty knows this only because she wakes as Jughead’s laying her down on her bed. It feels reminiscent of something - her birthday drinks perhaps, despite the fact she’d been pretty out of it (maybe there’s something to be said for her subconscious though).
“I didn’t want to wake you,” he says, smoothing her hair out of her face as she blinks up at him with sleepy eyes. He tucks the strands behind her ear so gently and when he strokes over her skin, she catches his wrist with her fingers.

“You’re one of the best people I’ve ever met.”

“Betts…”

“I didn’t want to fall asleep,” she adds.

“You’re tired.”

“I missed you holding my hands.”

He swallows visibly and catches her hand with his spare one - the one that’s not still stroking her skin. “I held them while you were sleeping.”

“But I still missed it,” Betty whispers. “And…”

“And what?” he asks, squeezing gently.

“I don’t want you to go.”

It’s silent for what seems like an eternity, but then he says, “I don’t want to go either.”

She watches Jughead eye the space on the mattress that she’s not occupying, but he makes no move to climb under the sheets. She’s also now awake enough to realise she needs to brush her teeth, and there’s an overwhelmingly awkward pause until he asks,

“Do you want me to stay?”

Because, she realises, not wanting him to go doesn’t equate to an invitation to stay. To join her in this bed. To lay side-by-side in much less clothing than they’re currently wearing.

She swallows. “Yes.”


The pause is longer this time. “We don’t have to do anything,” Jughead adds. “That’s not...that’s not why I want to…."

It’s Betty’s turn to nod. “I know.”

She offers him the bathroom first but he’s polite enough to insist she brush her teeth and wash her face before he does. When it’s his turn to occupy the tiny tiled space, she changes quickly in her room into a pair of pale blue jersey pajama shorts and a white camisole - not her usual sleepwear, but she doesn’t feel the old River Vixens t-shirt she’d slept in the previous night is right somehow. Only her head, neck and shoulders are poking out from under the sheets when Jughead appears in the doorway.

“I’ve never met anyone with a family pack of spare toothbrushes before,” he tells her, a hint of amusement in his eyes.

“My mom always had spares,” she tells him. “She called them emergency toothbrushes.”

Betty had never quite been sure what kind of an emergency would require a small, bristled piece of
plastic, though of course, she’d never asked.

Jughead is still wearing his shirt and slacks, and now she’s not sure whether she’s supposed to look away while he takes them off. His hands cross over his stomach to pull the hem upwards and she settles for glancing midway between him and the closed bedroom door. She does want to look but knows almost definitely that he’d be polite enough to turn his head if it were her undressing right now. Out of the corner of her eye, she catches a blur of black against olive-tan.

“You sure?” he asks once he’s removed his slacks too, hand reaching for the sheets but not yet peeling them back. Betty shifts onto her side so she’s facing him - so she can see his hard chest and the dark black ‘s’ shaped snake; so she can see he’s wearing light blue boxers; so she can see the trail of dark hair that disappears under the waistband.

“Yes.”

He climbs in beside her and she’s suddenly overwhelmed by his presence: his scent - piney and clean and with a hint of something else she can’t place; the heat radiating off of him; the deep dip in the mattress beside her.

She shuffles closer - not quite touching, but not far off. And then he closes the gap, inching over the last bit of space until his arm is dipping beneath her pillow and their noses and mouths are only millimeters apart.

Betty allows herself to rest her hands against his chest, safe there away from herself.

(There are still times she wakes from vivid nightmares with blood underneath her fingernails)

A siren screams somewhere in the distance and he kisses her before pulling back just a fraction in order to turn out the lamp. Once they’re cloaked in darkness, she hears Jughead exhale, then he brings her even closer. She wants to run her hands over his skin when he begins tracing patterns along her temples with his fingertips.

“What’s your sister’s name?” he asks gently, tucking a wave of hair behind her ear.

She tries not to feel the burn at the mention of her, but does anyway. “Polly.”

Jughead nuzzles his nose against hers. “Polly and Betty.”

“Mary and Elizabeth,” she tells him. She always hated it when her mom would use her full name, but would remain quiet on the subject. Polly though, would always wrinkle her nose. The memory makes her smile.

“Polly and Betty,” he whispers again against her lips.

It’s the last thing she remembers before she drifts into sleep.
Ten

Betty shifts slightly against the mattress, her breathing still even indicating sleep, and Jughead does his best to suppress the groan threatening to escape his mouth. At some point during the night, she must’ve turned so that she was facing the window: he’d woken only a few moments ago curled around her, nose buried into her hair so he can smell the ridiculously delicious scent of vanilla frosting, with her hands tucked carefully into his.

Just in case his eyes have stopped working properly, another part of his body is doing its best to remind him that he’s lying in bed with Betty, and that she’s wearing only minimal clothing. The little slideshow of last night’s couch makeout session - the one where she’d ended up seated over his lap and moaning softly against his tongue - filters into his thoughts and he attempts to inch back on the mattress so she doesn’t have to feel the effect she has on him.

Except, she doesn’t allow it.

“No,” she mumbles, still on the edge of sleep with the pillow muffling the single syllable.

“I can’t contro-”

“- S’okay,” she replies and presses herself just that little bit closer. Close enough that her ass in those tiny pajama shorts grazes his erection. A strange sort of strangled noise leaves his mouth because he’s sensitive and she’s warm and he really should’ve thought this through.

Betty turns so she’s facing him despite the fact her eyes are still closed, and her fingers feel their way blindly up his arms until they come to a rest in the crook of his elbow. There’s a smile on her lips and all he can think is that she looks so beautiful he can’t help but kiss her. She sighs softly against his mouth and melts against his body when he cups her cheek to tilt her face towards him.

There’s no use pretending he’s not hard. Jughead knows she’ll be able to feel it as she slides her right leg over his at the same time he slips his tongue into her mouth. She gasps and then, when he worries it might be too much, she rolls her hips and he officially loses his mind.

A groan vibrates at the back of his throat and when she repeats her actions, he breaks away and breathes,

“Betty.”

“What?” she asks, opening her eyes slowly. He has never in his life had someone look at him the way she’s doing now.

“Just...if we keep going…”

“It’s okay.”

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“You don’t.” Betty’s lips curve upwards and skim his when she says, “I want you.”

He pulls back to look at her; to determine whether she’s telling the truth or simply saying what she thinks he wants to hear. He does want to hear it, if he’s being honest, because lord does he want her. But he’s not about to push things too far too fast.
“Are you sure?”

She pulls him back to her and murmurs, “I’m sure,” against his neck, right before she presses her warm tongue against the skin and sucks just long and hard enough that he already knows it’ll leave a mark.

She kisses him languidly, like they have all the time in the world: slow strokes of her tongue against his; a tentative nibble of his bottom lip; hot breath intermingling when they drag just enough air into their lungs to go again.

One of Jughead’s hands finds its way beneath the camisole she’s wearing, exploring her skin which is so warm and smooth and taut that he wants to spend days on end doing this: feeling where she dips and curves. She’s lying on her back when his fingers venture far enough that he can feel the swell of her breast, and she gasps, tightening her hold a fraction on the hair at the back of his neck.

He kisses her all the time, their noses nudging as his other hand combs the blonde strands away from her face. When he swipes his thumb gently over her nipple, Betty’s hips rise off of the mattress and he grins against her mouth. He does it again and then again until she breaks away from his lips to whisper-whine,

“Jug.”

He doesn’t know what that means; isn’t yet skilled enough in all of the ways she says his name to know immediately what she wants (and doesn’t dare yet act upon the instinct he has to take off her top and replace his fingers with his mouth).

“What?” he asks, repeating his ministrations one more time. “What, Betts?”

She lifts her hips again and chokes, “Take it off.”

So he does.

Her camisole lands on the floor with a soft thump and she tilts her chin so she can return her lips to his mouth. Her tongue slides against his and the air that she exhales through her nose is hot in the narrow space between their faces. Jughead pulls back, pecks at her lips once, twice, then again before shifting so he can turn his attention to the rest of her body.

He peels back the sheets, the soft lines of golden morning light striking across her skin and for a while, he stares. He takes in the fan of her hair across the pillow; her heavy-lidded eyes and now-swollen lips. He watches the rise and fall of the swell of her breasts as she breathes, and the smooth curve of her hips to her waist.

And then something changes.

She closes her eyes and turns her head away; draws her arm across her chest so he can’t see.

“Hey,” he says softly. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” she says, barely opening an eye. “It’s okay; we can...you can keep going.”

Except it’s not okay and despite his body’s indication otherwise he can’t keep going. “Betty,” he insists. “We don’t have to—”

“- I want to,” she replies. “Just...”
“You can tell me.” His fingers are soothing circles against her temple when he notices her nails curling in towards her palms. Quickly, he places his hand over hers, guiding his own fingers downwards until they curve underneath and into the space littered with marks. He feels a soft squeeze and allows his thumb to stroke her knuckles for a few moments until slowly, slowly, he can feel the tension in her hands recede.

“I don’t want you to look at me like that,” she whispers.

Jughead swallows. “Like what?”

“Like I’m… like what you see isn’t….isn’t the mess I’ve made.”

Jesus Christ.

“I see you,” he chokes. “And God Betts, you’re beautiful.”

Her eyes close at his words and he wants to pull that mirror from the bathroom wall so he can force her to see. He squeezes her fingers again and moves only enough that he can kiss her eyelids, and then her nose, her jawline and all the way down the column of her neck until he reaches her collarbone. She’s shielding most of her right side so he concentrates on her left, inching across with butterfly kisses until he’s at her shoulder and he can come back up the side of her neck to her ear.

He hears her gasp and then suck in a breath and so he continues, heading from her shoulder where he lays another kiss, down her side, nuzzling her skin with his nose as he journeys south. He pauses to inhale when he reaches the side of her breast, and doesn’t kiss her - rather, rests his parted lips at the curve of her body and tells her softly,

“I see the scars. I see when your eyes change because you’re anxious. But you’re beautiful.” He forms his lips into a kiss against her breast and hears her soft sigh. “So, so beautiful Betty Cooper.”

When she shifts so that her face is tilted towards him again, eyes shining with unshed tears he thinks she’s probably willing not to fall, Jughead lifts his head so he can capture her lips. He kisses her slow and soft - much like the one they’d shared when she’d first woken - but this time her lips are trembling.

He’s not sure when it happens - he’s focusing only on her mouth and the fact he hasn’t tasted salt on his tongue which means there are no tears - but at some point, her fingers weave through his hair. He’s taken her arms away from across her chest and so he takes his chance, kissing down her neck again to the valley between her breasts. Careful not to linger too long - he doesn’t ever want her to be uncomfortable because of something he does - he continues down her stomach, dipping his tongue into her bellybutton.

He glances up and finds Betty watching him. Her eyes are soft and he wonders, if she’s uncomfortable with him looking at her like he was, how she can look at him like this. Like he’s everything.

She goes to turn her head, yet again with her eyes closing, but he cups her cheek with his left hand and holds her in place.

“Betts,” he whispers against her skin. “Please don’t.”

She takes in a shaky breath, chest rising in two jumps as she nods just a fraction, and then her hips rise too. When her thumbs hook around the waistband of her pajama shorts, he realises what she’s doing and hauls in a breath himself.
She pulls down the material and discards the shorts somewhere over the edge of the bed. It must take every ounce of courage she has to say,

“You… you can look - if you want to.”

His mouth practically waters at the sight of her laid out in front of him, but Jughead’s careful not to stare too long. Grazing his middle and index fingers from her sternum down to her bellybutton, he *does* watch her reaction though, a tentative smile tugging at his lips when when she lifts her hips. He circles his thumb around her nipple and this time her eyes close for a different reason. She lets out a soft moan and he blows a steady stream of air across the hardened pebble before taking it into his mouth.

Betty moans louder, then when he grazes with his teeth, she writhes beneath him and that smile he’s wearing grows. He repeats the action on her other breast until, without his knowledge, his right hand begins a descent towards her centre and he finds her wet.

He’s not prepared for how his cock reacts, feeling it positively leak at the thought of making her come.

Jughead strokes over her folds, her wetness coating his middle finger as she whimpers and presses herself closer. Her hands are tangling in his hair and he mouths her nipple as he continues to rub his fingers in a circular motion. When his thumb finds her clit, her back arches and he slips his middle finger inside of her, finding her warm and tight and unsurprisingly soft.

This time, her moan is more of a cry - high-pitched and needy - so he sinks deeper into her, an upward curl at the end as her grip on his hair tightens. Swirling his tongue around Betty’s nipple one more time, he releases her breast from his mouth and then heads down her stomach, dragging his lips as he goes. Her back is still arched from the way he’s working her and her whole body positively trembles when his mouth hovers just above her core.

Swiftly, his eyes flick upwards to her face - to check she’s okay - and as much as he can tell from her body’s reaction that she wants him *there* Jughead needs her to know he’s not going to do anything she’s uncomfortable with.

“I want to taste you,” he says, and her response is to close her eyes and turn her head into the pillow. She does though, he notices, lift her hips up further towards his face.

Gently, with his left hand, he covers her palm with his before sewing their fingers together. And then he does precisely what he wants.

He tastes her.

The sound that leaves Betty’s mouth is like she’s exhaling and gasping for breath all at once. Her fingers squeeze his as he licks a long, slow line upward, pausing to circle his tongue around her clit before repeating the process again and again and again until she’s writhing and gasping his name.

By the time he pushes his finger back inside of her, she’s almost so far off of the bed that the position he’s in is becoming difficult, but Jughead angles his head rather than pushing her back down onto the mattress and she comes around his finger as he sucks at her clit.

She’s gasping for breath when he heads upwards, nuzzling his nose at the valley of her breasts and then into her neck until he’s sure she has enough air in her lungs to kiss him. He traces her lips with his tongue so she can taste herself; so she can taste what he does - the sweetness mixed with that delicious tang of arousal - and just the thought of it nearly catapults him over the edge.
He has no idea how he’s going to last once he’s inside her.

She moans into his mouth, the vibrations hitting the back of his throat so he can feel them everywhere. Her tongue slips past his lips and strokes his own, and then Jughead feels her dainty fingers tug at the hem of his boxers. She can’t manage what she wants with just her one hand, and so he frees the other from his - only momentarily - so Betty can push the cotton material down over his hips.

He feels self-conscious about them being yesterday’s underwear and takes over once she’s gotten them to his knees. They end up somewhere on the floor (although where, he couldn’t care less) and he sits back on his heels. His cock is throbbing and looking at the girl in front of him, half-propped up on a pillow, half still weak from the effects of his tongue, isn’t helping him last. Now, her eyes are open but that vibrant green of her irises has been swallowed almost entirely by dark black. Her bottom lip is trapped between her front teeth and he frees it gently with his thumb.

“Condom?” he asks, and she nods, voice hoarse when she replies,

“Top drawer.”

Jughead reaches over and finds the box hidden at the back behind something that resembles a notebook. He doesn’t realise his fingers are trembling until he struggles to open the foil wrapper on the first attempt. He can feel her eyes on him the entire time: soft yet expectant as he rolls on the condom.

Taking himself in his hand, he shifts so that he’s positioned at her entrance and then asks, “You sure?”

Betty nods and traps that lip between her teeth again, but this time he doesn’t pull it free. He pushes into her slowly, feeling himself sink beyond her walls with indescribable ease and although he’s not going to let himself think anything as ridiculous as this is where he’s meant to be, he can’t ever remember a time where he’s fit quite so well anywhere.

Once he’s buried all of the way, he waits a few moments, letting her body adjust before he inches back out and then drives in again with slightly more pace. Each time he repeats the action, he speeds up a little until he’s holding back a groan as she meets his thrusts with her hips.

“Fuck Betts,” his gasps against her neck, breathing against her skin as opposed to sucking at it: he will not mark her - not when she already has enough. “I’m not gonna last much longer.”

She takes each of his hands in hers and brings them up so they’re resting beside her head. It results in much more of his weight on her, his elbows working overtime to keep his body from crushing hers against the mattress, yet she seems not to care, winding her legs around his hips so there’s barely a millimetre of air between them.

The new angle means he can’t move as well as he could, but it ceases to matter when he feels her squeeze his cock with her pelvic muscles, almost like she’s rolling in a downward motion. He can’t help the groan that leaves his lips - fighting it seems futile when every shred of energy he has is being spent trying to stop himself from coming before she does.

Whether she can sense it, he’s not sure but she repeats the squeeze again and says breathlessly,

“Let go.”

He does, spilling into the condom as if on command. Because she’s sheer goodness, Betty soothes him through it, releasing one of her hands so she can stroke down his spine until his body stops its
jerking movements. Even then, her fingers are massaging the nape of his neck in a motion that, if he isn’t careful, might just lull him back to sleep.

Jughead slips out of her and removes the condom, heading to the bathroom to discard it in the little bin he’d seen by the toilet.

When he returns to her bedroom, she’s stretched out on the mattress, covered by the sheets again, but she’s watching him with a smile on her face and he thinks, if it’s possible, she looks even more beautiful than she did before. He climbs back in beside her - it’s still relatively early in the grand scheme of weekend mornings - and besides, this is how he wants to spend his time.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” he breathes before pressing a kiss just below her ear once she’s settled in close to his chest. Her fingers are stroking patterns down his side and she seems not to mind that he can see her wrists; up her arms; the marks on her palms.

“When you’re happy,” she starts, the movement of her fingers slowing almost to a stop. “Do you ever feel like it’s cheating?”

“Betts,” he whispers, framing her face with his hands. “Is that how you feel?”

“Sometimes,” she admits.

“Is that how you feel now?”

She shakes her head. “No, but I was half-expecting to.”

He swallows and dusts a kiss to her lips. “Why?”

“Polly was in a relationship with this guy from her year at school. Chuck Clayton. None of us knew - my mom or my dad or me. He was the captain of the football team, on the wrestling team, the basketball team. Star athlete,” she tells him, burrowing closer. It makes his throat ache and his heart swell at the same time.

“He was always kind of an asshole to people -”

“- To you?” he cuts in without meaning to, and then feels the gentle shake of her head against his chest.

“Not to me, or, obviously, to Polly. But I saw him and his friends teasing some of the other students. Just...I was surprised, when I found out that’s who…”

She stops and Jughead wonders whether she’s done telling him this information - wherever it’s leading. He remains quiet, just strokes her skin with his thumb in hopes that it’ll calm her; that she won’t want to dig her nails (or, worse, something else) into her skin.

“They went away to college together. At the time I guess I thought it was just a coincidence: she was captain of the cheerleading squad and he was captain of the football team. She never told me. But they went away to Penn State and I guess they were really happy.”

“What happened?” he asks after a long period of silence.

“Polly got pregnant. I was in my freshman year and our town was hosting this annual celebration my mom always used to make me go to. Polly and Chuck were supposed to be going back for it. I just
thought it was because they wanted to; I didn’t realise it was because...because they were going to
tell people she was pregnant. I told my mom I wasn’t coming - there was this party I wanted to go to
on campus and I…” she sniffs and he feels her tears on his skin. He kisses her crown but doesn’t
shush her - just pulls her closer if it’s even possible.

“My parents were furious about the pregnancy. They blamed Chuck because Polly said she was
going to drop out of school to get a job so he could continue his scholarship and then Chuck’s dad
was furious too so… well, they left before the celebration and on the way back to Pennsylvania they
had a car accident.”

Jughead can feel the tears grow more insistent and the lump in his throat expands. He thinks of the
day his mom left with Jellybean; shudders at the thought of something like that happening to them as
they left New York behind.

“I’m so sorry,” he breathes into her hair, holding as much of her as he can.

“My mom and dad had to go to her room at Penn State to get all of her stuff and they found these
journals she’d been keeping since high school. They were all about Chuck and their relationship.
She’d written about finding out she was pregnant and then discovering she was having twins,” she
sniffs again. “And then that one day just took all of it away. All four of them.”

He can barely make out the last bit.

“They didn’t even get the chance to be a family.”

Her legs are resting over one of his, and Jughead locks his ankles together so that he’s so tethered to
her that not even a hurricane could rip them apart. It seems stupid to say he’s sorry (even though he
is). It isn’t enough.

“My mom called to tell me but I ignored it because I was drunk at that party. I didn’t want to talk to
her.” He thinks Betty tries to suppress a sob, but it sounds as though her breath is being strangled
from her lungs instead. “I didn’t want her to spoil my night.”

“That wasn’t your fault - you didn’t know why she was calling, Betty,” he tells her gently, but she
shakes her head and pulls backwards. He’s reluctant to let her - not sure why she’s extracting herself
from him when the only thing he is sure of is that she needs to be held. (Even if it’s not him, she
needs someone to wrap her in their arms)

“I didn’t feel anything when my mom told me what happened. Everyone knows that’s not normal,
right?” Something that sounds horribly like a cruel laugh leaves her lips and Jughead blanches when
he hears it. “I think I was grateful at first.” Her voice is quieter again. Rough but timid. “But then I
just wanted to feel something. Anything.”

Now he gets it. He brings her arms up to his lips, and although he’s careful, he makes sure to hold
her wrists tight enough that she can’t leave this bed. Can’t leave him.

He examines the lines from the crooks of her elbows to where they disappear beneath his fingers,
first with his eyes, then with his thumbs, and finally with his lips and nose. They’re faint - not recent,
thank God - but he figures it doesn’t matter any less. He kisses her wrists and she chokes on a sob.

“What did you feel?” he asks, exhaling into the palms he cups with his own.

“Relief.”

Jughead hears the whir of the tattoo needle; feels the initial scratch and then the deep stinging pain
flooding his veins; tastes the ache of everything he’s been suppressing on his tongue. He’s back there again: Hunts Point, in his only pair of jeans, the grey-knit beanie and a flannel worn several days past its best.

He’s never sure if it’s easy to remember that part of his life or simply impossible to forget - whether it’s etched so deep within him that it’ll never not be there. He figures everything is the same for Betty too.

“Yeah,” he says gruffly. “I get that.”

“Once the feelings came back though,” she starts. “It’s like they wouldn’t stop. Like everything that’d stayed away came back all at once and I couldn’t sort through it. The sting… it… it helps.”

“You still do it.”

It isn’t a question and they both know it.

“It grounds me.”

Jughead closes his eyes and holds her hands back against his lips. Her fingertips stroke his forehead lightly and he has no idea how long they lay like that in the quiet of her room, only that he doesn’t know how he’s going to leave her when the time comes to go back to his apartment.

The shower is his idea. His intention isn’t for it to be something they do together, but when she turns around in the pooling bedsheet on her way to the bathroom and says, “Are you coming?” he knows what she really means, is, simply please?

Betty leans her head on his shoulder while they wait for the water to heat up and when the steam has fogged the mirror, she drops the swathe of pink cotton and kisses him.

They’ve kissed a lot now - or at least more times than Jughead can count on his fingers - although it’s still not enough (he’s not sure he’ll ever kiss her enough). This kiss is different. He wonders if she’s thanking him, silently, for the morning, or if even she doesn’t know the reason behind the way it feels like it does. When her lips still and she dips her chin to rest her forehead on the bridge of his nose, he traces her invisible side seams and asks,

“You okay?”

“The water’s ready,” she says, and he gets his answer.

Pressed as close as he can get against the taps - there’s minimal room for two people - he lets the droplets rain down over him whilst making sure Betty’s drenched by the water too. He pushes her hair away from her face and her eyes close, hands coming to rest at his hips so she can anchor herself under the dizzying heat.

There are several bottles of shampoo and shower gel on the metal rack screwed to the tiles and he selects a purple-coloured one, squeezing a glug onto his palm before rubbing it over her shoulders. It forms suds that smell like lavender and he wonders if he hears her low hum of approval as his fingertips sink into her muscles, or whether it’s a figment of his imagination.
Betty’s hands remain on his hips and when he squeezes more of the shower gel onto his palm in order to wash her breasts and stomach, she stretches up onto her tiptoes so she can kiss his neck. She butterflies her lips across his skin and then, when she reaches the other side, she sucks on his pulse point and moves one of her hands to his cock. She strokes him slowly and his hands forget all about the shower gel as he braces himself against the shower wall. Her movements are completely unhurried and the pace she sets is torturous: too slow and yet too much all at once.

She sinks to her knees and his world whites out.

They towel off together afterward and there’s a moment where Jughead just watches her; wonders what exactly he’s supposed to do or say now.

“Can I make you breakfast?” she asks - somewhat unexpectedly - despite the fact it’s nearly midday. She steps closer and lowers her voice even though it’s only them in the apartment. “I want to make you breakfast, Juggie.”

He hopes it’s not a thank you. But he’s hungry, now that he thinks about it, and there is no greater food he can think of eating than whatever she’s got in mind.

“That sounds good.”

Betty smiles and he kisses her.

They eat on the couch and she giggles when he asks, “You going to eat that?” about her leftover pancake.

“Go ahead,” she says, offering the plate out to him. Before he swipes the semi-circle which isn’t nearly soaked in enough syrup, he steals a kiss and she smiles against his mouth.

Her eyes are lighter when he pulls away and he hopes that her heart is too.

Jughead is still sitting on her couch at four in the afternoon. Maybe sitting is the wrong word - he is, after all, stretched out across the full length of the cushions with a slumbering Betty snuggled against his chest. Friends is playing in the background - he’s not really a fan but she’d suggested it and he’s not about to turn it off - and every so often, he feels his own eyes close too.

She’s been dozing for around an hour when a sudden noise on screen rouses her and he gets to play out the fantasy he’d imagined only a week or so ago. He dusts a kiss to her crown and murmurs, “It’s okay baby; go back to sleep.” Betty burrows further into his chest and he smiles into her hair.

She does wake properly half an episode later, stretching against him and blinking the sleep from her eyes.

“Hey sleepyhead.”

“You’re a comfortable pillow,” she mumbles.

“Glad to be of service.”
Tilting her chin, she closes her eyes and Jughead knows she wants him to kiss her. There’s a little thrill that runs through him at the realisation that he knows that; knows one of her tells.

“You kiss good, Betty Cooper,” he grins, and she uses his own words in response.

“Glad to be of service.”

There’s a moment of quiet and he expects they both know this is that point where he’s supposed to go back to his place. He’s under no illusion that he needs to - after their shower he hadn’t put his boxers back on and there’s no way he can go straight to the office from her place in the morning. Still, it doesn’t make the inevitable see you tomorrow any easier.

“I should…” he starts, and she nods.

“Yeah.”

Betty rises from the couch first, hair a little mussed from her nap - but otherwise beautiful as ever. “Thank you,” she adds as she walks him to the door. “For… for everything.”

“I don’t want to leave,” he says. I don’t want to leave you, he thinks.

Her smile is tight as she replies, “Me neither.”

“Call me if you need anything.”

She nods and he cups her chin as he kisses her goodbye.

A few weeks later, when he’s thinking only of how tired he is and how comfortable Betty’s mattress will be when they fall against it after work, Jughead slips up.

He’s forgotten to fill a fifteen-hundred word slot and only remembers two hours before print deadline. His girl somehow manages to write a rather excellent piece on fairtrade baking ingredients and when she hands it to him in the breakroom where he’s pouring himself yet more coffee, mocked up and in perfect ready-to-print condition, he kisses her.

It is, incidentally, in front of Veronica and Kevin.

He’s not sure what expression he’s wearing when he realises what he’s done, but Kevin laughs and Veronica simply rolls her eyes.

“Don’t act like we had no idea. Everyone knows you’re having sex.”

He feels his cheeks flood with heat and immediately feels terrible for Betty. And then Veronica speaks. “Please, it’s bigger than that: everyone knows that you love her.”

His immediate reaction isn’t the panic he might’ve assumed. Betty doesn’t look like she’s about to dig her nails into her palms and he allows the words to turn in his head.

Does he? He wonders. Does he love her? Is he in love with her?
Probably.

She bites her lip and grazes her fingers over his hand and his heart thuds in his chest.

Definitely.
Sometimes, you do things and you do them not because you're thinking but because you're feeling. Because you're feeling too much. And you can’t always control the things you do when you’re feeling too much.
— Benjamin Alire Sáenz

Betty wonders if the removals truck is a waste of time. It has, of course, been sent by Veronica, and they’re all pretty powerless to stop any of her decisions at the best of times, let alone moving day.

Archie is standing in their living room (although, Betty wonders if it’s stopped being theirs now, or if that title doesn’t cease until the very last of his belongings have left in one of the two suitcases waiting by the door)

She looks around at their surroundings - still theirs, she decides. It’s a strange sort of day: everything is changing and yet nothing is different. The scent of coffee hangs in the air, plus the sweet syrup from breakfast which she’s figures she’s going to have to make again when Jughead gets here - pancakes are his favourite and she’s not about to deny him today.

There are two glasses draining on the sink too; chicken thawing in the refrigerator; a protein bar in the cupboard. Everything is as it’s always been since they’ve lived here together, except the next time Archie’s going to be standing in the living room, it’ll be as a guest.

Betty has spent the week helping pack away his clothes into the two suitcases, with only the few remaining items that hadn’t fit rolled neatly into the sports holdall in his hand. She hadn’t realised until he’d said, “Done,” with a grin on his face, that Archie Andrews is such a presence in their apartment that he’s never needed things. She doesn’t recall too much of the day they moved to this place (it had, after all, been at the worst time of her life) but now, if she thinks really hard, she does remember the two cases by his feet and the coffee machine tucked under his arm. That was all he’d brought.

He’s leaving that one item here for her: he doesn’t need it at Veronica’s with the built-in dispenser sitting above the granite counter in her kitchen, and it makes her smile - that everytime she’ll switch on the machine, she’ll think of her best friend and his innate goodness.

The fact she’ll be switching it on so that her boyfriend can have his morning cup of coffee makes her smile too.

“I think that’s everything,” Archie says, looking around as though they might’ve forgotten something. His eyes are soft when he adds, “C’m here.”

His arms wrap around her in a bear hug that makes her feel warm and safe and Betty smiles into his shoulder.

“I’m going to miss you Arch,” she tells him.

“I’m going to miss you too.” He plants a kiss on the top of her head and she squeezes him just that
little bit tighter.

“Thank you,” she whispers, only just loud enough that he’ll hear. Archie doesn’t reply with words but his fingers squeeze her sides before they both step back.

“I’d say call me to let me know Veronica’s answer but I’m pretty certain she’ll beat you to it.”

“Definitely,” he grins, his eyes lighting up. “You really think it’s the right ring?”

“Are you kidding?” Betty asks. “She’s going to love it.”

“What if she says no?”

They’ve been through this scenario a thousand times but still, she shakes her head with a smile. “She’s not going to say no.”

“Maybe she’ll go off me when she realises I’m messy.”

She forgets sometimes, that Archie doesn’t ever see Veronica’s desk and the jumble of stationery supplies it plays home to. “Just remember to hang up the towels,” she teases.

The buzzer sounds and they both sigh gently in unison. “Guess I should get going.”

“I’ll come down with you,” she replies.

Archie smiles and hands her the holdall. “I’ll take the cases.”

The truck is waiting by the side of the road when they reach the front door of their building. He lifts the two cases into the open space and then takes the bag from her hands. The driver looks at them quizzically and Archie scratches at the back of his neck with a wry smile.

“That’s everything.”

“You could’ve taken these on the subway,” the driver comments, and Archie shrugs. “You ready?”

“One minute,” he replies, and the driver shuts the back of the truck before climbing into the front of the vehicle.

“Arch...”

“ - I know you have Jughead,” he starts, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “But you know you can always call if you... whatever the time.”

Tears prick in Betty’s eyes but she smiles through them and nods. “One last hug?” she sniffs, and that big grin of his stretches right across his face as he sets down the holdall and then sweeps her up into his arms so that her feet leave the floor. She’s laughing when he sets her back down again.

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

He doesn’t make any real effort to move and she pushes at his chest playfully. “Go, Archie.”

He obeys and she waits on the sidewalk as he climbs into the front passenger seat. She supposes there’s some sadness about this - their life together in Brooklyn - coming to an end, but she also knows they’re both getting something better. Something they both need.
The truck pulls away and Betty watches it all of the way down the road until the sun’s haze begins to claim its presence. It’s warm for late spring, and the thin cotton material of the sundress she’s wearing brushes against her legs in the light breeze, the sky overhead stretching out above the city. It’s relatively early and therefore still rather quiet for Red Hook, so when Jughead rounds the corner clutching a brown bag, he’s easy to spot.

(He’s easy to spot, she finds, even when it is crowded)

“You okay?” he asks, stopping in front of her and trailing his fingers from her shoulder to her wrist where he rubs gentle circles over her pulse point. She kisses him then - right there on the sidewalk without a care for who’s watching. His eyes are shining when she pulls away.

“Better than that,” she tells him.

“I brought breakfast. Thought you might be hungry.”

She doesn’t have the heart to tell him that she’s already eaten, so she kisses him again, smiling against his lips when he murmurs, “But this is better than a danish.”

“You’re sweet, Jug,” she says.

“You want to eat upstairs? Or we can stay here,” he adds, “If you’d like.”

She thinks about Archie driving across to Manhattan, and her boyfriend, who’s very obviously been watching for the truck in order to show up right as it pulled away, clutching pastries he’s made a special effort to buy her. She feels the warmth of the sun on her skin and the genuine lightness in her chest and the smile that’s a natural reflex when Jughead’s there (and he’s always, always there)

“Can we stay out here?” she asks, toying with the fingers of his left hand. “Just for a little while.”

He laces their fingers together, tugging her gently towards him so they can sit on the steps in front of her (their - now, Betty supposes) building. “We can stay as long as you want,” he tells her.

She snuggles into his side despite the fact that it’s not even remotely cold, and he turns his face so that he can rest his lips against her forehead.

“I love you,” she says.

Jughead kisses her skin and pulls her closer. “I love you too.”

His things appear in their apartment not overnight, but slowly: books on the set of shelves in the living room; shoes by the door; clothes steadily filling up the drawers she’s cleared out for him. There are, of course, a set in Archie’s old room but it hadn’t seemed right to expect him not to share the set in their room.

Jughead sleeps in the apartment every night - always pressed close behind her if she’s facing the window, or lying on his side if she’s having the kind of day where she needs to press her face into his neck in order to breathe a little easier. He does, however, go back to his place each day to write. After walking her to the subway and kissing her goodbye for the day, he takes the G to Nassau Avenue in order to work on the online publication he now owns.
Her afternoon trip to the breakroom for coffee isn’t the same now that he’s not there to slide his fingers over her hand, but *The Point* is doing incredibly well and knowing he’s happy - finally truly happy - about what he’s writing makes it better.

Besides, she gets to go home to him anyway; gets to eat dinner on the couch and then snuggle up with him afterward, book in her hands, laptop balanced on his knee; gets to watch him climb into bed beside her with that soft Jughead grin and those gentle hands of his reaching out for her.

The trade-off seems infinitely worth it.

A month after Archie has been living with Veronica (the same period of time that the couple have been engaged; the same period of time that Betty has spent listening to Veronica gush about wedding plans and bachelorette parties every lunch break) Jughead stops going back to his apartment. There’s another month left on the lease, but as they’re brushing their teeth side-by-side in the tiny bathroom, he turns to her and says,

“I don’t want to keep going back to Greenpoint.”

She stops brushing, spits out the foam and rinses her toothbrush under the running water. Once she’s cleaned her mouth with water too, she looks back up at him to find an expression she isn’t used to seeing written into his face.

She is though, used to seeing that expression in the mirror. He’s uncertain. Betty exhales and strokes his cheek with her palm. Jughead turns his face into her touch. “Then don’t.”

“This is home now,” he tells her when they’ve climbed into bed and she’s shuffled close enough that her chest is pressed against his. “Greenpoint’s just somewhere I write and I’d rather do it here. Be here when you come through that door.”

Sometimes, she wonders how much of him her heart can take. She kisses him softly, winding her right leg over his thigh and rolling her hips just enough that she can feel what her body’s doing to his. He rolls them both so she’s lying on her back and then his hands move to the camisole she’s wearing and dip under the cotton, inching their way up her skin until they find her nipples, already hard and awaiting his touch.

He swipes gently with each of his thumbs and her arms stretch upwards of their own accord so he can remove the cami. Her lilac and white pajama shorts go next, and then he’s guiding her legs over his shoulders so he can settle more comfortably against the mattress.

Jughead links her fingers with his as he nudges her clit with his nose before drawing a circle around it with his tongue. She moans the first syllable of his name in a breathless high-pitched whine, feels him smirk against her thigh, and forgets to take in oxygen when he presses a kiss to the place she wants him the most.

Neither of them are thinking about a condom when he sinks into her a few minutes later; neither of them are thinking about it when, instead of heading to the bathroom before settling to sleep, he pulls her flush against his chest and whispers,

“Let’s get out of the city tomorrow. I want to take you somewhere.”

They’re not thinking about it either, when they take a break from their hike through the trails of Bear Mountain to eat the picnic she’s made.
Three weeks later, Betty does think about it.

She’s lying on the couch, eyes closed as the tv plays a documentary she’d suggested they watch, and Jughead is stroking his fingertips lightly across her forehead. She’s been suffering from a headache for close to a week; has been tired and lethargic for a little longer than that. It’s the thought that she needs to get her period that makes her realise she’s late.

A little over two weeks late, to be more precise.

She must stiffen because Jughead pauses his ministrations, her head still resting in his lap, and says, “You okay?”

She swallows the sudden lump in her throat and chokes out, “I’m fine.”

“Want me to turn this off?”

“No, it’s okay.” She shifts so that she’s lying on her side, facing the tv (facing away from him) but rather than move his hand away, he pulls his fingers gently through her hair, combing out the tangles until they can run freely. Mentally trying to work out the likelihood of her actually being pregnant results in a nauseous feeling - apt, she supposes - and she ends up excusing herself to the bathroom, not to vomit, but to sit on the cool tiles and panic silently.

She can’t be pregnant, she thinks. Hopes. Not from the one time they’ve had unprotected sex. Perhaps she’s simply anxious and hasn’t realised until now (it has an effect on her cycle sometimes) or perhaps it’s the fact that Archie’s moved out and Jughead’s moved in and for some reason, her body’s decided to make some changes too.

“Betts?” she hears a soft knock on the door. It’s unclear how long she’s been sitting there. “You okay in there?”

Her head thuds and her eyes feel heavy and her breasts choose that moment to ache. No, she thinks. “Yes,” she says. “I’m fine. Just...felt a little sick.”

He edges the door open and when he asks, “Can I get you anything?” Betty uses the remainder of her energy to stop her nails from heading towards her palms. It’s the first time she’s felt the urge in months and it makes tears burn behind her eyelids. She shakes her head, worried that if she opens her mouth to speak, a sob might escape instead.

Jughead senses something though, she can tell. Instead of heading back to the couch, he pushes open the door wide enough that he can fit through, then takes a seat on the floor beside her.

“Baby, your hands are shaking.”

Betty opens her eyes to look down and sees that he’s right - her hands are shaking and her fingers are ramrod straight. He moves so that he’s opposite her - not easy in the tiny space they’re tucked into - and carefully holds her hands in his, bringing them together so he can rub gently at her knuckles and then her joints. They relax in his hold and she feels her shoulders slump too despite the very obvious fact Jughead is trying not to ask her what it is.

He’s always so careful not to push or pry; careful to let her tell him things in her own time and she loves him for it so much. The lump in her throat grows bigger still and her eyes burn harder and the
thumping in her head pounds faster.

“I think I’m going to…” she trails off, struggling to finish.

Jughead exhales. “Bed?”

Betty nods and smotherfs the sob at the back of her throat when he kisses her forehead before helping her up, then again when she’s standing in front of him. “You go get ready. I’ll be in in a minute.”

“You don’t have to -” she begins, but once again she feels his hands on her - this time circling the pulsepoint at her wrists.

“I know.”

She sighs tiredly. “I love you Jug.”

“I know,” he says. “I love you too.”

Three days later, the weekend arrives. Betty’s period does not.

“Good morning,” Jughead murmurs against her skin, his fingers stroking up her thighs. She can feel his erection pressing into her ass and she shuffles forward slightly, the cooler edge of the pillow pleasant against her cheek.

The mattress doesn’t move again and so she knows he’s stayed where he is, but his fingers creep higher until they’re moving under the hem of her t-shirt (or, more accurately, his t-shirt)

“What time is it?” she asks, allowing herself to enjoy the delicate way he’s trailing up and down her skin. It always feels good when he touches her, but Betty’s been struggling to explain away the fact that she hasn’t wanted him to touch her in the place he most wants to (incidentally, the place she usually most wants him to) The louder she shouts in her head that it’s simply because she’s been so tired and run-down though, the less rational it feels.

There’s a brief pause and the mattress moves - Jughead turning back to look at the alarm clock on the nightstand, she assumes - and then she feels him settle back against her, nuzzling his face into her neck.

His words are muffled by her skin. “Ten past eight.”

Still early, early enough at least for what she knows he wants to do, and so when his fingers walk back up beneath the t-shirt she’s wearing, Betty tries to relax. It’s easier said than done though when his fingers inch higher - high enough that he can stroke over her nipple - and even she’s not prepared for the way her body jerks away violently. Jughead snatches his hand back.

“They’re sore,” Betty explains. “My period’s due.”

It’s not a lie: it is due after all.

“Sorry,” he replies, and slips the shoulder of her t-shirt to the side so he can kiss her bare skin. When he butterflies his way up the side of her neck, she feels most of the tension she woke with leave her body and when his fingers rub over the lace front of her underwear, the last remnants are shooed
away too.

Jughead makes her come once with his fingers and then again while he’s inside of her.

He heads to the bathroom to dispose of the used condom and Betty gets up too, pulling on a clean pair of underwear and her jeans shorts before swapping her sleep t-shirt for an old faded blue one that’s comfortable over her breasts. All of the while, she tries to fight the feeling that the condom her boyfriend is wrapping in toilet paper was an exercise in futility, and hopes - more than anything - that she’s wrong.

The ingredients she’d bought for raspberry-bran muffins are waiting in the refrigerator and cupboard respectively, and she sets about placing them on the counter to wait while she gathers the bowls and tin she’ll need.

She’s measuring out the flour when she hears the shower raining down against the tiles in the bathroom. Betty knows she should join Jughead in there: she smells like sex and she should probably pee too, but she knows what’ll happen if she heads in there; knows he’ll sink down onto his knees and hook her right leg over his shoulder; will wash her afterwards - always so gentle with the way he massages the suds into her skin.

She stays in the kitchen instead.

“Smells great Betts,” Jughead says as he leaves the bathroom, sniffing the air appreciatively. “What’re you making?”

“Raspberry-bran muffins,” she tells him. “They’ll be ready in twenty minutes. I think I might take a shower.”

She doesn’t miss his frown, but tries not to flinch at the sudden stab of guilt. “Okay.”

“I’ll be out before they’re ready,” Betty adds.

She crosses the room in order to kiss him, her body folding against his as his arms come around the bottom of her back to bring her closer. “Hitchcock movie day?” he asks. “Just you, me and that couch?”

Betty smiles against his lips and kisses him again. “Sounds perfect.”

She wakes early the following morning with a lurching feeling in her stomach. Jughead has an arm thrown loosely across her side - a reminder of how hot it had been when they’d fallen into bed the previous night - and she blinks in the pale light, trying to register exactly what it is she’s feeling.

Her fingers are curled in towards her palms, she realises, not quite digging into the skin, but not too far off. Maybe it’s that which has woken her.

And then her stomach lurches again and she realises she’s going to vomit.

Betty makes it to the bathroom just in time to empty the contents of her stomach into the toilet bowl. By the time she’s finished and flushed the chain, she feels a little dizzy, light-headed and clammy but significantly better. She rests against the edge of the porcelain for a moment, eyes closed as she takes a few steadying breaths.
The hinges of the door squeak and she lifts her head to see Jughead blinking the sleep from his eyes. She can’t explain it, but suddenly the tears she’s been holding back for the past week spill over as he takes a seat beside her, tugging her into his lap. His hands stroke down her hair and then her arms as he tells her,

“It’s okay.”

Except, she’s almost certain it isn’t.

At his words, the tears spill faster and hotter against his bare chest. He’s warm and safe and when he asks gently, “Can I get you anything?” Betty wishes he was wearing a shirt so she’d have something to cling to.

She shakes her head and feels him hold onto her a little tighter.

“Will you tell me what it is?” Jughead whispers. “So I can help.”

She thinks of Polly, discovering she was pregnant back in her freshman year, and wonders how on earth she told Chuck. Was it a gradual realisation for her? All of the symptoms revealing themselves slowly until she finally figured it out? Did she wake him in the middle of the night and say, “I think I’m pregnant” or did he catch her in a situation not unlike this one?

Either way, Betty wishes with everything she has that she could call her sister.

“I’m so sorry Jug,” she sobs. He frames her face with his palms so he can look at her, and all she wants to do is close her eyes. She doesn’t deserve him looking at her like that.

“For what?” His fingers stroke the streak of tears until she opens her eyes. “For what, Betty?” he repeats.

“I’m late.”

He frowns slightly. “For what?”

“My period is late,” she tries again. “I’m exhausted and I feel sick and my boobs are sore.” She watches him suck in a deep breath right before she whispers, “I think I’m pregnant.”

Jughead doesn’t say anything for a long time. His eyes blink and his chest rises with each breath he takes and his palms are still framing her face. But he’s silent.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sor-”

“.What? No!” Her words seem to remind him how to use his and his expression grows urgent. “Betts, God, no! Don’t be sorry.” He’s breathless all of a sudden. “How do you... How long... When…”

“The night before we went to Bear Mountain,” Betty answers. “We forgot to…”

He nods. “Right.”

It’s quiet again and she wraps her fingers around his wrists.

“Do you…” Jughead starts, a few moments later. “Do you want to take a test?”

She nods fractionally and he resumes circling his thumbs at her temples.
“I’ll run and get one when the pharmacy opens.”

Betty nods again and moves in his lap so she can rest her head back against his shoulder.

“You know it’ll be okay right?” he says. “Whatever the test says - it’s going to be okay.”

She has no idea how he can say that; how he can think that if she is, she’ll be anywhere near what a child needs.

“Your hands, baby,” Jughead reminds her gently, slipping his thumbs beneath her clenched fingers.

The plus sign is a bright, unmistakable red when she turns over the stick. Immediately, she vomits into the toilet bowl and hears Jughead wince, his hand promptly settling over her back to rub backwards and forwards as she heaves a couple more times until she can sit back on her heels for the second time that morning.

The stick is still in her right hand so she knows he can see, but he doesn’t say anything. Just waits for her to go first, ever patient, ever more than she deserves.

“We should’ve been more careful,” Betty states, flushing the chain - again for the second time. She wonders whether any tears are going to come - or even if there are any left - and when they don’t, she reaches for the sink in order to pull herself up, but of course, Jughead is there.

“Can I make you something to eat?” he asks, ignoring her previous comment. Food is the last thing she wants, and weakly, she replies,

“No, thank you. I’ll just get a glass of water.”

“Let me,” he insists. “You should lie down.”

“I’m okay Jug,” Betty replies, although they both know it’s a lie.

She flicks on the coffee machine in the kitchen, grateful that it’s Sunday and she doesn’t have to face work, and pulls a mug out of the cupboard.

“What’re you doing?” Jughead asks quietly, watching from close by as she opens the refrigerator to locate some eggs. It’s nearly eleven and he hasn’t eaten breakfast. It’s his favourite meal.

“Making an omelette,” she answers. “Do you want ham?”

His footsteps across the floor are quiet, but even above the coffee machine’s gurgling, she hears them. Or maybe she senses them, she’s not sure. And then she feels his hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently as he says,

“Betty”

A single tear - part of the batch she’d expected to fall earlier - slips out of her eye. She blinks the rest away. “- Do you think it’s enough?”

“Is what enough?”

“Love.”
“For what?” he questions, his thumb pressing into her muscles as he steps closer.

“A baby.”

“I -”

“- I love you,” she tells him. “But I don’t think….”

“Of course it’s enough,” he says, like it’s simple.

It isn’t simple.

She continues with the omelette and Jughead says nothing more.

“You love so easily Betty,” he tells her, carding through her hair with his fingers. They’re lying in bed way earlier than they normally would for a Sunday evening but given the day’s events, she figures she’s entitled to give into the exhaustion a couple hours prior to when she usually would.

“It’s not that,” she says in reference to the unspoken you’d love the baby too.

“Then…”

“I’ve cut myself Jug,” she chokes. “And starved myself and purposefully drawn blood from my own hands. Until half a year ago, I was anxious all the time about everything and now I’m anxious again and what if...what if it’s like me? Because of me. How can I do that to someone?”

Jughead pulls her closer. “Remember when we went to Hunts Point?” he asks, soothing his thumbs repeatedly over her palms. She can feel her fingers curling over to hold his - their automatic reaction at his touch. “You told me I’m not my past.”

Betty feels him burrow further against her back, his nose nuzzling at the nape of her neck. He lays a kiss on her skin and she thinks of those dark, cold streets covered in snow; the building he’d stared up at with unreadable eyes for what felt like hours; his grip tightening on her hand (and the space between them dissolving as she’d pressed herself closer).

“You’re not your past either.”

It’s easier to believe when she’s cocooned in bed with him like this in the little safe haven of their apartment. Even in the office without him there now, she sees Veronica and Kevin and knows things are better - better than before at least.

But then there are the odd nights when he’s travelling in pursuit of a story and she comes back to an empty apartment and thinks, what if he doesn’t come home?

She knows he’d never choose not to come back to her, but she also knows Polly and Chuck didn’t choose not to come back either. Now she has him, she can’t give him up.

But then there are the odd nights when he’s travelling in pursuit of a story and she comes back to an empty apartment and thinks, what if he doesn’t come home?

She knows he’d never choose not to come back to her, but she also knows Polly and Chuck didn’t choose not to come back either. Now she has him, she can’t give him up.

Betty feels Jughead press his thumbs gently into her palms and realises she’s been projecting her anxiety in the form of squeezing them. She relaxes her grip and he anchors his left leg over both of hers.

“Sorry,” she whispers.
“Don’t be.”

“Jug…”

“We’re gonna have a baby Betts,” he chokes, awed - she thinks, as he brings their joined right hands to rest on her stomach. It’s flat of course - it’ll be a while yet before she shows - but, maybe, she decides she might want to be stretched and pulled by the life inside of her. By the baby that’s his.

The resulting smile on her lips is tiny, but she can feel it. “I know.”

Their son is born on the first day of spring. The streets are littered with blossom and although the breeze is still a little cool, the sun outside of the hospital is warm and bright as the doctor places all seven pounds, three ounces of him on Betty’s chest. His eyes are blue and his hair is dark and he doesn’t cry when she does.

“He’s perfect Betts,” Jughead mouths against her forehead, stroking her damp hair with his right hand. “So perfect.”

The word doesn’t sound or feel like it used to. It has a weightless quality to it: simple and irrevocable.

She brushes her fingertips over the baby’s crown and whispers, “Yeah, he is.”

Chapter End Notes

And we’re done! Thank you to each and every one of you who commented, left kudos or reblogged/recommended this story on Tumblr (special thank you to those of you who did all three ;p)

I hadn’t anticipated that Betty’s struggles would resonate with so many of you, but I hope you feel they were portrayed accurately. The nature of this story is why we haven’t ended on the world’s fluffiest chapter (far from it). I wanted to be true to the way I thought she would handle an unexpected pregnancy.

That being said, I have a couple ideas for a coda to this. I’m making no promises though.

A final comment would be HUGELY appreciated and if you’re interested, my new multi-chapter ‘Order Up’ will be out in a couple days.

Follow me on Tumblr at @itsindiansummer13

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!