Bad Omen

by sweetpca

Summary

Calliope Hobbs believes she has enough distance from the darkness of her past, but when she moves to Riverdale to live with her cousins, her path to everything she worked for is quickly challenged by Southside High's resident alpha male Serpent. Sweet Pea, lean, cut, and practically dripping with danger, is exactly what Calliope wants — and needs — to avoid.
I spent a better half of the last year wondering what the world gained from kicking people when they were already down. I never saw the compromise in giving into the crap hand people had been dealt, and just always assumed that you were in control of your own destiny. That every decision you made, every choice, had a consequence and each consequence would mould who you were supposed to be.

Would you learn from it? Would you run?

My fingers gripped the strap of my bag tightly, glancing down at the crumpled paper in my right hand to read the address one more time, just to be sure.

Fourteen Moorregate Crescent.

“This is it,” I sighed, waving to the taxi driver behind me, pressing my lips into a tight line as he glanced at the house, back to me and then shook his head. My eyebrows pulled together slightly at his sudden departure, pulling my eyes back to where the washed out oak door swung open to reveal the large figure of what I assumed was the eldest of my cousins.

Dean waved his arm in the air excitedly, his smile wide and inviting; I shoved the folded piece of paper back into my pocket and walked up the driveway with a weak smile. The southside of Riverdale was almost exactly what I had imagined it would be — dreary, cold, and grimey. Thankfully, there was no noticeable pungent smell, and there was nothing rancid or filthy about the house that I could see, although that wouldn’t stop me from believing that I needed to invest in several bottles of Purell to spare my immune system. This house had been maintained by three boys for the last seven years, so my expectations of the general cleanliness to be subpar. Overall, something about this place seemed colder, darker.

I was running from my decisions, by the way.

Two years ago, I had made the sensible decision to stick it out in youth outreach programs; instead of trying to fit into a foster home like my student support worker had suggested, I decided that I was perfectly content slumming it with the rest of the other fucked up orphans. I hadn’t be there quite as long as the others had been. When I was two, mother had died from ovarian cancer, which had ignited the beginning of my fathers fall into depression. His demon was alcohol, and while he was never abusive, it was always a priority. The same way a smoker relied on cigarettes to make it through the day without completely snapping, my father had needed whiskey.

Honestly, it all seemed fine and well up until I was almost fifteen — that’s when I started to notice how quickly he was deteriorating. One night, I had come home from from a friend’s place late, and had found my father knocked out cold on the floor of the living room. At first glance, I hadn’t thought anything of it. While strange to some, it didn’t appear to be out of the norm for him. It was a Friday night, the game was on, and we typically preferred to go our separate ways to avoid the embarrassment of his daughter having to remind him to go to his bed. It wasn’t until I noticed the stained carpet on my way up the stairs that I realized he hadn’t just passed out.

It all happened quickly after that. His health continuously declined, even after the doctors had told him that if he continued to drink he was going to end up killing his liver. Up until that year I had never considered my father a selfish person. Emotionally destructive, yes, but not selfish. He had always ensured there was food in the house, that the bills were paid, that I had everything I needed. He had settled into living life as a functioning alcoholic with zero issues, and maybe I was naive or ignorant for turning a blind eye, but I never saw reason to try to keep him away from it. As long as I was looked after, what did it matter?

He continued to drink in spite of his life being at risk, as though he were racing towards the finish line. Like he couldn’t wait for it to all end, because he was too much of a coward to face a life alone without his wife. He couldn’t stand to look me in the face everyday knowing he had done nothing with the last fourteen years of his life, that he had left her down.
It was a week before my fifteenth birthday when his liver started to fail. He signed a DNR, and watched a support worker from social services come by the room to take me away. Her name was Yvette. I didn't mind her, and she didn't seem too pushy. She bought me milkshakes to keep me full and let me sleep in the back when I moved from Pelham.

That was the last time I ever saw him. I knew that he was dead, and I knew that his life did not last much longer after I had been removed from the room. The machines would have been turned off, he would have been able to sustain himself for two, maybe three days before a transplant would have become necessary, and by then his odds of surviving would be very small. I had come to terms with my father’s death sooner than I had expected, but it never bothered me. After that, I jumped from group home to group home, never quite settling into one place for too long because pleasantries never really appeared to be my thing. When my hobbies began to cause unwanted troubles in foster family homes, I moved into a cot at Safe Haven in downtown Greendale.

David Hobbs was my father’s twin brother, and he lived on the Southside of their hometown Riverdale with his three sons. Once Dean had become of age, and the boys had shown they were capable of taking care of themselves, David skipped town. No one was quite sure where he had gone, but my dad had always speculated that he had moved out west. After his wife had left him, it didn't seem as though he had any interest in sticking around for the boys.

Something awfully concerning about Hobbs men and abandonment tendencies.

There appeared to be no return of my uncle any time soon. Dean, being the eldest of the four of us and feeling the most responsible, had called me a little over a month ago and offered up his father’s empty room. Family took care of family, despite the bad family ties. The unresolved dispute between our dads never seemed fair to the rest of us. We hated how we had to sacrifice being one whole unit to keep the two of them from throwing temper tantrums. I hadn’t imagined myself leaving the comfort of Greendale after I had been ripped from my home in Pelham, yet here I was. Standing on the porch of a home I had never once in my life stepped foot into.

I had met the boys a handful of times in the last fifteen years. Mainly during the summers in our childhood years, when they came into town to visit for a week or two. I got along fine with them for the most part, there never seemed to be any issues. Boy would be boys, so of course there was always typical family discourse, but we functioned together well. As far as I was concerned, this move was a trial and error effort; I agreed to stay with them under the condition I wouldn’t be forced to remain here if I didn’t want to.

“Welcome to hell, Cal.” Dean joked as I stepped onto the welcome mat, holding the door open a little wider so that I could fit through with my bags. His voice was a lot deeper that what I remembered on the phone when he had called. Being the oldest of three boys, he had always assumed the alpha role. He made sure his brothers stayed in line, that they didn’t cause too many fights or get into too much trouble. Although that didn't stop Dean from stepping in when necessary. He had definitely changed. He wasn’t just a pretty boy any more, there was nothing naive left in the man that stood in front of me.

I made sure to wipe my muddied shoes on the mat, taking my time looking around the dimly lit living room. The couches were mix-matched in colour and shape, facing each other with a small rectangular table set between them offering next to no comfortable walking space. A television sat in the corner, facing the door where we stood. Down the hall past the stairs, I could see the light shining from the sun room and kitchen.

Dean took my duffle from my hand, then gestured towards the stairs with a crane of his neck, “The master bedroom is upstairs,” he grunted, lifting the bag over his shoulder as he swooped his arm open to usher me forward.

I gnawed absently on my bottom lip, taking the stairs one at a time as my eyes examined every photo lining the wall of the staircase. School photos mixed with family portraits, none of which included my dad, or me. I noticed that most of the doors on the upper level were secured shut, apart from the bathroom and the unoccupied bedroom that sat in the left corner at the top of the U shaped platform. The room was fairly large considering the outside size of the house; it was longer than it was wide, resembling more of a rectangle than a square. There was a walk-in closet opposite to the window side the bed that was cornered against the wall. I set my bag down on the desk chair, my eyes scanning over the freshly polished furniture. A dresser, a work desk and the unusually large bed, considering only one person had slept in it in the
last ten years.

“Hope you like the purple,” Dean mused as he placed my bag on the bed, looking around at the accenting colour of the drapes and bedding. “Danny wanted to go with black, but Donny figured you might like the colour. I think I might have to agree with the kid.”

I smiled, “It’s great, thank you.”

We stood in silence for a few moments, our eyes wandering over the room as though either of us really cared about the details. They had made an obvious effort to make the room feminine: aside from the purple duvet and throw pillows, there were paper lanterns that hung from the ceiling, and a cork board that hung just behind the desk. Photos of my the boys and I from our childhood had already been tacked up in the corners, along with an old photograph of our fathers when they were our age. It was certainly a rarity, seeing them with their arms over each others shoulders and smiles on their faces. Despite the empty closet and drawers, the room appeared comfy and lived in. I found comfort in that.

“Dinner is at six,” he said quickly, clapping his hands together to break the silence, “We’ll go to Pop’s, grab some burgers.”

“Pop’s?” I asked, pulling my eyes from the crack in the baseboards to meet his green hues.

Dean’s shoulder dropped in defeat, remembering that this was my first time in Riverdale, “Just be ready.” he sighed, patting my shoulder twice as he passed me on the way out. The shut the door behind him, and I waited until his footsteps disappeared down the stairs before I blew out a loud exhale, ripping the zipper on my bag open to dump the contents onto the bed and began to unpack my life again.

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I slipped into the inside of the booth, Donovan squishing in next to me; much like Dean, Danny and Don had grown into themselves in the last few years. Danny was in his last year of high school, while Don and I were still juniors. They were both little heartbreakers, taking after their fathers prominent features and light eyes. My first day at Southside High would certainly be interesting, to say the least — the boys had left very little up to the imagination on the car ride over. I could feel my anxiety growing with each passing comment they made, slight traces of terror and confusion swirling in my stomach unbeknownst to them.

“Ghoulies?” I asked as I mixed my milkshake with my straw. “What the hell is a Ghoulie?”

“Rivals to the Serpents.” Don explained, stretching his long legs out into the aisle. His boots were untied and messy, though I had realized all of the boys dressed in that same manner. Not to say they dressed like pigs, just that they happened to match the general aesthetic of the Southside community. Dull and boring. “We’re slightly infamous for our bounty of criminal activity on the south side of town.” he half-joked as he rolled the sleeves on his plaid shirt up to his elbows.

“Interesting.” I mulled quietly, sucking the sweetness into my mouth. Pop's Chocklit Shoppe had a charm to it that I couldn’t quite put my finger on. It was dimly lit and quaint; families gathered in the 1970’s chic booths and sipped on flavour variant milkshakes, sodas and curly fries. I looked around the restaurant, my eyes scanning the faces of what appeared to be the residents polar opposite of the Southside. They were high-collared, perfectly curled, prim and proper teens gossiping about small town drama. It was at this time I wasn’t certain which side I sympathized with more: the Northside or Southside.

“They’re definitely not the type of people you wanna get caught up with,” Danny added, leaning forward on his elbows to leer at me. “They’re the main source of the JJ at Southside, into street-racing and typical gang-related violence — that sort of thing.”

“And the Serpents ... they're worse, how?”
The boys shared a look, Dean and Don both grimacing slightly as Danny began to explain: “The Ghoulies are a little more fluid with their members than the Serpents. They all come from the same circumstances, so I like to think of the them like a pack of wolves. They’re more like a family, and they take care of their own. You fuck with one, you’re pretty much asking for a death sentence.”

I lifted a brow, “That intense?”

Dean leaned forward, dropping his voice as he joined, “They’re in it for life, Cal. This isn’t something people come and go from as they please/ They’re willing to die for each other.”

“The Ghoulies care very little about their people — if one goes astray, they hardly bat an eye.”

Danny snorted, “That’s because Malachai has them hopped up on intravenous drugs. They can hardly function.”

“Just be careful,” Dean interrupted, leaning back in the booth as his eyes focused somewhere behind me. “They’re not our people, kid. Snakes aren’t good company.”

I shifted in my seat, following his gaze to where a small group of loud individuals had entered the restaurant. They appeared to look vaguely similar, and shared similar aesthetics; dark hair, leather jackets and vests, heavy boots. The words stitched onto the backs of their outerwear stuck out like a sore thumbs in the midst of the crowd: SOUTH SIDE SERPENTS, accompanied by a double-headed snake curved strategically into an ‘S’.

*How original*, I thought sneeringly.

My eyes settled onto the young girls — her hair was faintly tinted with a pink dye, her skin three shades darker than the males around her. They all sported the same scowl and hard eyes, the same superiority complex evident as they ignored their waitress when she neared the table. You didn’t have to be from town to know that this particular group of teens had trouble written all over them. My eyes shifted over to the boy beside her, his eyes were already watching me closely with the corner of his mouth pulled upwards around the toothpick in between his lips. His raven hair fell into his eyes with a slight curl, which already appeared dark. His attention was pulled away from me momentarily; he turned his head to the right, exposing an identical double-headed snake inked into the flesh on his neck.

*Very intense and legit.*

I turned around in my seat as the waitress, now shaken and obviously annoyed, set the baskets overflowing with food down on the table. I looked across from me to where Danny was stuck watching the group a few booths down from us, jaw working under the skin. “Quit it,” Dean warned, biting into his burger.

“How do you know them?” I asked curiously, taking a small bite out of one of the fries.

“Not personally, but one of ’em is a senior.” Danny explained, wedging a fry into his mouth angrily, “The rest are Don’s year.”

I pursed my lips together, pulling my blonde hair back into a sloppy bun as I shifted my legs underneath me, “You got some kind of beef with him?”

“Doesn’t matter, eat your food.” Dean instructed, throwing a fry into my basket with a disapproving look. I lifted it to my mouth, peaking over my shoulder to where the group sat once more. They watched the other customers, making what I could only assume to be elusive comments about others in the diner.

*Unbelievable.*

I kept my head down and eyes on the floor as I walked through the front doors and stood in line behind other students to
be patted down and have their bags searched. It wasn't the first school I had gone to with a metal detector, but it also wasn't Greendale. Zero familiar faces meant zero odds of my social life ever kick-starting. Not that it would be much of an issue, really. I didn't exactly think of myself as a people person.

The further I walked down the hall, the more I started to realize why the boys wore such dark, beat-up clothing. I, unfortunately, stuck out in the midst of navy blue, black and forest green. While I wasn't Legally Blonde-ing a courtroom with a bright pink suit, I was the obviously the outcast in the center of what Dean had oh-so-perfectly labelled, hell. I hugged my textbooks to my chest and pressed my chin down, making a necessary means to avoid any and all forms of eye contact.

In between classes over the first few couple of days, I noted that not many students were engaged in the class lectures at all. Most members of either gang cluttered in groups and talked among themselves — the very few of us that weren’t affiliated with either group tried to pay attention to the teacher’s futile efforts of providing the bare minimal educational structure of the course. Of course, it was always hard to hear over those that had the least amount of interest in the curriculum.

At the end of each period, I gathered my belongings as quickly and quietly as I could manage to avoid pulling any unwanted attention to myself. Don met me outside of my English class each day, and his friends met us at their table in the back corner of the cafeteria, where we sat out of the eyes and ears of the rest of the school population. I folded my arms over my chest, holding my breath as we passed by the chained fence on the far side of the cafeteria. The Serpents looked up from their seats, watching our movements closely as we passed, as though they were surveying us and memorizing our body language for future reference.

My eyes locked with the boy from Pop's; I still hadn’t been able to figure out his name, but it had become glaringly apparent that he was the ring leader for that particular group of hooligans. I had already made mental note to avoid speaking with any of them at all costs for the sake of sticking to my plan — the less eye contact I happened the make, the better. Except him. Every time I chanced to look in their direction — in his direction — he'd already be looking at me. Watching my every move. Analyzing me. So I opted to keep my head down.

With that in mind, I had also noticed that the floors of the hallways were absolutely disgusting and definitely needed more maintenance and TLC than they were receiving.

I pulled a seat out from the table, sitting across from Danny and Don's friend, Josh. “You’re almost at the end of your first week, Cal. Do you hate us yet?” he asked teasingly, wiggling his fingers towards the bag of chips I pulled from my bag.

I slapped his hand, “Don’t kid yourself, Josh,” I grumbled, taking a bite of one of the Doritos, “This place is a glorified dive bar — complete with the strippers.”

Don snickered at my words, moving the hat on his head backwards while he straddled the seat next to me and leaned forward with his arms folded, “Yet you still insist on sticking out.” he lamented, pulling at the dark purple cashmere sleeve closest to him.

I grimaced. Admittedly, part of my maintenance in my appearance was fault of my childhood best friend. In the interest of self-preservation, I had decided to make more of an effort here than I had in Greendale. I refused to succumb to black jeans and patterned leggings, deciding that combat boots and plaid shirts simply weren't my style. It wasn’t so much that I dressed better, just differently. “Do I look like a bottom-barrel girl to you? I don’t even look that much different, you’re making a big deal out of nothing.” I argued, cracking open my can of soda.

Danny lifted his brows, “You’re wearing hoops. Diamond hoops.”

“Cubic zirconia,” I corrected, bringing a finger up to touch one of the earrings, “so what?”

“So, you look like a Northsider.” Josh laughed, “Adorable, nonetheless, but still.” My cousin's friend had made several failed attempts to flirt with me; every day he greeted me with a lame joke, and by lunch he was laughing at everything I
could say (which was physically painful to experience). Neither of my cousin’s had offered to let him down lightly on my behalf, and I didn’t have the heart to confront him or call him out, so I had settled on suffering in silence.

Joshua wasn’t unattractive by any means — it was more that I made an effort to not get too emotionally attached to people if I could help it. If this didn’t work out, and I ended up leaving, I didn’t want to have to be the girl that broke any hearts. Truthfully, if I wasn’t prone to solidarity, I might’ve actually been able to see myself having some form of crush on him. He was tall and handsome, with trademark dimples and pretty eyes. He seemed nice and genuine enough, but he had grown up with Don, and that alone posed a lot of implications.

“What’s wrong with the Northsider’s?” I asked, crumpling the empty bag of chips between my palms.

“Technically, nothing,” Danny started, chewing around his apple, “they just blame most of any issues this damn town has on us. Someone died? Southside. All their teens are hooked on drugs? Southside.”

“Serial killer on the loose?” Donovan added bitterly, staring down at the metal tabletop.

“Southside.” The group replied in unison, faces grim and smiles weary.

“It leans towards the unsaid, but implied ‘Serpents’ at the end of it, which means we get the tailgate of their anger. It’s been a living hell since all of these random killings and attacks started.”

I glanced over my shoulder in the direction of the two groups I was certain brought the worst to everyone that happened to live south of the tracks. I looked past the Ghoulies to where the Serpents laughed, shoving shoulders with wide, wicked smiles. Perched alone on one side of his table, the alpha had his head turned over his shoulder, too. His eyes met mine for a heartbeat, tongue darting out to wet his lips before he returned his attention to one of his brothers.

My head jerked with the tight tug on one of my curls; I turned to the perpetrator and massaged the area of my skull that throbbed, “Do not,” I started between clenched teeth, narrowing my eyes at Danny, “touch my hair.” Don held his hands up innocently, snickering alongside Josh and their friends as I sunk down in my seat.
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My first week in Riverdale was far less hectic than I imagined it would have been. I ended up applying at Pop's for a part-time serving job, and was essentially hired on the spot. I started sometime later in the following week; I was thrilled I had been able to secure a job so soon. Pop reminded me of a gentle giant with his cheerful smile and positive outlook on life.

Joshua asked if I wanted to drive up to the Bijou to go to a movie Saturday night — I obliged, but had also invited Danny and Don along to ensure the night was kept PG. I was forced to sit through some retro-horror film, and being that I wasn’t particularly a fan of anything involving guts, guns and glory, I opted out and stood in line to get snacks. Josh offered to make it up to me by treating me to a milkshake at Pop’s afterwards. This is when I realized that the Chocklit Shoppe would be a frequent hangout for most teens in Riverdale, and began to regret my decision of applying altogether. I had to remind myself that the money was necessary, and it wouldn’t hurt to actually make friends at this school. A companion couldn’t hurt.

I spent most of Sunday organizing my room more to my liking; this was the first full bedroom I’d had to myself since in six months. I pinned the photos of my mother and I (some of Sabine, too) along the cork-board, and added some hooks to the walls for my jackets. I hung the extra set of white Christmas lights Dean brought up from the basement along the ropes that held the lanterns, eliminating the need for the main light switch entirely.

By the time I had finished, the room was full of more life and to my liking.

A box that contained some of my belongings had been kept in storage up until recently had arrived earlier that morning. I sat in the center of my bed surrounded by my collections of sketchbooks and drawings. I pulled my hair up into a bun before I flipped aimlessly through the thousands of pages of sketches of faces that had intrigued me over the years. In every place I had visited, I sought to find the face that inspired the muse within me. As I reeled my mind back towards the towering raven haired Serpent, I pulled a pencil from the case next to me without hesitation, flipped open a fresh page. I scrolled through the music playing from my phone until I found something a little more fitting, then hunched over the paper.

Four hours passed before there was a knock on my door that interrupted the gentle strokes of my pencil. I turned down the volume of the music and pulled the notebook into my chest as the door opened, “Wow,” Dean whistled as he surveyed the room, “could’ve sworn you lived here your whole life.”

“I’m good at this.” I lamented, offering him a sad smile.

He mulled through the pages of one of the sketchbooks near the foot of the bed, smiling to himself as he turned the page, “These are good — do you do this a lot?” he asked as he traced his finger over the edges of the silhouette.

I shrugged in response, “I guess.” I hadn’t really thought of it to be a hobby, but more of something I did to pass the time. It was my form of connecting to people, without ever having to really be apart of their lives, or having them interrupt mine. It might have been the reason why I people watched so much, and may have played part in my social anxiety. “It helps take my mind off things.”

“How many are there?” he asked, joining me on the bed as he studied the faces.

“There are five books in this box, and these ones are the most recent ones. I have a couple boxes with some in storage back in Greendale.” Dean nodded in understanding. He closed the book and placed it back on its place on the mattress, his fingers lingering on the leather spine. “Are you heading to bed?” I asked, gesturing to his flannel bottoms with a jut of my chin.

He looked down at his legs and nodded tiredly, “I am, yeah. Don is out with the boys, and I think Danny passed out on the couch an hour ago.”
“You think?”

He shrugged, “I can never tell if he’s sleeping or if he’s dead, I always assumed the former.” he patted my knee awkwardly before he stood from the bed, “Sleep tight, kid.” he called from the door, shutting it behind him. I let out a tired sigh, looking down at the drawing in my hands as my back straightened against the wall behind me.

His jacket sat a little lopsided, though I was sure that was more than fitting. His shoulders were hunched over, hands shoved into the deep pockets of the leather. I was certain the next drawing would feature more facial structure if I was ever able to study him without the unfortunate happenstance of him catching me, but for the time being I was perfectly content capturing his solidarity in his body language.

Monday morning, I trudged into Mr. Birdy’s biology lecture with my bag slung over my shoulder and my body tired. I gathered my featured and made my way to my desk on the far side of the room. Close enough to the front that I could see and hear his lesson, far enough away that I was out of range from the pack of Serpents that gathered on the left-hand side.

“Science,” Mr. Birdy began with an excited as he sanded his hands together once the bell had rung to signal the start of the lecture. “requires us to transform into detectives. We have to really question everything, and get our hands dirty.” Put that way, Birdy almost made science sound interesting, nearly. I had been here all of one week, and I put it far past his abilities to make biology anything but. “Good sleuthing takes practice,” he continued with a devious glimmer in his beady eyes.

I turned my head and watched as the crowd roll their eyes simultaneously; I chuckled to myself, returning my attention to the textbook I pulled out of my bag, aimlessly allowing my pen to glide in the margin.

“Toni,” he called, looking towards the back of the room expectantly, “You know your friend there pretty well, right?”

I looked to where the pink-haired girl shrugged, “Unfortunately.” she teased, nudging her sleeping partner in the side.

“A lot better than you know Filipp up here, I presume? I bet a lot of you know each other fairly well — it was comfortbility that brought you together, right? You hangout with the groups you’re most comfortable around, people you can trust.” Clearly pleased with the response he was pulling from his students, Birdy smiled, “Too bad good detectives don’t look for comfortbility. Pack your things, kids, I’m picking new lab partners.”

My brows knotted in objection, looking nervously around the room.

“What the fuck, it’s October!” Someone from the back of the classroom called, a series of grunts and nods in agreement.

The red-haired man at the front of the room held up his hands up in a shrug, “We can do this again in November, and so on. So,” he clapped his hands, offering another coy smile, “let’s all shut our mouths —”

Reluctantly, students began to collect their belongings and move to their designated seating areas as he called them out. When he finally moved onto my row, he stopped at my desk and peered down at me with a knowing smile, “You’re quite bright for your age.” he mused quietly, looking over his list as he waited for my response.

I nodded, “If that’s what you want to call it, sure. I’m bright.”

“SP! You’ll be paired with Miss …” he looked over his sheet again, brows pulling in the middle as he struggled with the pronunciation. I slumped in defeat and rubbed my forehead, “Calli-ope?” he butchered, looking to me for correction.

“Cal, is fine, thanks.” I grumbled, moving my textbooks off the left side of the two-seated biology desk and dropped my bag between my legs on the floor.

“Cal it is.” he nodded, marking it down on his chart before he continued on to the desk behind me. I pressed my lips
together as my arms rested against the tabletop, hoping to conceal my annoyance as my newly appointed partner slouched into the seat next to me. After several moments of silence, I turned in my seat to introduce myself.

“Hi, I’m Cal —” my smile vanished quickly once I registered exactly who SP was. The vein under his tattooed neck pumped menacingly, tauntingly. His brown eyes sliced to mine, and the corners of his mouth tilted up in a mischievous smile. My heart thundered erratically against my chest, and in that momentary pause, I felt weak and completely at his mercy. As though he were the only individual in the room, as though the axis in the magnetic field shifted and everything was suddenly thrown off balance.

His smile wasn’t friendly at all. It was a smile that screamed trouble with a promise. And once it vanished, I was left feeling cold.

The rest of the period had been dedicated to learning about our new partners; the object of the assignment was to interact with each other and to try to decipher your partner, creating a list of attributes and observations you felt were true to their character, rather than simply telling each other. While this task seemed simple enough, my partner simply wasn’t interested in cooperating at all. Instead of trying to force conversation, I stared at the front of the room blankly and gnawed on my lower lip, contemplating how I was going to complete my assignment to Birdy’s satisfaction.

We were a few minutes short of the bell dismissing us when I heard the sound of his pencil moving across his paper. I peered over to where his notebook sat open, and pulled my eyebrows together in annoyance. Forty minutes of sitting next to me in complete silence didn’t give him the right to make any sort of assumption about me.

Though I had already made plenty about him.

“What are you writing?” I questioned, leaning forward onto the tabletop to try and skim over the cursive loops he had jotted down.

“Demanding.” he mused, scrawling it down lazily before he looked up to meet my bewildered gaze and cracked another sly smile as he slapped his notebook shut. Demanding? What the hell?

I licked my lips slowly, and turned in my seat, holding my pen steady and poised to write, “What does ‘SP’ stand for?” he blinked, leaning back in his chair, watching me closely. “Your name?” I asked again with more conviction, clenching my jaw tightly.

“Sweet Pea.” he mumbled quietly, bracing his hands on his thighs.

“Sweet Pea?” I repeated dubiously, narrowing my eyes at him. “Give me a break —”

“I’m being serious.” he snapped, lifting his shoulders in a shrug. “It’s stands for Sweet Pea. Yours?”

I clenched my jaw, noting his tone, and brought my attention back to my own notebook, “Cal.”

He shook his head, amused with my reluctance, “Full name, please.”

“Why do you want to know?”

Sweet Pea smirked, “It’s your name, isn’t it — also, your unwillingness to share has coloured me curious.”

I licked my lips again, analyzing his face carefully. He seemed genuinely interested, so I exhaled in a huff and straightened in my seat, “Calliope.” I responded. “So tell me, Sweet Pea,” I accented, “what do you do in your free time?” I hoped to sound nonchalant, eyes focused on writing his name across the top of my page in bolded letters instead of the way his voice lulled just enough so I could hear him, but we wouldn’t draw too much attention to ourselves.

I appreciated that.
“I don’t have much free time.” he admitted.

I let my pen halt, trying to hold my composure as I rolled my neck to look at him. “I’m just here to pass, alright, so do me a favour?” I asked gently, eyes flickering over to where Birdy perched his feet up on his desk, deeply invested in whatever he was reading on his phone.

Sweets dropped his dark orbs across the length of my body, pausing a moment too long on my waist. He locked his hands behind his head and leaned back, “Is that an offer, sweetness?”

I pressed my mouth together and felt my face drop into a glare; his eyes briefly glanced over my features before he averted his gaze and continued.

“Free time,” he repeated, rocking back slightly as he thought, “I’m in a gang.” he stated proudly, as though that were the most obvious answer to everything that stood true about him.

I jotted **ENJOYS BOXING** down.

Sweet Pea looked down at what I had neatly printed and chuckled, “You’re not fooling him,” he mused, jutting his chin towards the front of the room where Birdy sat. “I mean, c’mon. Pretty obvious what boxing is.”

“Just because you’re all branded like cattle doesn’t mean I’m going to openly advertise your *malicious* gang-related violence in my homework, okay?” I met his eyes again, tossing my hair over my shoulder with a single brown risen in challenge. I wasn’t entirely sure what had come over me — I typically preferred to keep quiet, and tried to do so now that I was desperately avoiding any form of contact with either of the Southside gangs as a whole. Here I was, stuck sitting next to the Serpent poster boy for what I could only assume would be the remainder of the semester.

I prayed this wasn’t the case.

His lips threatened another smile, eyes leering into my own as he sat upright; I was more aware of eyes watching the back of my head as he hooked his fingers under the seat of my chairs and pulled me closer to him. I hoped he couldn’t sense my fear. “Passing judgement is a weakness, y’know.” he reminded me.

I sat upright and inhaled deeply, stretching my confidence as I retaliated, “Am I wrong?”

He left his mouth ajar for a moment, contemplating whether or not he should really answer that question truthfully. “Not entirely. My turn; do you sleep naked?”

The sound I made was not human. With the air caught in my throat, I looked around the room frantically to see if anyone was still watching.

No one else was really interacting with who they were supposed to be; Serpents were yelling to each other from across the room, filling the empty space with noise.

“You’d be the last to know.” I bit back harshly, placing my foot on the bar between the legs to push myself back to my side of the desk.

"Ever been arrested? Done anything illegal?"

“No.” I lied, looking sideways at him. “And no. Can you ask me normal questions.”

Sweet Pea snorted, “I’m not going to ask what I can guess.”

“You think you know me?”

“Your favourite colour is red — or purple. Hard to tell, but you wear a weird mixture of the two a lot.”
I craned my neck and looked at him in confusion, “What?”

Sweet Pea shrugged, “Last week you wore, what … three different tops that all looked burgundy? Maroon? I’m not really sure, honestly.”

Creep. “How long do you stare at me? Do you pay attention to Birdy at all?”

He lifted a brow, “We share four classes together.” he stated, as though it were the most obvious fact. He then looked offended that I didn’t know that.

“Uh, no we don’t.” I argued matter-o-factly, rearing my thoughts back to all my courses throughout my day. “I didn’t even know we had bio together until fifty minutes ago —”

“You’re not very observant, are you?” he inquired as he peered sideways at me, leaning forward on the desk. When I failed to form an articulate response, he continued, “Apart from biology, we have marketing, history and fitness together.”

“We definitely do not have fitness together.” I replied quickly. I hadn’t seen him once — and I spent a large majority of that period listening to the other girls that did participate fawn over the males as they worked out.

Sweet Pea definitely would have been one of those males, I had not doubt in that.

He shook his head, handing me his timetable he had pulled from the front of his wallet, “Sorry, sweetness.” he teased as my brows pulled together when I realized we did in fact share the same gym period.

“I never see you.” I accused, handing him back his paper.

He shrugged, “I said we had it together, not that I went to it.”

My eyes swept over the hint of bicep that strained under his shirt. “Right.” I swallowed, pulling my eyes away as the bell rang. Sweet Pea shoved his pencil and notebook into his bag, and slung it over his shoulder. I watched him walk away towards the front of the room, “Hey — wait up!” I called in annoyance. I hastily shoved my belongings into my backpack once I realized he had swiped my phone off the table; I sprinted out after him, “Sweet Pea, give it back.” I called out to him loudly, voice hard and demanding.

He stopped, turned back around and walked up to me with a grin, holding my phone upright so I could view the contact he had put into it. “‘0000’ isn’t a good passlock, by the way.”

I dropped my mouth open, ripping the device from his fingertips, “You’re barking up the wrong tree, Sweet Pea, you won’t be hearing from me.” I lied again, looking up at him with hard eyes and taunt lips. I couldn’t be bothered to be angry about him swiping my phone, mainly because I didn’t put it past him to have do it frequently.

Sweet Pea smiled, bumping fists with a fellow Serpent as he began to walk backwards, “Looking forward to it.” he responded with a smirk, winking as he spun on his heels.

“I won’t call!” I called loudly, ignoring the stares of the students around me.

I sat at the kitchen table with my back pressed against the wall, pushing the food around on my plate. Danny had attempted to recreate homemade Shepard’s pie for dinner as Dean would be absent, but the beef and corn had come out with less substance than he intended. Not wanting to mess around with the measurements he swore he had carefully added together, he served it regardless. Donovan and Joshua sat in the living room, the television blasting music as they sat on opposite sides of the sofa, scrolling through their phones with their plates empty on the coffee table. I remained in the kitchen this weeks reading open in my lap.
“Not hungry?” Danny asked, back turned to me as he scrubbed at the pot in his hand.

My automatic instinct was to please him by shoveling a forkful into my mouth, and then I remembered that Dean had been completely understanding in my picky eating habits, and had even gone as far as to reassure me that it wouldn’t cause any issues. I pushed the plate away in response, leaning forward on my elbows, “Not really. A plus for effort, though.” I offered gently, meeting his eyes.

“I say next time we just order in and call it good, deal?”

I snickered at his words, “Deal.”

We sat in silence for a few moments as I scrolled through my phone; I had a habit of keeping up with classmates from the past I had grown particularly fond of. While I tried to restrict my interaction and kept friendships to a bare minimum, I wasn’t capable of keeping every being on this planet out of my life. My childhood friend Sabine was still the center of my whole universe, there was no denying that. I hadn’t really seen her since my father died — my move from Pelham to Greendale had been quick and messy. I was only allowed to bring what I could fit into a duffle and my backpack, the rest had gone straight into storage and would be held until I turned of age.

Once I was eighteen, I would be able to go and claim what was in the unit. If I did not claim anything within the first month, the waiver indicated that the state had the right to auction off the contents in the storage closet to the open public. Not that anything in it was of any value or worth — truthfully, there was only one item in storage I couldn’t wait to get my hands on.

“Hey, Cal!” I heard Don call from the living room. I cleared my plate into the trashcan, slipped it into the sink around Danny’s frame and wandered over from the table.

“What up?” I asked casually.

Joshua looked up over his shoulder, offering a wide smile, “We’re gonna head up to Roller Rink at nine — wanna come with us?” he asked, holding up his phone screen. From what I could see on the banner, they were advertising a teen roller junction.


“C’mon, I’ll teach you.” he tried again.

Don snorted, “Yeah, teach you how to break your tailbone.”

Josh snapped his head to the right, glaring at his friend from the opposite couch, “That was one time.” he growled.

I shoved my hands into the back pocket of my jeans, “It’s fine — I’ve got some homework to finish anyway.”

Danny joined us, wiping his hands on his denim. “Someone told me Birdy stuck you with Sweet Pea for a lab partner.”

Don and Joshua shared a look, then craned their necks to look at me fully, “Wait, wait, wait,” Don started, sitting upright on the couch with his hands raised slightly as he tried to comprehend the information, “You’re partnered with Sweet Pea?”

“Yeah,” I nodded, tucking my hair behind my ear, “what about it?”

“If the guy ever gives you a hard time, let me know.” he grumbled, lifting his chin with wide eyes, sharing another glance with Josh. “The guy’s a total basket case — “

“Fangs .. is a whole different kind of weird, dude. The whole group is one big bundle of fucked up.” Josh added.

I thought back to the suggestive comment Sweet Pea had made earlier, and shrugged, “Thanks, but I think I can take care of myself.” I mused in dismissal, turning towards the stairs to retreat for the evening.
Danny caught my arm as I passed, “We’re just looking out for you.”

I paused and looked down to where his fingers gently gripped my wrist. I forced myself to nod, “I know.” I responded, adding a small nod to show my appreciation. Truthfully, I hadn’t expected the boys to offer such a solid foundation of protection. The way they had spoken about the Serpents had me believing that they were a force that wasn’t to be reckoned with. And yet, here they were, foolishly offering up a suicide mission should Sweet Pea give me a hard time.

**Fact:** Sweet Pea had already given me a hard time, but I was determined not to let him get under my skin.

“I’m going to finish my homework.” I mumbled quietly, taking the stairs two at a time when Danny released his grip. When I was finally concealed behind my bedroom door, I flipped the lock and leaned against the wood with a tired sigh.

I had told Sweet Pea I wouldn’t call, and ten hours ago I hadn’t meant it. But as the evening dragged on, I felt the familiar overwhelming sensation of anxiety creep over my chest; one part because of the assignment, one part because I had this overwhelming urge to call him.

Begrudgingly, I pulled my phone off its charger and scrolled through my contacts, finger hovering over the icon in momentary hesitation before I hit **CALL**. I hoped that he wouldn’t answer — that way I could rest easily on the idea that I had made an honest effort to finish an assignment, but that he was simply that uncooperative. Birdy wouldn’t see a reason to keep the seating plan if partners were unwilling to work with each other, and I could go back to sitting alone. No Sweet Pea needed in my bubble.

But, he answered on the fifth ring, “Whom the fuck might you be?”

I replied coolly, “Can we meet?”

“Calliope,” he said my name like he owned it. My full name, nonetheless. I clenched my jaw and closed my hand into a fist, “This is a pleasant surprise.”

I swallowed my pride, running a hand over my face tiredly, “We can meet at Pop’s.” I tried.

“Sorry. Can’t.” he responded immediately, seeming preoccupied.

“Can’t or won’t?” I pressed, narrowing my eyes at my bed, envisioning his smug smirk burning in the rear of my mind.

“I’m in the middle of an important pool game.” he replied absently; the clatter of the phenolic resin balls hitting each other in the background verified his statement.

“Where are you?” I asked off topic, already moving towards my closet to pull a jacket from one of the hangers. There was a place in Riverdale that had pool tables, and the boys wanted to go to the roller rink?

I heard a snort from the other side, “Whyte Wyrm.” he admitted, smile evident in his tone. “Not really your kind of hangout. And coming here would be a really bad idea.” he added.

I sighed angrily, “I can handle myse—”

The dial tone sounded in my ear.

Sweet Pea had hung up on me.

I pulled the phone away from my ear in disbelief, and knotted brows together, clenching my jaw tightly as I tossed the device onto my bed.

I collapsed onto it shortly after in defeat. I pulled the phone up, and stared at the numbers. It was already past nine — the way I saw it, I had two choices. I either fabricated my assignment, which probably wouldn’t be as hard as I made it seem
considering who my partner was (his reputation superseded him), or I walked to the Whyte Wyrm to find Sweet Pea.

The second option was, admittedly, a little more tempting.

Against my better judgement, I sat upright and slipped the jacket I had pulled from the closet on over my arms. I let my bun fall free, and ran my fingers through my blonde tresses.

If there was one thing I could thank my mother for, it would be my hair. Her blonde curls resembled so much of my own, and I saw my own eyes in the reflection of hers. It was the closest part of me that I had her, and given that I didn't have much to remember her, looking in the mirror always served as bittersweet replacement.

Girls tended not to like me for what they concluded to be my ‘obvious’ beauty, but I never cared for it. My so-called attractiveness didn’t make me want to fit in. I liked being alone, believe it or not, I enjoyed my own company. I was content coasting my way through high school until the day I graduated and could leave indefinitely.

What I liked more was being that one chick with kick ass hoops and pretty lashes.

I second guessed myself for a moment, the nervousness of what I had planned finally taking over. Then, I shook my head and pulled out the warm brown lipstick from the makeup bag on my dresser.

Nothing a little lipstick couldn't fix.

The television downstairs had been shut off; the boy’s boots were gone, and the door had been locked, meaning they had already left for the Roller Rink. Hopeful that I would be able to be home before them, I locked the door with my key and hugged my biology notebook to my chest.

I didn’t know my way around town yet, but it wasn’t nearly as big as Greendale. Fifteen minutes later I was standing at the light across the street from the bar, the neon lettering flickering in the dark sky. I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jacket with the book under my arm, and moved in between the bikes that lined up along the side of the black-painted building, pulling the red and black door open with more force than necessary.

*Full of model-citizens obviously,* I quipped sneeringly to myself. I tried to keep my thoughts lofty and nonchalant, but I couldn’t shake the uneasy quake in my stomach as eyes followed my every move. There was something about this place. I pulled the jacket tighter around my body, and let my eyes scan the crowd. All of my previous nervousness had returned.

He was bent over the edge of the billiard table, hands working their magic to prep for his shot. “Sweet Pea!” I called. He looked up at me from under his bangs, then stood with curiosity and surprise etched into his features as I wandered towards the table.

“Another pleasant surprise,” Sweet Pea said, coming to stand beside me. With a tilt of his head, he motioned the others to leave. The first male to leave (*short hair, broad shoulders — recognizable as a student from Southside High*) bumped into my shoulder as he walked past, lips pulled into a pout. I took a step back to balance myself.

Definitely more terrifying when you were up close and personal.

“Don’t worry, I don’t plan on staying long,” I said simply, holding up my notebook.

His eyes glanced over the page, “Likely to die from a gunshot wound,” he laughed, looking down at me as though he were impressed with my lack of creativity, “Can you see into the future or something?”

I pulled the booklet from his hand angrily and slapped it down onto the pool table that wasn’t occupied by any balls, “Religion?”

“Religion?” he repeated in question. “I belong to a gang, does it look like I follow a religion?”
I contemplated his words, chewing on the inside of my lip before I shrugged, “Nope.” I muttered, writing that down on the paper. “Any dreams?” I asked lazily, half-expecting him to sit on it and think about his answer for one second.

“You.” he said around a smile, his voice suddenly behind me and far too close for comfort. I shot upright, moving one of the balls across the table, “You’re messing up the game.” he added.

“Don’t be weird.” I growled, narrowing my eyes at him, “It’s not funny.”

“You’re blushing.”

I shook my head, trying to remain confident, “You’re provoking me.” I accused.

“You have nice lips, they look good when you talk.” he pressed, leaning forward with the left side of his mouth pulled up into a large grin.

“We’re done.” I stated, slamming my notebook shut with more force than necessary on the green of the table. “I don’t like sitting with you, I don’t like talking to you. I don’t like your smug smile,” my eye twitched slightly — something that typically happened when I was lying. In this very moment, I sincerely hoped it was by mere coincidence. “I don’t like you.” I tried to sound as convincing as possible, thrusting his pool stick into his chest.

He stood tall; I hadn’t realized until that moment how tall he actually was. He towered over me, well over a foot taller, in fact. Sweet Pea grabbed his pool cue, “Are we done here?” he asked, eyes suddenly hard, “Any more questions? Comments?” When I didn’t indicate I had any left for him, he nodded to the group behind me and moved back into position. “Then I’ll see you in bio.” he concluded, striking the ball loudly, sinking the purple ball into the right-side corner pocket.

I rushed home, desperate to wash the stench of the bar out of my hair, off of my skin. I felt a thousand times heavier as I entered the house, leaning against the wood as I ran a hand through my hair. In the midst of trying to convince myself that I despised Sweet Pea, I may have actually offended him and created an unwanted target on my back.

I tried not to let that be the only thought on my mind as I flipped the hot water on full blast.

I didn’t get sleep that night.
The night had been long, and I had been dreading sunrise. I moved through my morning slowly, ate my oranges in silence, didn’t talk much on the ride in.

Now, I sat hunched forward in my seat, arms wrapped around my bag. Every so often, my eyes would threaten to slip shut, and I’d have to remind myself of my responsibility as a student. I needed to be awake and alert.

Especially with Sweet Pea hovering dangerously close.

I ran my hands over my face tiredly, pulling on the skin beneath my eyes while I let out a quiet groan. From the corner of my eye, I could see his eyebrows raise in question. I thought about muttering how I lost sleep because of him, thought about letting him know that I had created that much anxiety for myself over a stupid biology project that he couldn’t even be bothered to participate in because he was too busy inflating his ego. I had scribbled down unwilling to cooperate and lazy under the bullet points I had gathered from the previous night. I knew that was unsatisfactory in Birdy’s eyes, but it would have to do. Maybe it would get the message across that working with Sweet Pea was just a bad idea.

Fuck this seating arrangement.

“Cal?” I snapped my attention to the front when Sweets flicked my thigh, watching the faces of several students turn to me from their individual groups.

“Yes?” I asked quietly, swallowing as I sunk in my chair.

Birdy sighed petulantly, “What qualities are you attracted to in a potential mate?”

Perplexed, and a little caught off guard, I repeated: “You want me to list characteristics of a boyfriend?”

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

I pressed my lips together having been stumped, hearing Sweet Pea breathe out a quiet laugh from next to me, “I’m ..” I stammered, not really able to think of much else to offer. What did I know about that, anyway?

Birdy looked down at the floor in exasperation, then pointed his finger towards my partner, “You’re up, SP. What are you looking for?”

“Bright, I guess. Attractive for sure, maybe a little funny. Definitely headstrong.”

“Headstrong?” Birdy repeated, folding his arms, slightly intrigued.

“He means oral.” someone mused from the back of the crowd. Thankful for the distraction, I sat upright in my seat and hastily flipped through the pages of my textbook; I tried not to pay any mind to the snickering Serpent next to me, ignoring the lingering sensation of his eyes surveying me.

“Guys, c’mon, attraction is the key to the ignition of all animal reproduction, humans included.” Birdy turned to the rest of the class as he held his hands out, looking to make sure we were all on board. “Okay, Sweet Pea. What’s next?”

Sweets sat up in his seat, “Divide and conquer.”

“Excellent. Next.”

“I have to figure out if she’s interested so I’ll read her. What’s her body telling me? Does she want people to approach her, is she open for conversation? Does she engage in physical contact? You know, touch my arm, twirl her hair, that sort of girly bullshit? Does she bite lip? Cal does it all the time.”
I instinctively pressed my lips together tightly and glared over at him. This drew a few snickers from other Serpents in the room.

“She might be into me,” he stated confidently, bumping his knee against mine rhythmically. I felt the heat creep into my face at the contact, noting the several pairs of eyes that watched us intently. “More body language .. she’s trying to pull attention away from her face, bring it to her hands instead. Both are equally .. enticing, if you ask me.”

I wanted to die right there; instead I leaned forward, hiding my face in my hands. I was horribly mortified with becoming some sort of science experiment, and the target of his banter. The class erupted into a chorus of laughter — I felt my eyes sting with hot tears, my mouth pulling together to hold my composure. I tried to remind myself that one boy and his cocky know-it-all demeanor were not going to set a reputation for me in this pathetic excuse for a school. Once I was sure I wasn't red in the face any longer, I turned to look at him with a vindictive glare, wrapping my slender fingers around my mother’s necklace as he studied me carefully.

Birdy had somehow managed to capture the remaining students attention; the rest of the period had turned into several of the males trying to dehumanize their respective female partners in the same way Sweets had humiliated me. He definitely hated me. I was absolutely convinced that Sweet Pea was over trying to make me blush, or try his luck. I had obviously overstepped a boundary and pushed the line. I couldn't blame his reaction, but still didn't appreciate his need for it. I remained silent for the rest of the lesson.

When the bell dismissed the group, I hardly wanted to wait and stick around to get the tailgate of Birdy’s instructions for the reading that night. Instead I bolted from the room, pulling the hood of my sweater up over my head with my chin tucked close to my chest as I bee-lined for the girls bathroom.

The group of girls smoking in the corner next to the mirrors watched me as I barged through the door, my shoulders shaking and my chest heaving with each struggling breath I took, “Get out.” I mumbled. Their faces contorted in confusion, ignoring my words. I tried again, “Get out!” I demanded louder, pointing a shaky finger towards the door.

They retreated slowly, leaving me to grip the sink tightly in solitude, staring myself down in the mirror.

I hated all forms of attention — especially negative attention. Unknowingly, Sweet Pea had just labelled me as a prime candidate for continuous banter; eventually, the rest of the school would find out about our episode during second period, and the entire student body would be watching my every move. I had intended to blend in as best as I could, had even started to wear colours that drew in less attention, courtesy of Danny’s hand-me-downs.

“You look like a mess.” I snapped my eyes up in the reflection of the mirror to where the brunette stood, watching me from the doorway. “Trouble in paradise?” she asked with a snort, moving to the sink next to me. She was just a few inches taller than I was, her brown hair was left wild and curled.

I turned my attention back to the sink, turning the faucet on to watch as the sink filled with cold water. “I’m fine,” I lied, shoving my hands into the cold water. “just tired.” That wasn’t a complete lie — I had been awake for nearly twenty four hours, and I wasn’t exactly known for insomnia.

“Don’t let Sweet Pea get to you.” the girl tried, casting a sideways glance at me. “I mean, that’s definitely expected Sweet Pea behaviour, but never to that degree.”

I dropped my head, pulling air into my lungs with more focus than necessary, “I told him I didn’t like him.” I admitted, turning the faucet off.

I watched the girl raise her eyebrows up in surprise, right before her lips cracked into a large smile and she let out a loud laugh. “Girl,” she cackled, patting me on the shoulder, “that is single-handedly the most badass thing I’ve ever heard — we have to be friends. I won’t take no for an answer.”

I pushed away from the sink, running my fingers through my hair nervously, “Uh, I don’t really do the whole friend thing
— but thanks for the offer.”

She paused for a moment, quiet as I gathered my bag off the floor and readjusted my shirt, “I’m Kabrina.”

I halted my movements, watching my reflection in the mirror. I tried to keep the annoyance from striking across my features; honestly, I had wondered if one female companion in this hellhole might ease my conscious. My tongue darted out to wet my lips as I folded my arms and turned to face her fully; she definitely filled out more in areas that I lacked. Her hips were set wider, making her waist appear smaller — which in turn made her chest appear larger. I envied that. But she would do.

“Cal.” I said cautiously, extending my hand forward to shake hers. “How did you hear about what happened with Sweets?”

“I sit in the back of the class,” she responded, pulling a tube of lip-gloss from her pocket. “I’ve never seen him more engaged in his education. Which benefits him, I guess, he can’t really afford to fail again.”

I pulled my brow together, following her out of the restroom, “Again?”

“Rumour has it that Sweets is a senior.” Kabrina explained, folding her arms across her chest.

“Rumour?” I asked, keeping my voice low as we entered the cafeteria.

“No one knows for sure if he was held back, or if he missed a year. He was moved around a lot as a kid — at least that’s what I hear.” she admitted, sticking some change into the vending machine. A group of studded leather teens stood on the other side of the bright blue machine, their eyes glued to our figures as she retrieved her juice. We waited until we were out of earshot before Kabrina continued, “He’s a year older than the rest of us juniors, but he’s in all of our classes. It’s probable he failed and was held back.”

I thought back to when Danny had mentioned one of the teens at Pop's was a senior he knew, then nodded slowly to myself as I grabbed her hand and led her to where my cousin’s and their friends typically sat. “Assuming you’re neither Ghoulie nor Serpent, you’re welcome to join us.” I stated, turning to Danny with a smile.

“You made a friend.” he noted, taking a bite out of his sandwich.

I nodded, “I did — this is Kabri —”

“Kabrina Sobon.” Joshua finished, smiling up at her frame as he scooted over, “Southside’s very overbad and boujee.”

I grimaced at his terms, taking my usual seat next to Don. “That’s gross,” I muttered, shoving my hands into my sweater pockets.

Kabrina laughed lightly, dropping her bag onto the table top as she sat in the chair in between Danny and Josh, “What are you girls gossiping about now?” she asked, nudging Josh with her elbow.

“Sweet Pea’s escapade in bio this morning.” Don replied bitterly, looking over Danny’s shoulder to where the Serpents sat tucked away in their portion of the cafeteria. I snapped my eyes to Donovan’s quickly, shaking my head a little.

“What happened in bio?” Danny asked, raising a brow as he looked to me expectantly.

I shrugged, “Typical Sweet Pea behaviour, that’s all.” I lied, trying my best to make it sound as though there was nothing to be worried about. “No biggie.” I added, cracking my lips into a grin.

Throughout the remainder of the day, I noticed that the Serpents had shifted; I had completely overlooked it in my business class, but I definitely noticed in history when Sweet Pea strolled in and shot me a sly smirk before he proceeded to kick out the student from their seat in front of me.
My brows pulled together when he straddled the chair and sat down facing towards me, folding his arms across the top of my desk. His brown orbs were bright and playful, the corner of his lips upturned into a smile that made me want to squirm uncomfortably in my seat. We sat like this for about thirty seconds before I decided to break the silence, leaning back in my chair as I folded my legs over top one another, “Can I help you?” I asked as I tried to feign boredom.

Sweet Pea’s lips broke into a wider smile, “Do I make you uncomfortable?”

I narrowed my eyes, folding my arms across my chest, “Was what I said last night too subtle for you?” I asked, letting my tone slip the slightest to appear condescending. “Because I distinctly remember mentioning that I didn’t like sitting with you —”

“But we had so much fun this morning,” he cut me off, propping his chin up with his knuckles.

“Right. Fun.” I grumbled, flipping open my textbook as the teacher entered the room.

“You don’t think so?” he asked, dropping his face to my eye-level. There seemed to be genuine concern in his features, his mouth and eyes softening the slightest.

“If you insist on making my life here insufferable, could you at least pretend to pay attention in class?” I responded, clenching my jaw tightly after I had finished speaking. I glared past his head, trying to indicate that the conversation was over. Sweet Pea, after careful assessment, nodded once and turned in his seat. I spent the majority of the period staring at the back of his skull, trying not to think of how utterly satisfying it would be to just smack him.

I forced my shoulders to relax as I made my way to my last period, knowing with certainty he would not be there. I pulled my hair up into a ponytail, and exited the gymnasium to fill up my water bottle at the fountain just outside in the hallway. Through the tiny window, I could see the top of a familiar raven head. I burst through the doors angrily, placing my open palms on his broad chest to shove him, “What is wrong with you?” I growled, looking up at his height with a venomous glare.

“Easy, princess.” he warned, rocking back on his heels. His arms folded neatly across his chest; for the first time, I noticed the rings on his left hand and the tattoo on his right thumb.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, mocking his stance as I folded my own arms and tried to hold my ground.

Sweet Pea lifted an eyebrow, pulling the corner of his lip up along with it, “Technically, I have fitness.” he replied smugly, his smile only growing further when he noticed the disdain on my face.

“You don’t come to fitness.” I reminded him, narrowing my eyes.

“Maybe I should to start — get my beach bod and all that.” he joked, leaning against the wall beside the fountain. I watched him carefully, then slowly twisted the cap off my bottle and stuck it under the faucet. “I noticed you’re hangin’ with Bri now.”

I pulled my brows together, “Who?”

“Bri.” When I lifted a brow, clearly confused, he repeated, ‘Kabrina?’

“Oh, her.” I said stiffly, feeling my lips tug down at the ends. “Uh, yeah, she’s a friend. Sort of. I guess.”

Sweet Pea nodded once, shaking his head a little to keep the hair from falling directly into his eyes, “Not exactly the greatest company, princess.”

“First of all, stop calling me princess.” I demanded, twisting the lid back onto my water bottle, “Secondly, I highly doubt she’s worse company than a snake.”
“Ouch,” he pressed his palm to his chest in mock hurt, “That really hurt my feelings, Callie.”

I rolled my eyes, exaggerating the sigh that I let past my lips. Spending three periods a day with Sweet Pea was exhausting enough as it was, and having fitness be the only place I have some sanctuary in this god forsaken hellhole, it was unnerving that he suddenly decided to show up. The semester was halfway over — obviously Sweet Pea was taking torment to a whole new level. Is that what this was? Was he purposely trying to bother me? Did he take pleasure in making me severely uncomfortable? “I’m sure your ego isn’t bruised too badly.”

“I’m just being honest. Sobon is notorious for latching onto good girls and sucking the innocence out of them.” he stated matter-o-factly with a frown. “I’d hate to see such a pretty face crumble.”

“That’s cute,” I responded, feigning innocence as I leaned against the wall and placed a hand on my hip, “You think I’m a good girl.”

His face dropped, causing the warmth in his eyes to disappear as his grin shifted. It was that damn smile — a smile that screamed I should run, caused my stomach and turn uneasily. Definitely the smile of a boy that guaranteed trouble. “I know you’re a good girl.” Sweets moved forward; I felt my body freeze involuntarily as his fingers came up to tuck stray hairs behind my ear, his thumb gently caressing my cheek. “Blonde hair, blue eyes,” he started listing off attributes, his eyes thoroughly scanning over my body, “what — five feet? Four eleven?” Sweet Pea took a step back, tilting his head to the side. “Pouty lips —”

“Stop.” I stammered, standing upright as I smacked his hand away from my face. “Stereotyping me doesn’t make me a good girl —”

Sweets rolled his eyes, “C’mon, baby, you’re killin’ me here.” he groaned, leaning forward with his hands shoved into his jacket pockets. “You look like a fuckin’ Northsider that took a detour and got lost — and let’s not forget about the fact that you’re probably the only student here that takes this piece of shit school seriously.”

I licked my lips as I fumbled with the label on my water bottle, “Y’know, good grades mean more post-secondary options, which means moving far, far away from here.”

“You think I could leave?” he asked suddenly, his voice dropping the light-hearted playfulness tone that I wasn’t even aware it had taken on, replacing it with animosity. “That college is really an option for someone like me?” he didn’t have to say it outloud for me to know what he was referring to. I let my eyes scan over the tattoo on his neck, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth. “If you’re as bright Birdy claims you are, then you’ve already put two and two together —”

“And that’s how you’re gonna spend the rest of your life? Under the table drug deals, hanging out at dive bars, reliving the good ol’days?” I asked sarcastically, taking a step towards him. “I really don’t think that’s all you want for yourself, Sweet Pea. Don’t you think you're capable of more?”

“It’s not about what I want.” Sweets said firmly, standing upright and tall, “My world is black and white, not grey. What I want and what I’m going to get are two entirely different things.” There seemed to be a sadness to his voice; I tried not to think too much into it. We stood in silence for a few moments, staring at each other blankly before I heaved a sigh and took a step back.

“Well I know what I want.” I replied simply. I had it all sorted out in my head. As soon as I had moved to Greendale, I promised myself that I’d pack everything that mattered and leave the state altogether. I’d head North, end up somewhere just over the border. I wasn’t held to Riverdale or Greendale by any obligations — programs I had already looked into were better in Canada. Cheaper, too. As soon as I graduated, I’d leave. I’d never look back, I’d never come back.

That was a goddamn promise.

I tightened my ponytail and smiled to myself, “I’m getting out of here as soon as I can.”

“Is that so?” Sweet Pea asked, taking a step forward. I hadn’t realized how compromising my current situation really was
until my back was pressed against the cool wall, the door blocked by his large frame. I nodded vigorously, not trusting my
voice.

Sweet Pea placed his hands on the wall on either side of my head, leaning down so that he could be at eye-level with me,
forcing me to keep eye contact. It wasn’t until that moment that I had really (I mean, really) looked at him. His eyes were
a pretty brown hue, with flecks of gold around the pupils. There was a faintest hint of warm chocolate freckles across the
bridge of his nose, and he smelt like cigar smoke and motor-oil (his breath, however, was minty fresh).

“I don’t plan on sticking around long.” I mumbled quietly, licking my lips again, “Try not to get too attached.”

Sweet Pea smirked, “Promise I won’t if you won’t.” he lowered his hand to rest in between us; his middle finger was
extended, similar to how pinkies were extended to solidify promises. I hesitated briefly before I brought my middle finger
to his and linked them tightly, pleasantly surprised by his warmth. Using his strength, he pulled on my grip to bring us
closer, his jaw working under the skin as he leaned down, warm breath saturating the hair just above my ear, “Now get
back to class.”
Joshua and I sat back to back in the living room as Danny flipped through the television channels, head propped up by his arm. I tried to keep steady as I ran my pencil along the paper, defining the jawline on the silhouette. My cousin never seemed to mind when I used him for practice, but that didn't mean I made a point to make it obvious that's exactly what I was doing. He always asked, and it was painfully embarrassing to admit it to him if others were in the room.

Today, he wasn't my muse. I didn't want any inquiries, so I worked quietly. I couldn't get the warmth of Sweet Pea's touch from my mind, and as a result had been too enamored with the feeling to think about anything else. “So ... he really asked her out?” I asked absently, hunching over my sketchbook as Josh stirred behind me.

“Mhm,” Danny hummed, stretching out his legs over the edge, “only took him three years to get the balls to do it, too.”

I flipped onto my back, twisted to shove my feet into Joshua's lap as I shivered involuntarily; the boys were all covered in long, lean muscle, so they hardly ever complained about the fact that the AC was still blasting in the middle of October. I, on the other hand, didn't have the same luxury, and had pulled out several thick hoodies and doubled up on socks. “Cold?” he asked softly, raising a perfectly sculpted brow while his fingers grabbed my foot and added pressure to the sole, then began to rub in a circular motion.

“A little ... not too bad, though.” I admitted, hugging the sketchbook to my chest as I offered him a smile.

Danny looked over to where I laid and pulled his brows together, “What’re you drawing?”

Fuck. “Nothing.” I replied smoothly, offering him an innocent smile with a bat of my lashes. As much as I loved my cousins, I didn’t want them knowing about my fascination with the gang members. Lately, I had occupied my free time musing over their sharp features and obscene styles, but always found myself coming back to him. I didn’t dare bring the sketchbook to school, just managed to study them from afar for reference later.

I had successfully managed to complete my first shift as a waitress at Pop’s without screwing up a single order, which I previously had been convinced I would do — and had even racked up enough tips to start a savings jar. This would hopefully fund my first vehicle purchase; I’d have to get to Canada somehow. I glanced down to where Joshua sat with his dirty blonde hair pulled back from his face, eyes intently focused on the foot in his hand as he kneaded and worked his thumbs. I allowed my eyes to slip shut and hummed in delight.

“Do I need to tell y’all to get a room?” Dean boomed from behind me. I looked up to where his tall frame stood wiping his hands on a dish cloth, and shot him a warning glare, “I’m kidding.” he sneered, leaning forward to smack me in the stomach with the towel.

Every day went on like this; if I wasn’t working at the Chocklit Shoppe, or finishing homework with Bri (which also happened at Pop’s), then I was stuck on the couch with my cousin’s and their friends. I hadn’t bothered learning any of their names — most only came by whenever they had nothing else to do, and even then it seemed there was only one that mattered to either of the boys: Joshua. I had at least attempted to play nice with him, even when his persistence had grown from mildly cute to flatout annoying.

I pulled vigorously on my locker, letting out a growl of frustration when it failed to open for the seventh time in a row. Out of all of the things this school really needed funding for, I’m sure lockers were at the bottom of the list and that only further pressed my annoyance. It was such a minuscule thing to let ruin your day, but it wasn't an improbable idea that this would put me in a mood. Of all the things the boys had grown to dislike the most, it was my attitude.

“Need some help?”

Startled, I looked up to where a boy stood with his friends. I had people watched enough to know that the trio of studded leather douchebags happened to be a small pack of Ghoulies; the male closest to me was Eddie, and I remembered him
from history. He and Sweet Pea had a few encounters in the last few days — males being typical males in the fight for dominance over territory I was sure — which had led to Eddie sporting a nasty looking split lip and purple eye.

“I think I’m just gonna leave it.” I replied, shooting him a forced smile, “thanks anyway.”

“You’re Cal, right? Don’s cousin.” he leaned against the locker next to mine, thumbs hooked into his belt loops. His eyes couldn’t seem to focus clearly on me, almost as though he were trying incredibly hard to keep himself upright. My father had sported the same look on occasion — I didn’t take Eddie to be a heavy day drinker, so I leaned more towards the idea that his head was up in the clouds (figuratively speaking, of course).

“I am. What’s it to you?”

“Donny boy and I go way back,” he snickered, looking over his shoulder to where his friends stood. They shared the same knowing look, both grinning along with their friend. “how about we take you on a little tour — I’m sure you haven’t had much of a chance to see all of the perks Southside has to offer.”

Perks? I highly doubted that. “Thanks, but I think I’ve pretty much got it all figured out.” I declined as politely as I could manage, fixing my bag onto my shoulder. His tone had indicated he was being entirely suggestive, which I found grotesquely disgusting and cringe-worthy.

“C’mon, don’t be a tease, little Hobbs.” one of his goonies stepped forward, bracing his hands on my shoulders to hold me steady. I rocked back onto my heels, tightening my arms around my textbook. “Let’s just go have some fun.” he murmured, pulling the corner of his mouth up in a lopsided Sweet Pea manner — which didn’t look nearly as good — and flashed the silver of the swiss knife hiding in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Part of me wanted to stand up for myself, bark something about ‘over my dead body’, but there was something so ironic about that phrase and the reality of the problem at hand, I didn’t dare open my mouth. As much as I could have protested, my arms were still tightly secured by the hands of Eddie’s friends. My feet reluctantly moved forward, the heels of my boots deafening in the silence of the hall. I looked over my shoulder, eyes frantically looking for any another students.

The further we talked, the less hopeful I felt about the situation. We had made it off the school premises before I bothered speaking again, “I feel like this qualifies as kidnapping.”

I heard Eddie snort unattractively from in front of us, “You’re not gag-bound and tied; to everyone else, this is completely consensual.”

“Right. Because intimidation didn’t sway the outcome in your favour at all.” I spat, glaring up at his tall frame. “It’s pathetic really — what, you couldn’t coherence any other girl to spend some quality time with you?” I teased, raising a brow in mock, “Shocker.”

“Easy, princess.” he warned angrily, spinning on his heels to face me with a pair of wild eyes. “We didn’t want just any girl. We wanted you.”

I narrowed my eyes, ripping my arms out of my captors grips as my brows set into a glare, “Why?” Personally, I didn’t see the gain in taking me. Fresh meat? Maybe. “Because I’m a Hobbs?”

“He likes you.” he was mocking me now, his voice raising an octave, feigning politeness. “Nobody can seem to figure out why, and I wanted to see what all the fuss was about.”

I let my face drop, flinching when I accidentally backed up into the tallest of the trio. “Is this about Sweet Pea?” I asked heatedly, gripping the strap of my bag tighter in my fist. Confusion — among several other emotions — had my heart beating erratically in the cage of my chest. Sweet Pea had made it very, very obvious that he took pleasure in making me incredibly uncomfortable. I didn't believe that meant he liked me. “You’re delusional.” I shook my head in protest, “It’s the complete opposite.”
“I don’t think it is.” he swayed with a shake of his finger, taking a step towards me. “But if you’re sure, then I won’t have to worry about backlash for mackin’ on some Serpent slut.”

I pressed my hand against his chest, pushing him back roughly, ‘Serpent slut?’ I repeated, feeling the space in between my eyebrows disappear as the heat crept up under my flesh and into my cheeks. A pet name — perfect.

Eddie’s lips cracked into a wicked grin as he leaned down, tilting his head to the side as his eyes drank in the short length of my figure, “Everyone knows about your little rendezvous with Sweets, Callie. The whole school’s talkin’ about it.”

I rolled my eyes, “He humiliated me in front of the class — hardly gossip worthy.”

Eddie shook his finger again, “Nu uh, princess. Little birdie told me you were seen going into the Whyte Wyrm — that’s Serpent territory. No way anyone in their right mind takes a step into that bar unless they’re getting something outta it.”

My throat tightened at his words, processing their weight; what did that mean? Did people think I was really pining after Sweet Pea? Did people think I was one of those girls looking to fit in with the wrong crowd? I licked my lips, the overwhelming sensation that my lungs were caving in on me crawled from my shoulders down, weighing in on my chest. “Funny joke.” I replied dryly, avoid his eyes.

“Wish I was kidding, baby.” Eddie sighed with an exaggerated frown, standing up right as his hands came up to roughly grip either side of my face, forcing me to look at him. “That’s okay. I’ll make sure to show you a good ti—”

Let her go.” the voice boomed over the empty parking lot; my head snapped to where the voice echoed from, pulling my face from Eddie’s grasp long enough to catch a glimpse of Sweet Pea’s hard expression, to see his fists angrily clenched at his sides as he burned his eyes into the trio. Of course, this was prior to Eddie pulling roughly on my arm to lock me against his side, lips then at my ear with a throaty chuckle.

“Sweets,” he crooned, almost condescendingly, “we were just talking about you.” His breath was stale and reeked of cigarettes. I grimaced, trying to keep the bile settled in my stomach.

“Let her go.” Sweet Pea repeated, folding his arms across his broad chest, clearly growing impatient.

“And if I don’t?” Eddie prodded around a smirk, running his hand down the side of my waist. I used my right hand to slap his arm away, trying to pull myself out of his grasp. No avail.

Sweet Pea rolled his eyes, tongue running along his bottom lip as he turned his head slightly to look at his friend (the same friend from the Whyte Wyrm, I assumed this was the one they called Fangs), before he shrugged. “I’ll gladly make your eyes a matching set — you’ll look much prettier.” he taunted, taking a step forward. His brothers followed.

“How are you gonna play this?” Fangs asked him, keeping a careful eye on Eddie's tight grip on my arm.

“Divide and conquer.” Sweet Pea replied, tilting his head to the side.

“Divide what?”

Sweet Pea cracked a smile, “His head from the rest of his body.”

Fangs nodded quickly, the column of his neck bobbing as he swallowed, “Good plan.”

Eddie reacted out of what I assumes was fear; he twisted my arm painfully and pulled me in front of him, lips still dangerously close to my flesh. I tensed under his grip, frame stiffening as I watched Sweet Pea's calculating frame carefully. Please don’t do anything stupid —

There was a loud thwack! prior to Eddie’s body slumping forward, his grip on my arms loosening which caused me to
lose my balance and collapse to the ground with him. I looked over my shoulder to where he lay completely unconscious, then up to where Sweet Pea and Fangs had tight holds around the other Ghoulies throats, fists swinging with incredible speed. The boy that stood behind me, I recognized him from biology, offered me his hand, using all of his strength to pull me up onto my feet. I gathered my books, shoving my sketchbook into my bag hastily without adding any more damage to the paper.

The next time I lifted my eyes, Sweet Pea was looking to where I stood with a face heavy with utter disappointment. “What?” I lifted, stepping over Eddie’s unconscious body.

“What’re you doing hangin’ with these creeps?” he demanded, voice hard and angry.

I lifted a brow in surprise, scanning my eyes down the length of his body. His grey zip-up was blood stained, but easy to cover up if he was careful to keep his jean vest tight to his body. There were very few people that could pull off jean on jean — Sweet Pea somehow fit into the incredibly small percentage of people that definitely could. “Same reason I hang with you,” I spit back, brushing past him.

“Uh,” I could hear his footsteps behind me, following me back towards the school. “you could at least say thank you.”

“For what?” I asked, glancing over my shoulder. His brothers were preoccupied with hauling the trio of Ghoulies behind the pile of scrap metal by the end of the lot. I grimaced again, trying not to think about what kind of consequence could be waiting for me if I didn’t eliminate myself from the scene immediately. “That wasn’t necessary — I’m sure there was another way to approach that situation.”

“What wasn’t necessary?”

“Violence? Is that your answer for everything?”

“Ed had it comin’.”

I rolled my eyes at his nonchalance, “I had it handled.”

Sweet Pea snorted as he laughed, falling into a casual stroll beside me, “Yeah, definitely looked that way.”

I sighed in annoyance and stopped in my tracks to glare up at him, “What do you want from me?”

He met me with an equally annoyed expression, his eyes narrowed. “I want you to use your fucking head — this isn’t exactly the safest establishment in town.” he spat venomously, folding his arms across his chest again as he looked down at me, “Stay out of the east wing, don’t stay after hours alone, don’t go fucking off with a group of lowlives —”

“I didn’t ask you to come to my rescue, Sweet Pea. Actually, I'm pretty sure I told you I didn’t want anything to do with you. You don’t even like me — honestly, I’m completely convinced you hate me and this was just some excuse to get your hands dirty.”

“Hate you?” he looked down at me, shaking his head. “You’ve got it all wrong, sweetness. You got beef with me, but you’re cool with them?” he asked, jutting his chin to gesture to the scene a couple dozen yards behind us.

I shook my head, fixing the placement of my bag on my shoulder, “No,” I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose, “I don’t want anything to do with any of you. I want to come to school, and try to get some sort of education. I want to graduate, and I want to pack my bags and run as far away as I can and never look back.”

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that situation to begin with. “How did you even know where I was?”

Sweet Pea averted his eyes and shrugged, “I didn’t.” he lied, turning around to continue to walk towards the school.

I scoffed quietly to myself, shoving my hands into the pockets of my jacket as I trudged along behind him. It was ridiculous, how much he resembled an overgrown infant. “You’re a terrible liar.” I concluded once I reached his side, struggling to maintain a steady pace with his long legs. He seemed to notice my difficulty and slowed his pace.

“How do you even know where I was?” he replied firmly, adjusting the collar on his jean vest as we reached the south wing doors. There was a group of Serpents gathered outside the door, most of them watching us with careful eyes as we approached. “Look, I got some business to attend to. Think you can keep yourself out of trouble?” he asked when he finally met my eyes; there was nothing joking about the look on his face.

I nodded slowly, but couldn’t verbalize the promise.

My hands were shoved into my jacket pockets as I wandered down the worn down trail; Pop gave me just enough time after school to get home to change instead of bringing my uniform with me to school. Thankful for the time to myself, I usually walked home and plugged into my music. There was something about the way heavy bass lifted my spirit — something about the vision of my entire body trembling under the intensity of the vibrations that put my mind at peace. It were as though none of the outside world could harm me. A personal haven.

My thumb absently ran over the volume buttons as I hummed along with the tune, completely oblivious to the world around me. A solid forty-five minutes a day was all I needed.

The diner hadn’t been particularly busy that evening. Most parents weren’t too keen on the idea of their children running around unsupervised while a serial killer was still running loose. I had heard a few stories from customers over the last few shifts, trying not to feed into their paranoia — but from the sounds of it, Dean had explained it like we had nothing to worry about. No one from the Southside had been targeted as of yet, and he didn’t seem to believe that was an accident.

Still, I wasn’t comforted.

The bell to the door chimed, peaking my curiosity given the late hour; I looked up from behind the counter to where Sweet Pea walked. His brown hues fixed on mine as he slowly settled into an empty booth in the far corner. His vest remained the same as earlier, but his shirts had been replaced; he swapped the grey hoodie with a green shirt paired with a red plaid button up. I sighed indignantly, grabbing a menu from under the till.

I slapped it on the table top and then rested my hands on my hips, “Are you following me or something?” I asked, looking down at him.

Sweet Pea chuckled, shaking his head slightly as he leaned forward on the table, “You infiltrated my life, remember?” his voice was less rough, more at ease. Smoother, almost.

“Right,” I nodded with a smile, folding my arms around my waist. “where are your friends?”

He cocked his head to the side; I squinted to outside the window to where a group of teens dressed down in black and dark hues gathered on their bikes, laughing simultaneously at something Toni had said. “Did you stay out of trouble?” he asked quietly after a moment of silence.

“I’m here in one piece, so I’d say I managed alright.” I responded calmly, fingers pulling at a stray piece of fabric on my apron. Sweet Pea sat upright in his seat, looking out to where his friends gathered. We were silent again for a few heartbeats, watching the group of teenagers from inside. “Are you going to tell me how you found me earlier?” I prodded quietly.

Sweet Pea inhaled deeply, having been prepared for this question, but eyes remained focused on the scene outside as he
spoke, and his voice was barely audible. “I got a text from a friend — said they saw you leaving the school with Eddie.”

I pulled my brows together in confusion, “So you just leave class to save girls he preys on?”

Sweet Pea looked up at me now, eyes soft and mouth taunt, “Not typically, no.”

“Lucky me.” I muttered, pressing my palms into the table as I leaned forward, “Are you ordering?” When he shook his head, I swiped the menu off the table, trying to keep the annoyance from my features as I retreated back towards the register. There was some minuscule part of me that wanted to stop fighting him on everything he said, on everything he did. That I shouldn’t question his reasoning. That what happened was the norm in Southside — that Sweet Pea was doing what Sweet Pea always did.

But I couldn’t shake the feeling that this wasn’t typical Sweet Pea behaviour, and I wasn’t sure if that scared me more or less. I couldn’t pinpoint which feeling I wanted to dominate my judgement in that moment. I still firmly stood on the promise I wouldn’t emotionally latch onto anyone, and that included Sweet Pea. Of all people, he should’ve been the one to have me running for the hills, screaming bloody murder.

Maybe he didn’t hate me after all. Maybe Eddie had been right — maybe Sweet Pea liked me in his own way, and maybe that meant I had to endure slight social humiliation.

Suppose I entertained the idea. What did he offer that I could invest myself into? He was tied to this town — that was no good. I would be gone within 24 hours after graduation. He was a gang member, and not just any gang member, or any Serpent. He was the alpha male for the younger generation — while I was certain he answered to somebody higher up on the totem pole, I wouldn’t doubt it if the others answered to him. People seemed to quake with fear at the mention of his name.

I looked up from my textbook on the counter to where he sat. He remained slumped forward in his seat, eyes glued to the window where his friends still sat on their bikes. There was something off in his demeanor this evening, and as foreign as it felt, that bothered me. Sweet Pea was loud, and cocky. He was full of himself, and self-righteous. Arrogant. Demeaning. A know-it-all badass with an attitude problem. Seeing him as anything but was unnerving.

“Hey, Pop?” I called quietly, leaning over into the kitchen where he stood elbows deep in soapy water. “Can I get a vanilla shake?” I asked, peering over my shoulder to where the Serpent sat.

The grizzled male smiled, pulling the towel off his shoulder to dry his arms, “Sure thing, Cal.”

I finished counting the till and stocking the extra napkin containers, ensuring all bottles at the front were full before Pop slipped the tall frosted glass with the creamy vanilla mixture through the slot. I offered him a smile as I took the glass, then carefully maneuvered my way over to where Sweet Pea sat. I set the coaster on the tabletop in front of him, then glass down, watching as he examined it, clearly confused. He trailed his eyes up to mine as I sat across from him in the booth.

“What’s this?”

“My thank you for earlier.” I replied, using the tip of my finger to wipe the excess whip cream off the side. “I don’t really know what would’ve happened if you and your friends hadn’t shown up.”

“Yeah, Fangs was real excited to lay into ‘em.” he chuckled, leaning forward onto the table. He looked at the milkshake again, “This was a little unnecessary. How do you know if I even like vanilla?”

“I don’t,” I replied, pulling the straw out of his fingers, “but I do, so you’ll deal.” I countered with a definitive smile, leaning forward to steal a sip from the straw. Sweet Pea watched me in wonderment for a moment before the left corner of his mouth lifted up into a grin, revealing the slightest hint of a dimple in his cheek.

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that?” he mused, licking his lips.
I swallowed, “Promise you won’t give up on me?” I asked, sliding the drink back over to his half of the table. Sweet Pea brought the straw into his mouth, extending his middle finger out in silent promise. I happily linked mine around his and smiled.
“Can you at least attempt to pay attention?” I whined in annoyance, swatting Sweet Pea’s fingers away from the rip in my jeans for the fourth time in the last fifteen minutes. Mr. Birdy shot his eyes in warning over to where we sat; Sweet Pea straightened up in his seat, offering the teacher an innocent smile. When all eyes returned to the front, he leaned down into my ear again.

“You workin’ tonight?” he asked quietly, resting his elbow on the table.

I sighed gently, pulling my eyes away from the front of the room to glance at him; he had propped his head up on his knuckles, and was chewing on a piece of gum with a small grin. I watched his bicep flex involuntarily under the tightly rolled sleeves. It was hard not to want become enamored with him. Admittedly, the first few days of whispering into each other’s ears had drawn the attention of the class. Seeing Sweet Pea genuinely enjoy talking to someone that wasn’t branded in the Serpent logo was obviously unheard of, and we had piqued the attention of the majority of our classmates. He never seemed to mind the stares.

“Nope,” I replied, popping my ‘p’. My fingers turned the page of the textbook, trying to follow along with Birdy’s instructions as he flipped on the lights and listed the exercises for homework. “you can’t keep showing up and distracting me, anyway, you’re gonna make me look bad.”

“You’re the best there, and Pop knows it.” he remarked smugly, stretching his grin wider when his words had received a smile from me. He had been giving me small compliments over the last few days — nothing normal, though, and nothing relating to anything I would have expected it to. I figured a man like Sweet Pea would have stuck to the typical, ‘Your hair looks nice today’. Instead he made an honest effort to compliment parts of my personality or work ethic.

Yesterday, he had mentioned in passing that he really enjoyed my laugh after I had mentioned that I hated how noisy it was. “I think it’s adorable,” he mused absently, scrolling through his phone during third period, “I don’t get to hear it as much as I’d like.” Today didn't appear to be any different, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing it secretly made my entire week.

“You should be studying for midterms.” I pressed quietly, leaning back in my seat so that I could put some distance between us, “Seeing as you refuse to give Birdy your attention.”

Sweet Pea narrowed his eyes, reaching out to pull a stray hair that had fallen out off my sweater, “And miss out on bugging you?” he insisted, pressing the same hand to his chest, “Never.”

“We do have three other classes together.” I reminded him, folding my legs over top one another. “you have almost an entire school day to torment me. That isn’t enough?”

“Not even close.” he admitted grimly, sinking back into his chair. I focused my eyes on his face, hoping for some sort of follow up to that statement. When it appeared there wouldn’t be one, I exhaled loudly and pulled my sketchbook out of my bag.

Sweet Pea wasn’t paying attention as far as I could tell; his arms were folded over his chest as he scrolled through his phone, chin tucked into his chest which caused his hair to fall over his eyes. I kept my eyes focused on his face, pencil gliding across the paper as quickly (and carefully) as I could manage without catching his attention. I started with the cut in his jaw, working to define the bone structure as it disappeared behind the soft edges of his hair. Fifteen minutes had passed; I had completed the detail in his facial structure and had full intentions of perfecting his hair when he looked up from his phone.

His face immediately dropped into a scowl.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, craning his neck to peek over the edge of the booklet.
“Nothing.” I lied, slamming the sketchbook shut.

He watched me closely for a heartbeat before he relaxed into his seat again, “Just make sure you get my good side.” he concluded, returning his attention to his phone in hand.

“All of you is your good side.” I mumbled absently, picking another stray strand of fallen hair off my arm. Sweet Pea’s eyes lifted from his phone, looking at me sideways with a grin, “Don’t.” I growled, shoving my belongings into my bag. “You just have a nice face, that’s all.”

“A nice face?” he repeated in question, his head falling to the side, clearly amused.

I nodded, “Strong jawline, symmetrical eyes, high cheekbones —”

“So you’re admiring me?” he teased, hooking his fingers under my seat to drag me closer. “Adorable.”

I gripped his face in between my thumb and index finger, squishing his mouth, “Face it, Sweet Pea. You’re just another pretty boy.” he smiled against the press of my fingers, eyes crinkling around the edges. I released his face, offering him another warm grin before the bell rang to dismiss the class. He handed me my textbook prior to shrugging into his jacket, following me out into the hall as students raced towards the cafeteria for lunch.

I stopped at my locker, saying a silent prayer as I spun the dial and lifted the hook — it clicked in response and the door swung open.

_Sweet success._

“You’re right about studying, by the way.” Sweet Pea lamented, leaning against the locker next to mine as I unloaded my bag. I shrugged into my jacket, flipping my hair over my shoulder as he continued, “Think you could spare an hour or two after last period?”

I rose my brows, “Bold request.” I noted, slamming the door shut on my locker. “You can meet me in the library after fitness.” I folded my arms, copying his stance as I leaned against my locker.

His face twisted, “Do we have to stay here?”

I sighed, looking behind his frame to where his group of friends stood, waiting patiently. “I’m not going home with you,” I said finally, “and I can’t bring you to Dean’s. So you’ll just have to suck it up.”

“Serpent discrimination? My feelings are so hurt.” he rolled his eyes, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his sweater as he cracked his gum. Sweet Pea’s eyes fluttered as he nodded in defeat, “Alright — this place is crawling with Ghoulies the second school lets out but _fine_,” he sighed dramatically, “we’ll do it your way.”

“Cal!” I peered over my shoulder, throwing Don a smile as he approached. I noticed that his shoulders visibly tensed as he locked eyes with Sweet Pea, jaw clenching tightly as it worked under the skin and he approached with more caution. “Don’t you have somewhere else to be?” he asked Sweet Pea, voice sharper than necessary. Having hoped to avoid confrontation, I pulled my brows together in the middle in worry.

“Just talkin’ to my girl, that’s all.” Sweets replied with a sly grin, wrapping an arm over my shoulders as he challenged Don. _Jesus Christ._

“As if.” I grumbled, lightly shrugging his arm off me with a roll of my blue hues.

Don’s eyes narrowed, his mouth pulling into a snarl as he shoved his arms against Sweet Pea’s chest, creating distance between us. I glanced up at Sweet Pea worriedly; his mouth was pulled back over his teeth, laughing quietly at the sudden outburst, “That was very brave.” he mused quietly, towering over Don’s frame.
“Don,” I warned quietly, pressing a hand to his chest to pull him back, “leave it alone.” I pleaded. They remained in that stance, eyes burning holes into the other, nostrils flared, fists clenched into tight balls at their sides. I shifted uncomfortably between them, turning to my cousin with pleading eyes. *Please,* I mouthed as I tugged on the hem of his shirt.

Sweet Pea backed off sooner than Don did; he shoved his hands into his pockets and shot me a lopsided smile, “See you after last period.” he reminded me, backing away slowly as he turned on his heels and joined his friends. They all watched Don carefully, waiting to see if he would respond or react. When he gave no indication of following Sweet Pea, one by one they retreated.

“What are you doing with Sweet Pea?” he demanded angrily, folding his arms across his chest.

“Bio.” I responded with in the same tone, mimicking his actions, “Do you have a death wish? The hell are you doing shoving a Serpent around?” I hissed angrily, pulling his arm to lead him down the hall in the opposite direction. When he looked over his shoulder to where Sweet Pea was retreating, I lightly smacked his cheek, “Hey, asshole. Don’t get any ideas.”

“Looks like a lot more than just bio, Cal. Since when were the two of you all buddy-buddy? Y’know what, doesn’t matter. You’re not hanging out with him anymore.” Donovan replied, cutting his eyes down to me. “He’s fucking psychotic, Cal, please tell me you’re not that stupid.”

“About as stupid as you are for shoving him into a locker.”

We stood in silence for a few moments, students shoving by our bodies. I was certain Don would tell Danny, and then Dean would find out. Having the boys rip on me for my choice in companionship was one thing — but Dean was something completely different. I was less worried about my own safety, and moreso for theirs. I fully understood that Sweet Pea was capable of handling himself; but like the boys had said, the Serpents were a family. You didn’t fuck with family.

“Relax, okay?” I pleaded, squeezing his arm in comfort. “I’m okay. It’s biology homework, I’m helping him study. Birdy wants me to pick up some extra credit and tutor him.” I lied easily; funnily enough, it was easier to lie about Sweet Pea than it was to lie to Sweet Pea.

Don exhaled loudly, his shoulders dropping as he released the tension he had been holding in his shoulders. “I hope you know what you’re doing.” he sighed, shaking his head slightly as Kabrina joined us at his side, cheerful smile beaming brightly in contrast to the grim surrounding.

“What’re you doing?” she questioned perkily, linking her arm through mine. She glanced between Don and I, reading our expressions. Her happy smile was quickly replaced with worry, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I spat quickly, shooting a glare up at Don. “he’s being unreasonably stupider than normal today — let’s go.” I pulled her forward, striding off down the hall leaving Don behind.

When the bell dismissed us from last period, I was surprised to find Sweet Pea standing against my locker, his arms folded as he examined his boots. He looked up as I walked towards him, casting me a boyish grin before he turned to the locker, and popped it open. I shoved my bag into the top shelf, glancing sideways at him. “How did you figure out my locker combo?” I inquired curiously.

Sweet Pea shrugged nonchalantly, resting his shoulder against the locker next to mine as I grabbed the biology textbook. “Faculty really should invest in a better filing system.”

I slammed the door shut, mouth slightly ajar as his words registered. “Did you break into the student files? That’s kind of illegal, Sweets.” I pointed out, shoving the textbook against his chest before I turned on my heels to lead him to the library.
entrance on the south wing of the school.

“Nah, Dorothy loves when I visit.” he smiled to himself — an inside joke, I could only assume — and stuck one of his hands into the pocket of his leather jacket as we walked shoulder to shoulder down the stairs. It was never awkward silence like I had expected it to be. Truthfully, I seemed to be falling into a comfortable routine with Sweet Pea. Which I previously had tried to avoid at all costs with any individual — people like Sweet Pea especially. Maybe Donovan had a point.

After about an hour of reviewing for the midterm, Sweet Pea melted into his chair and stared blankly at the tabletop. “You good?” I chuckled, pulling my hair away from my face and into a bun.

“Reproduction isn’t really my strong suit.” He grumbled absently, stretching his long legs out under the table. I watched as he left his head fall back, neck rolling stiffly, lips falling open in satisfaction when it cracked loudly. I cringed.

“Thanks for the help, but ‘m pretty sure it’s useless.”

I rolled my eyes, leaning forward to pull the notebook closer to me. The papers were full of half-assed notes, with doodles and drawings. Surprisingly enough, his handwriting was far neater than I had anticipated — I smiled to myself and started writing my own notes in the column. “You’re distracted,” I said after a few minutes, glancing back over to his resting frame. His eyes were closed, head still tilted back to expose his neck as he adjusted his folded arms. I let my eyes linger on his tattoo, memorizing the lines and shapes. How painful that must have been, I thought to myself as my brows pulled together. “Hey, why’d you get it there?” I asked, poking his neck gently with the end of my pen.

Sweet Pea opened one eye, looking sideways at me. His mouth grimaced sourly, shoulders pulling up in a shrug as he tilted his head towards me. “Dunno,” he admitted, “at the time I wanted to show how committed I was. For the longest time there was nothing I wanted more than this.”

“But?” I stressed, pulling my eyes from his, returning them to the textbook.

I heard him sigh, “But nothing. It’s still who I am and who I identify as.”

“Do you have any others?” I asked casually, highlighting keywords on the flashcards I was making. “Apart from the one on your thumb?”

I could see Sweet Pea shake his head, stealing his notebook back to shove into his bag, “No hidden tramp stamps on me. Any on you, sweetness?” his lips threatened a smirk at the idea, scanning his eyes along the length of my body. I tried to keep my shoulders relaxed as I turned to face him. Sweet Pea had made a habit of objectifying me silently with his eyes. Most of the time, when boys looked at me, they were seeing past me. Especially after I had taken the time to knock them down a few pegs. Sweet Pea never seemed to mind when I dismissed him. It never stopped him from (what I could only assume was) undressing me with his eyes.

“Fat chance,” I snickered, turning my nose up as I slammed the textbook shut. “I’m not a fan of needles.”

Sweet Pea shrugged, “They’re not so bad — more annoying than painful.” he replied, tugging on the back of my bun. I shot a warning glare in his general direction.

“You’re also six feet of solid muscle and badass, so that opinion doesn’t count.” I grumbled in response, bending to collect my belongings and toss them into my bag.

“Six five, actually,” he corrected, pulling the textbook out of my hands to carry, “and badass is an understatement — but it’ll suffice for now. You really should consider getting one.” I followed along behind him, fixing the hood on my sweater as we exited out of the library. It was completely silent in the school, and I hadn’t realized that the entire facility would be empty apart from us. Sweet Pea hadn’t been lying — it really was a ghost town after hours.

“What am I gonna get? A butterfly on my asscheek?” I knocked into his frame suddenly, dropping my bag on the ground.

“What the hell, Pea?” I asked angrily as I bent to grab my bag, brows pulled together in a glare until I looked up past him
and noticed why he had stopped. His shoulders were squared and his hands were pulled into fists at his sides, jaw working under his skin as he glared forward. We weren't alone; a small gathering of black studded leather teens watched us closely. They didn’t look like they were friends of Sweet Pea’s, meaning they were the entire opposite.

I stood on my feet slowly, involuntarily hugging myself against his back as I peered around his arm. “Sweets,” I whispered quietly, looking up at him. His face was expressionless, but behind his bangs I could see his eyes were cold and calculating, trying to think of a solution to the problem. We were easily outnumbered; among the group, Eddie’s friends from the other day stood in the back with their arms folded. They sported matching black eyes and busted lips.

“Where’s Ed?” Sweet Pea asked casually, his face eerily smooth and emotionless.

One of the Ghoulies leaned forward, folding his arms, “Still unconscious, no thanks to you.” he growled in response. I watched a few of the figures behind him simultaneously crack their knuckles, moving whenever he moved.

Pea scoffed, “I wasn’t the one to hit him,” he reminded them with a shrug, shoving his right hand into the pocket of his jacket. Sweet Pea swayed the slightest, the corner of his mouth pulling up into a playful grin. “just showed your Rocky back there a good time, that’s all.”

Rocky stepped forward from the back, dropping his folded arms into tight fists, “Fuck you, Sweetie pie —”

Sweet Pea’s eyes narrowed into a glare, smile disappearing just as quickly as it had appeared, “It’s Sweet Pea, jackass.”

I tugged on his arm, pulling his attention down to me, “Don’t provoke them.” I pleaded, pressing my lips together in worry. There was easily five of them, and only one of him. I was essentially useless — I couldn’t throw a punch if my life depended on it, and I was certain it wasn’t me they were interested in. This was all on Sweet Pea.

His eyes cut down to focus on mine, seeming to consider my words before he closed his brown orbs tightly and sighed in annoyance. “You need to go,” he whispered, handing me back my textbook. We held eyes for another moment, his face pulling into confusion when I hesitated and didn’t move to take the book. “This isn’t negotiable, sweetness. Go back through the library to the north door, wait for me by my bike.”

“Are you crazy?” I asked frantically in a hushed tone, looking past him to where the group stood. I shook my head profusely, taking a step closer to him, “No, I’m not just gonna leave you here —”

“The hell you aren’t,” he growled, shoving the textbook into my arms with more force than necessary. I looked down at his hands; his right knuckles were now accompanied by a row of heavy brass. We shared a knowing look, and I could feel my throat closing in around my vocal chords. There was a sense of urgency in his tone, his eyes pleading but his voice remained firm and assertive. “I’m not kidding, Calliope. Get out of here.”

I wrapped my fingers around the spine of the textbook, eyes lingering on the dents in the brass. They had been in heavy use, obviously, and I tried to let that comfort me. I could believe he could handle himself — what I couldn’t have faith in was the Ghoulies not doing everything they could to hospitalize him. Worry pulled at my heartstrings, trying to keep the tremble in my hands to a minimum. Reluctantly, I hugged the textbook to my chest and backed away from him slowly.

“Be careful.”

The moment he turned on his heels, he was met face to face with a large body; he nearly as tall as Sweet Pea, and definitely larger in body mass (which was saying something because Sweet Pea was already impressively massive). I ducked back into the library, trying to ignore the bangs against the lockers. I wandered back into the center of the room, looking for the north side door Sweet Pea had mentioned. I tried the several I could find, all of which were locked.

Growing impatient, I started kicking one of the metal sheets, growling in frustration.

“Why is everything locked?” I asked myself, agitated that my voice sounded so desperate. So weak.Use your head, Cal.

My eyes scanned the rows upon rows of old archives and withering books. I gnawed on my lower lip, my eyes lingering on the nude painted ladder than clung to the wall. My eyes followed up the steps, pausing when I saw the bold white
letters that printed ‘NORTH’ above the exit sign on the platform. I heaved a sigh in relief, snaking through the tables and chairs towards the ladder. It wasn’t low enough for me to reach on my own.

I hauled a chair from one of the nearby tables over. If I jumped, I could grab onto the last step, and then would have to rely on what little upper body strength I had to pull myself up. Determined, I shoved the textbook into my already heavy bag and secured it on my shoulders.

There was a loud bang as a body crashed into the main library doors. I looked over my shoulder, watching the shadowed figures on the other side of the frosted glass struggle before I jumped up. My palms were slick with sweat, making pulling myself up more difficult. I used my feet to press against the wall, fingers gripping onto the thin metal bars as I pulled myself up. Once my feet hit the bottom step, I raced up the remaining length to the exit.

When the door gave way and opened, I breathed a sigh in relief as I stopped in the hallway, doubling over to place my hands on my knees and draw in deep breaths. The hallway was empty, with the exception of the row of desks that sat perched against the back wall at the end of the row of lockers. I made my way towards the stairwell, trying to make the least amount of noise possible until I reached the base floor and exited the building. I was unsure of where I was, the sun was starting to set behind the school yard which meant finding a leather clad boy and his motorcycle would prove to be difficult. Anxiety rolled in my stomach as I gripped onto the straps of my bag tightly, chewing on the inside of my cheek as I started to walk around the building.

After fifteen minutes, I started to worry that Sweet Pea had left without me, assuming I had found my own way home. I rounded what appeared to be the seventh corner to the school, and smacked into a hard chest. I staggered to keep my balance, my heavy bag threatening to work against me and pull me down. Sweet Pea’s arms caught my shoulders quickly, his face falling into relief as he pulled me into a tight hug.

My arms wrapped around his midsection for a moment, gripping onto the material of his leather in a tight embrace before I shoved him away, swinging my bag off my back to throw into his side. “If you ever,” I started, hitting him in the hips again, “ever pull that crap again, I swear to god I’ll —”

“Shut up,” he chuckled, pulling the bag from my fingers to sling it onto his shoulder. I was relieved to see him scratch free — more surprised than anything. I brought my hand up to his chin, gripping it as tightly as I could to turn his head from left to right, examining his face. No bruises, so swelling. His hand, however, looked as though it had butchered an animal. His knuckles were reddened from the brass, slight traces of blood stains remained on the back of his olive skin. “I can handle myself.” he assured me quietly, pulling his hand from mine.

“Clearly,” I breathed quietly, staring at him in awe. He backed around the corner, beckoning me forward with his finger as he took on towards the parking long sporting the lone motorcycle. My stomach churned uneasily, worry weighing my chest down as I reluctantly followed. “so what happened?” I called, keeping a distance.

Sweet Pea shrugged, looking over his shoulder, “It’s not the first time my ass has been cornered for shit like this — don’t worry about it.”

I pulled my brows together, keeping my hands in tiny fists at my sides, “Why not just avoid it then?”

Sweet Pea looked down at me, seeming pained briefly, “If I had avoided it this time, who knows what could’ve happened.” he reminded me, nudging me with his arm. “It’s not the first time they’ve preyed on defenseless girls.”

I tried to keep the distaste at the word ‘defenseless’ off my face. I pressed my lips together in thought before I responded, “Didn’t you say your friend texted you about it?” I asked, raising my brow thoughtfully when he nodded, “But you don’t try to save all the girls? Just some?”

Sweet Pea side-eyed me as he slowed his pace to match mine. We walked in silence for a moment, Sweets considering his next words before replied, voice just above a whisper, “Just you.”
I worked with much difficulty not to let any immediate changes appear on my face. Instead, I nodded once in understanding and folded my arms. If Donovan knew — if Dean knew — about the what appeared to be very subtle attachment Sweet Pea had started to show was actually true, then I would have more issues than pissing off the Ghoulies. It wouldn’t be about my reputation — it would be about my character as a person. What it could cost me.

I took a step back when he straddled his bike, offering me the helmet. I stared at the silver coating, catching a glimpse of my grimace in the reflection of the visor. “I think I’m just gonna walk.” I murmured, grabbing my bag off the back seat. “I appreciate the offer, though.” I added quickly, trying my best to give him a smile.

Sweet Pea let the helmet drop into his lap, shoulders slumping forward when he realized convincing me otherwise was futile. “Are you comfortable doing that?” he asked, carefully reading my face as he waited for an appropriate response.

I thought about the question. It wasn’t so much so are you okay to walk home, but do you feel safe enough to walk home? I knew he meant well, considering what had just happened. I tried to find some comfort in knowing I was making an obvious effort to keep some distance to show that whatever acquaintanceship we had formed was to be kept inside the school walls, and nothing more. I wasn’t a people person, and people didn’t like me. And while boys tried, many didn’t like the idea of chasing after anything, and only did so if I was worth it. I was only worth it if I was willing to give them what they wanted, immediately.

So I stopped thinking that having a boyfriend, or a girl group, was necessary in your high school years. I was perfectly content with the way things were. With the stability of my plan. Regardless of where I lived, or who I lived with, who I wanted to be never changed. Like tunnel vision, I had taken the necessary steps to better me for myself.

“I’m okay.” I promised with a confident nod.

He looked me over once and nodded as he repositioned his helmet, “You know my number if you change your mind.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” I replied, waving him off when he revved the engine of the bike. I watched him speed out of the parking lot, leaving me standing in the middle of it alone. Oddly enough, the silence of the area haunted me more than I had anticipated. I pulled my jacket closer and wrapped my arms around my midsection as I wandered towards the familiar path that broke out between the trees.

I set the bowl of macaroni in the center of the table, looking up at Donovan as he shot an open glare in my direction. It hadn’t been the easiest at home, knowing that Don was doing wrong by his brothers to keep what happened with Sweet Pea to himself; oddly enough I found it touching that he cared enough about me to consider doing that at all in the first place. In return, I accepted the cold shoulder with minimal complaint. The way I saw it, it could have been a lot worse.

“Anything interesting happen at school?” Dean asked casually as we sat for dinner that Friday evening. It had been three days since my run in with the Ghoulies, and I still had yet to bring it up to any of my cousins. I shook my head, dumping heaping mountains of the casserole on my plate while Danny clapped his large hands together and started in on his daily tangent.

Over the last few days, Kabrina and I had spent a lot of time together. Admittedly, it was mainly because I was trying to keep as much distance between Sweet Pea and I as possible. He still showed up for my shifts at Pop’s, bringing the girl I knew as Toni along with him, as well as a few other familiar faces. He never bothered trying to keep conversation going, preferred to keep quiet when I came around. I suppose that might have had something to do with the fact I wasn’t really conversing with him.

He continued to make an effort to sit next to me in most of our shared classes, and most of the students continued to comply with his demands. I tried my best to make the process as nonchalant as possible, hoping to conceal the obvious while still being polite.
His persistence was annoying.

Dean mentioned something about there being a town meeting upcoming that he would be going to. For an adult, his willingness to play nice with all of the other adults was minimal. “No doubt just another ploy to bring the Southside some more rainy days.” he grumbled, tossing his used napkin onto his cleared plate. “From what I hear, McCoy wants to instill a curfew.”

“Curfew?” I asked with a snort, pulling my brows together. “That’s a little far fetched, don’t you think?”

“Doesn’t matter what I think,” he sighed, finishing the remainder of his beer. “you know that saying ‘no one is above the law’? Doesn’t apply to McCoy.”

The Black Hood was running free in Riverdale, and the police department had no real leads as to who the Black Hood was or how they planned on stopping him. It was strange to think that in the midst of students being targeted and people dying, I was more worried about my involvement with Sweet Pea. More paranoid than ever, trying to ensure that neither of my older cousins found out about him. The table was cleared, prompting me to follow Donovan up to his room. Personally, while I was appreciative of his silence on the matter, I wasn’t a fan of being without the one person I had grown particularly fond of. I caught the door just before it were to slam shut with my leg, pulling a very loud, very annoyed sigh from Don.

“What, Calliope?”

“First of all,” I slammed the door shut, turning to him with hard eyes, “don't call me Calliope.Ever. Secondly,” I sat down on the edge of his bed and looked up at him; his arms were folded and he appeared disinterested in what I had to say but I continued speaking anyway, “thank you for keeping your big mouth shut.” I said quickly, folding my hands in my lap.

“I didn’t do it for you.” he mumbled, “The last thing I need is Dean getting caught up in their shit again —”

“Again?”

Don bit his tongue and pinched the bridge of his nose, “You know nothing —”

“You’re right, I don’t.” I stated firmly, irritation creeping up into my voice. “Because no one tells me anything. You’re all treating me like I’m a child — friendly reminder, dear cousin, I’m technically older than you.”

Donovan considered my words and mulled over them for a few moments, his lips pulling into a tight scowl as he narrowed his green hues down at me. And then defeat hit him; he flopped onto the bed next to me, looking up at the ceiling with a sigh, “You’re right. Dean used to hang with a group of them when he was still in highschool — obviously it’s been a few years since then,” he laughed once, folding his arms behind his head, “he and the used-to-be Sweet Pea of his generation were bffs. Thick as thieves. Didn’t end so well for them. Lines started to blur, people started to question his loyalty and that wasn’t flying with FP or Tallboy. Dean was dealt with ‘accordingly’,” he held up quotations around the word, “and he never spoke to any of them ever again.”

“What do you mean he was dealt with?” I asked, flipping onto my stomach so that I could face him.

Don licked his lips, his voice dropping into a whisper, “Dean was initiated into the Serpents when he was fifteen — he was with them for two years before they deemed him unfit for going against the code, and they removed his tattoo.” I felt my brows pull together, confusion sweeping across all of my features.

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“And when you say removed?” I pressed weakly, peering up at him from under my hair.

“I mean they burned his skin until it was unrecognizable.”

Ouch.
“Isn’t Dean the one that said snakes were bad company?”

“Don’t you think he’d know best?” Don replied, lips pressed into a firm line, eyes boring into mine with a knowing look.

We lay in silence for a few heartbeats; I was trying to wrap my head around it. The boys had made it sound like the Serpents were one gang originally started way back when, and that new members were daughters and sons to the pre-existing members. That outsiders couldn’t join. So either that was a misconception and the town was hellbent on painting the family-loyalty gang all wrong — or somehow the Hobbs family line fit into the Southside Serpents by blood relation.

I rubbed my temples, the tension immediately building in my neck as I circled back over all of the information. “That’s… really messed up.” I concluded, at a complete loss for words.

“That’s the only reason why I got mad — and also why I’ve kept Danny in the dark.” Don mumbled quietly, “Sweet Pea might have a sweet mouth when it comes to you and no one understands it, but his loyalties will always lie with them. He’s no better than the rest of them. He’s quick on his feet and scarily strong; he’s their best recruit since Penny Peabody, and none of them bother fucking with her because she’s the worst of them all and she’s not even violent.” He sat up and looked down at me, rubbing his bare arms against the chill in the room, “Danny wouldn’t have been able to keep his mouth shut. Dean would’ve known before he’d stepped foot in the door that day, and your ass would’ve been shipped back to Greendale.”

I tried to let the seriousness of his words sink in — it only gave me more reason to avoid Sweet Pea at all costs, and this time I was determined to keep him at bay.
“If I say yes will you shut up and leave me alone?” I interrupted angrily, brow furrowed as I shot daggers towards the culprit. There was a hint of triumph in his eyes, lips cracking into a boyish grin as his head nodded once, eyes quickly scanning the top half of my body above the table. “Don’t be gross.” I amended with a growl, slamming the cover of my textbook shut for emphasis. It was still a mystery to me how bold some males could be; and I was beginning to realize that men in this town simply never gave up.

Ever.

I thought about to Sweet Pea, and how utterly revolted he would be that I caved so easily. I thought back to his disappointed eyes, the way his lips pulled down in the corners to indicate his displeasure. Thought back to the way I wanted to ensure he never looked at me that way again, and how much it had actually impacted me. How a very small part of my body screamed to do whatever I needed to correct my mistake.

It was revolting how often I found myself thinking about him, wanting to talk to him, to talk about Kabrina or my cousins. He had started to show his face less and less around Pop’s. Apart from the very short periods in school, I didn’t see or hear much from Sweet Pea.

Oh, how I wished he were here, now.

Joshua had visited me on my break while I was trying to finish some of the homework I had, but he preferred to gossip about Northside drama. It appeared as though he didn't have anything better to discuss.

“I’m trying to do homework, and I only have fifteen minutes until my break is over. Do you need something else, or?” I attempted to keep the annoyance in my voice to a minimum. When he didn’t move, I rolled my eyes and sunk back into my side of the booth, "Look, Joshua, I don’t know what impression Don gave you. I don’t really do friends, let alone boyfriends.”

“I didn’t say I wanted to be your boyfriend —”

I cut my eyes towards him, “I’m not sleeping with you, either.”

I didn’t give him the opportunity to respond. My feet were carrying me to the back with my textbook and laptop in hand, holding the swinging door steady behind me so that I was safely concealed in the privacy of the back. Pop looked up at me from behind the dishwasher, his eyes crinkling around the edges as he smiled.

Curious, I set my textbook down in my locker and turned to him, “What?” I asked, trying to keep a smile of my own from forming.

“You don’t get along with any of my male customers.” he chuckled, tossing a wet rag at me.

I shrugged, balling the cloth into the palms of my hands, “I do — just have very little patience.” I admitted to him quietly, letting my head fall back as I exhaled. I couldn’t wait to go home — to wash the day off my body, to be rid of responsibility. When I was naked and heated, when my body felt all too sensitive, I felt at complete ease. And while I was typically a fan of the winter season, I was appreciative of the warmth that I felt. As though I could pretend I was home. My home. A home where my father existed, and the last two years were simply forgotten. “That, and Joshua's a righteous pain and was mooching off my free meal.”

We worked away side by side in the back to finish closing duties while the new hire swept and cleaned up front. When Pop was ready to handle the night stragglers alone, I pushed open the rear exit with a hard-set scowl. It had been clear skies and a pretty red sunset — where the thunder and lightning had come from, I didn’t know.
I pulled my hood over my hair carefully, tucking any loose strands into the back as I rounded the corner of the restaurant. The figure that leaned against the side of the building stepped into the light; I paused in my tracks and clenched my hands into fists at my sides. The frame was tall and looming, their shoulders tense under the rain the plummeted from the dark, cloudy skies above. And once they registered who I was, they took a step towards me.

I froze in place, completely petrified.

Sweet Pea’s figure came forward and towered over mine, forcing me to look up at his face. Droplets of water from his bangs dripped down onto my forehead. My brow furrowed in worry seeing his face clearly as a bolt of lightning illuminated the sky, I carefully lifted my fingers up to touch the part of his eye that had started to swell and bruise, “What happened?” I whispered, index finger lightly tracing the blood clots pooling together under his left eye. “Sweet Pea, what happened?” I repeated, my voice was a little harder this time, a little more firm.

He grabbed my hand and pulled it from his face, holding it in the air between our soaking bodies, “Did you know one of the Northside freakshows has a gun?” he asked me after a moment, fixing my hood around my hair. “People thought I was psychotic for being a little knife happy.”

I pulled back from his ministrations, looking up at him in utter confusion, “You carry a knife on you?” to which his brows lifted in response, lips pulling into a grin. I quickly recovered, slapping his hand away as I took a step forward, “Who has a gun, Sweets?”

We stood in the alley behind Pop’s for a way too before he finally offered to walk me back over the tracks; in that short, miserable time together, I had learned that Archie Andrews had come down to the Southside to defile and vandalize parts of the town, hoping to spur some sort of reaction out of the Black Hood. Sweet Pea had made note to sneer at his own words, finding irony in them. Listening to Sweet Pea talk about what happened that night, hearing just how unfair and unjustified the town was to the Southside made my own blood boil — and I didn’t personally consider it my own problem. And I knew it could have been about anybody on the Southside, my cousin’s included.

But tonight, it boiled for him.

I had, unfortunately, bared witness to a side of Sweet Pea that not many others had. His reputation helped to keep the whispers and gossip about ‘us’ to a minimum, but it hadn’t stopped students from our shared classes from staring and making passing remarks. They were wrong to think it to begin with, but that didn’t stop me from wanting to defend him. They didn’t know how silly he could be, how underneath all of the leather and attitude, there was a boy that wanted a different life. But I knew as much as everyone else did, too. I knew his anger superseded him. I knew he preferred to let his emotional instability control his actions, which meant the majority of the school had the unfortunate opportunity to meet his brass knuckles.

He was easily offended, and a hot headed mess. While I wanted to believe his heart was in the right place, he never seemed to change.

I found myself cursing under my breath as we reached the porch of Dean’s house, the walk having been shorter than I remembered; the lights were off, which meant Dean hadn’t come home yet, and the boys were either already asleep or out. I had spent most of the last week trying to keep my distance from Sweet Pea if I could help it; now I held the door open and all but dragged him over the threshold, eyes silently pleading for his compliance. We left his Harley parked behind the house near the shed, and I prayed my cousin’s wouldn’t find the tire tracks and investigate.

I pressed my finger to my lips as I quietly shut the door and flipped the lock. “I’m going to get us some towels to dry off — my room’s the one at the top of the stairs to the left,” I whispered, shrugging out of my jacket to hang on the hook by the door. I turned quickly, holding my hands out in warning while my eyes shot daggers at the back of his head, “and don’t touch anything!” I hissed, sighing in relief when his heavy boots were silent as he made his way up the stairs.

I took my time in the kitchen; I boiled the kettle for Dean for when he came home, cleared the dishes Danny and Don had left on the counter, and tied the trash and left it by the back door. I leaned against the granite counter top, sipping
thoughtfully on a bottle of water as I contemplated my next moves. I was wasting time, trying to put off going upstairs to face the boy that occupied the space in my bedroom. My mind was racing nearly as fast as my heartbeat, my nerves alight with fire as I pictured his shivering frame seated on the edge of my bed.

I had done the one thing I was certain would be considered unforgivable in my cousin’s eyes. I brought a Serpent home — and not just any Serpent. *Sweet Pea.* If any of them knew that he was here, I was positive that Donovan hadn't been lying when he said I’d be shipped back to Greendale. Returning to that town was the last thing I wanted to happen. And for the first time since my father had died, for the first time in a very, very long time, I felt as though I had found a place I could call home.

I raced up the stairs to the bathroom, locking the door behind me. Staring in the mirror, I let out a sigh, then pulled my damp hair out of my face, washed the smeared makeup off and brushed my teeth. I grabbed a towel off the rack beside me, threw it over my shoulder and flipped the lights off in the hallway as I went.

I inched the door open slowly, stomach swirling nervously as I stepped into the room.

My fingers hesitated to lock the door once it was shut behind me; being locked in a confined area with Sweet Pea was likely bound to be an incredibly bad idea, but against my better judgement, I twisted the knob until it clicked. “I wasn’t sure if you needed a change of clothes or just a towel but I figured —” my words came to halt when I lifted my head and noticed Sweet Pea standing at the foot of my bed, holding one of my sketchbooks. His silhouette was illuminated by the moon and lightning outside, eyelashes fluttering against the top of his cheeks every so often as his eyes moved across the page. “I thought I told you not to touch anything.” I growled angrily, pulling the booklet from his hand to hug against my chest. I held the towel out, brows crumpled together when he remained still. “You’re getting water everywhere.” I added, a little softer this time.

“They’re good.” he murmured, taking the towel from my fingers as his brown orbs locked onto mine. “Really good,” he continued as he peeled his jacket from his body, making an effort to conceal the logo stitched into the back by draping it over the back of my computer chair.

“It’s not just you,” I defended weakly, feeling the heat creep up from my cheeks and into my neck. I turned my body, carefully wrapping my cold arms around the leather of the book as he stripped his t-shirt from his body. “I draw Toni, too.” I set the book down on my dresser, looking over my shoulder, watching as he shook his head furiously in the towel. I was enamored with him. It was so unlike him, seeing him stripped of all the things that typically made Sweet Pea who he was. No leather jacket, no hair in his eyes. His body, although wet and hard to see, looked far more relaxed than it should have been. When his shoulders weren’t squared under all the layers, when he wasn’t trying to assert his dominance, *Sweet Pea almost* looked like a normal teenage boy.

My heart tugged painfully at the thought.

I took advantage of the silence to excuse myself, seeking sanctuary inside my closet. I flipped on the light and brought my hands up to my face as I sighed. “What are you doing?” I mouthed to myself, looking around at the boxes not yet unpacked and rows of sweaters hanging along the back rack.

I undressed quickly, kicking the wet uniform into the corner as I pulled a tank top down over my bare torso and pulled a pair of flannels up my legs. My eyes lingered on the box sitting on the top shelf, more pristine than the others, not yet touched or opened. The rest had been resealed over the years, from home to home, storage to shelter. I’d settle in, rip the tape and pry it open, only to later reseal it shut. All except for one.

I grunted as my arms struggled to ease it down from the shelf, awkwardly moving around the tiny closet to set it on the ground in front of me. My fingers ran across the words written in black marker, pulling a petulant sigh from my lips. The scent was overwhelming; still crisp and heavy, every article of clothing in the box reminded me of a time when life wasn’t so
complicated. Not great, but not so complicated. When I still had the chance to be me, to grow into who I thought I was supposed to be. Honestly, that person was very different than who I had become.

I forced my shoulders to relax as I gripped onto the blue plaid button down, holding it up to my nose to inhale my father’s scent deeply.

Two quiet knocks on the closet door interrupted my train of thought, “Cal?” worry laced with the word, his voice muffled through the door. I hastily pulled a pair of track pants out from the bottom of the box, standing on my feet as the door started to open. I turned then, noting the concern in his face before I pushed the clothing against his bare chest, trying not to pay much mind to the burning sensation his skin left on my fingertips. “What’re these?” he inquired, brows furrowing as he took a step back.

“I figured you wouldn’t want to sit around in wet jeans,” I retorted as I followed him towards the bed. I watched his hands begin to tear at the material of his belt, prompting me to spin on my heels with an embarrassed huff. I wasn’t sure when it was appropriate to turn around to see if he were finished and decent, but shortly after, the gentle caress of his fingers against my lower back served permission enough. My head to turned so that I could look at him.

He was closer than I anticipated. Sweet Pea’s face was only just visible by the lanterns that hung from my ceiling he had turned on, and I noticed that his mouth was pressed into a tight line. My arms instantly snaked around his waist, hugging myself against his warm frame tightly.

It was almost as though he was here. It had been a long time since a warm body had worn this shirt, and had been even longer since I last hugged the person wearing it.

Sweet Pea seemed to be at a loss with my actions; his arms remained lifted awkwardly in the air, hands clenching into tight balls before he eventually wrapped them around my shoulders, holding me tightly against him. We stood in silence, his hand combing through my hair, fingers gently pulled the strands back. “I’m supposed to be avoiding you.” I hummed quietly into his chest, eyes closing when he squeezed me tighter.

“I know.” he responded, voice sounding distant. “You’re doing an awful job.” he added out, trying to force his usual cocky demeanor, but genuinely seemed to be upset with my bluntness.

I sighed again, pulling back from his frame reluctantly to peer up at him. “You gonna tell me how you got that?” I narrowed my eyes, folding my arms over my chest as I sat back on the bed.

“Give me your phone.” his hand was already extended forward, not leaving me much say in the matter. I let my tongue roll over my lip in annoyance, pushing off the mattress to waner over to where my bag slumped against the floor, water creating a very small puddle around the bottom of it. I held my thumb over the home button, watching the screen open before I held it out to him.

He sat in my place on the bed, fingers scrolling through a webpage before he selected a video and flipped the phone around to return it to me, “Watch.”

He leaned back on his hands as I sat next to him, folding my legs under my bum as my thumb hit play and lowered the volume. I strained to hear the teen clearly, but the gist of the video came across loud and clear. Obviously, Archie Andrews had a death wish. “What is this?” I asked, peering sideways at Sweet Pea, who had leaned closer to watch the video over my shoulder. I tried not to let his close proximity catch me off guard. “Another gang?”

Sweet Pea scoffed, “Hardly.” he snorted, falling back onto the bed with a tired sigh. “This came out a few days ago — our new recruit is bff’s with the psychopath.” he debriefed, resting his hands on his stomach. As he spoke, recollection formed in my mind. He had given me a more watered down version of the story earlier on our walk home from Pop’s, “Fangs and TJ and I were at Bo’s getting some smokes, came out and this fucker was marking up the side of the building. Pulled a gun out when we got involved to get him to stop —”
I rolled my eyes, twisting my neck so that I could look at him with a dubious glare, “C’mon, Pea. We both know you’re skimping over the details.”

He met my eyes for a moment before he rolled his own, and closed them. “Fine. I pulled a knife on him.”

“There we go.”

“He still pulled out a fucking gun — do you have any idea how f*cked up that is? Where did he even get a gun?” he asked, mainly to himself. His eyes opened as he looked at the ceiling and the lights, mind beginning to reel and contemplate what under the table deal the Northsider made to get the gun in the first place.

“Don’t even think about it, Sweets.” I warned, shoving his hips roughly. “You don’t need a gun.”

Sweet Pea’s jaw tightened at my words, turning his head to the side so he could look at me as he continued, “I went to see him. Not gonna lie, I was a lot more confident beating his ass when it was just him. Well, he had some company — it just got real messy real quick. Andrews landed a solid one on me,” he seemed bothered by that statement, and even more annoyed he had said it out loud. My fingers instinctively went to his face, thumb gently smoothing over the strain in between his brows, “I’m used to how dirty we fight down here. Everyone’s so predictable. It’s how I managed to get out of the school the other night scratch free. They’re all driven by emotion, none of them use their head so it makes it easier to get a leg up on them.

But this kid knew what he was doing. I was on the ground before I even realized what had happened. Don’t get me wrong, that was just his one, but the Bulldogs were so sloppy. Bunch of fucking pansies. I’m gonna be really disappointed if he doesn’t have a bruised rib cage in the morning.”

My mind flashed with vivid mental images of Sweet Pea stomping his steel toed boots down onto someone’s body, swinging his fists into their faces. The thought of him being capable of doing so much more than I even knew, terrified me; I gripped his jaw in my hand and squeezed tightly, pulling a wince from him, “If you...” I started, dropping the tone in my voice to mimic his from the night in the school, “...swear to God —”

“Easy, sweetness.” he grimaced, pulling on my wrist gently. I released his face and twisted my hand from his grip, shoving it into my lap. I rubbed my thumbs together absently, trying to keep my eyes down on the patterns in my flannel bottoms instead of on his face. The less emotion I conveyed to him, the better.

I was failing miserably.

“He has a gun, Pea.” my voice was thick with concern. My mind couldn’t fully grasp onto the words. It still baffled me that teens had such easy access to weapons that had been created with the sole purpose of killing other things. Other people. That someone had held a war machine to Sweet Pea’s face, and he had the mind to seek out said person to finish what he started. I didn’t know what to think of it. Was this his initial reaction every time a Northsider puts him in a compromising situation? “A shot wound isn’t like a stab wound, you idiot. People die when they get shot, okay, they die. You could have died.” I huffed, leaning into his face. "You're made for more than dying in the hood with a fucking bullet in your head, Sweets, get some god damn sense.”

“He made a joke out of me.” he shot back, leaning up on his elbows.

“By holding a gun to your face?” I deadpanned, “I don't think very many people blame you for running — at least it means you have enough sense to know when to pick your battles.” when he didn’t respond, I pushed away from his body and sat upright, to create the distance between us. We were quite for a few moments, both too caught up in our own thoughts to speak much. “We should ice your face.”

“I don’t need ice.”

I shot my brows up and looked down at him. “You’re so stubborn.”
“Me?” he pressed, his lips breaking into a smile, “Have you heard yourself? If I’m stubborn, what does that make you?”

“Reasonable.” I responded, sitting back against my pillows. Sweet Pea crawled up beside me, twisting his body in the warmth under my blanket as he rested his head against his knuckles, “One of us has to be.” I added grimly, face all too serious.

He narrowed his eyes for a moment, lips turning into a smirk, “Do you wanna play a game?”

“A game?” I repeated, glancing down at the time on my phone. “It’s a little late to be playing games, don’t you think?”

“Nah, it’s only midnight.” he shrugged, “It’ll be fun.”

“For who?” I asked, sliding my feet under the covers as I lowered myself into the dip in the mattress.

“Me.” he shrugged, fixing the duvet over my frame, “But that’s besides the point. Answer the question: do you sleep naked?”

I glared at the ceiling, bringing my hands up to play with the tie on my flannels, “This again? I’m currently fully clothed, so I think that’s your answer.”

“You’re fully clothed because I’m here,” he reminded me, “but if I wasn’t?”

I pursed my lips into a small pout, thinking it were completely unreasonable to be asking such a question, but answered nevertheless, “Same attire, maybe minus the pants.” I grumbled. “What about you? Do you let the family jewels hang out?”

He chuckled quietly, resting his arms behind his head, “As often as I can.” he winked; I tried to keep the heat from rushing into my cheeks, instead opted for shrug. “Tell me about your first kiss.”

“Okay, this is the last unreasonably personal question I’m answering and then you need to figure out another route before I punch you,” I growled, sinking into my pillows as I thought on my answer. I could tell him the truth or I could blatantly lie. I couldn’t tell him I hadn’t had one — he’d find that too laughable, and I already embarrassed myself enough. If I told him the truth, that was also equally laughable. I chewed on my lower lip, “I was twelve, it was seven minutes in heaven. We mashed tongues while he felt me up — super uncomfortable, it never happened again.”

“What didn’t?” he prodded, eyes studying my face carefully. “Kissing him or kissing in general?”

“It’s my turn,” I reminded him, “and no more intimate questions.” Thankful that he didn’t argue, we continued on; Sweet Pea’s favourite colour was green, his preferred old soul rap and R&B over anything else but pretended to like rock to satisfy his friends (personally, I didn’t believe he was over his punk rock phase). His favourite meal happened to be anything breakfast, but he was a sucker for waffles with strawberries and whipped cream. At some point, he had begun rambling on about god only knows what — my eyes had closed, head nodding every so often to keep him talking.

Eventually my breathing evened out, and the sound of his hushed voice lulled me to sleep.

Three loud bangs sounded on my door, waking me from my sleep abruptly. My tired eyes fought against the sunlight beaming in through the window — wait. Sunlight. It was morning. Sunlight also meant I had slept through the alarm on my phone, because typically when I woke up, it was still dark outside.

Slowly, I peered over my shoulder. The sight, while slightly adorable, was not the sight I wanted to see first thing that morning. Sweet Pea lay just behind me, arm curled around my hip as his mouth hung ajar. He inhaled, dragging the air across the back of his throat quietly, “Are you kidding me?” I hissed in annoyance, “You snore?” Despite my various quiet efforts to wake him, Sweets merely moaned in complaint and shoved his face into the back of my neck, arms coiling
around me to keep me still.

Admittedly, it was a refreshing change of pace. Most mornings, I hit snooze for an hour, woke up with just enough time to eat, put a face on and get out of the door in time to make it to my morning class without being late. Seeing Sweet Pea’s face buried into my pillows, body encased under the fluffy purple duvet was something otherworldly. I almost felt bad for having to wake him; more often than not he looked like he never got enough sleep. I just wanted to give him that much — to give him the solid eight hours I’m certain he was overdue for.

There was another loud knock at the door that pulled my attention from his peaceful face; Dean’s muffled voice carried through the crack between the floor and the bottom of the wood, “You’re gonna be late, Cal! The boys are gone, I’m leaving now. Lock up when you go!”

I waited until I heard his footsteps descend the stairs, then I shot my hand under the covers, fingers searching for my phone. I pulled the device to my face, the time reading 8:11 AM. School started in less than twenty minutes. “Crap,” I sighed, pressing the palm of my hand into my forehead. “Okay, Sweets,” I tried cooing the name gently to coax him awake, rolling over so that I could face him. “you gotta get up, we’re gonna be late.”

The snoring had ceased; a single brown eye opened, then peered down and focused on me before he closed it again. His fingers trailed slowly up my back, entwining into the back of my hair as he shoved my face into his chest, “Shut up,” he growled tiredly into the top of my head, lips brushing against my hair. “Please,” he added more politely.

I pushed on his chest, twisting my shoulders and head so that I could breathe freely, “We have to go to Biology — if we’re both missing, there’s gonna be a lot of talk.”

“No there won’t.” he mumbled quietly, fingers massaging the back of my skull, pulling them through the tangled strands, “People aren’t stupid enough to say shit about you.”

I huffed in annoyance, “Okay,” I pressed, pushing the heel of my hand into his chest again, “I still need to go.” That’s when I noticed that his chest was bare. I pressed my hand flat against his heart and looked up at him again, “Where did your shirt go?” I demanded angrily, sitting up right.

Sweet Pea groaned, arm falling from my shoulder to my lap as I fixed my hair, “It was too hot.” he grumbled, shoving his face into the side of my hip, no doubt to keep the sunlight from bothering his eyes.

“So you stripped in my bed?” I hissed, “You aren’t even supposed to be here.” I accused, rubbing my tired eyes furiously.

Sweet Pea rolled onto his back, stretching his arms above his head. I watched the muscles in his chest and shoulders roll as he did so, watching the way his ribs worked as he arched his back off the mattress, pulling a loud yawn from his pouted lips. With his arms behind his head, the muscles in his biceps pulled forward and bulged. My eyes trailed over the definitive curve of mass, trying not to make my stare entirely obvious. He relaxed into the pillows again, meeting my eyes, “You never told me I couldn’t stay.”

I raked my hair into a pony, pulling my eyes from his as I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, “For future reference, me passing out isn’t an invitation to sleep in my bed.” I pulled my sweater off the laundry hamper in the corner, holding it in my hands as I turned to face him, “No one can know you were here.” I reminded him.

“’Course not,” he grumbled, “wouldn’t wanna hurt your reputation, sweetess.” Sweet Pea folded his arms behind his head more comfortably, looking at my chest from his corner of the bed. His lips pulled into a smirk, “Bit nippy this morning, huh Cal?” he joked, his warm pools darting up to mine before I looked down at my chest with furrowed brows; my arms shoved through the sleeves on my sweater and hauled it over my head.

“What about your rep?” I growled, throwing my dad’s flannel in his direction, “I have to shower or I’m gonna be gross, and I can’t come back in here naked if you’re still occupying my bed.”

I heard a low chuckle resonate from the back of his throat as he sat up and pulled the sleeves over his bare arms, fingers
slowly working to do up the buttons on the blue plaid shirt. “I won’t peek.” He promised, running a tired hand through his (very) fluffy hair.

“That is the biggest lie you’ve ever told, and we both know it.” I pulled drawers of my dresser open, rummaging through the various pieces to find a suitable pair of jeans. I started throwing together my outfit, tossing the clothes onto the chair (that was still occupied by his jacket) and then grabbed my bag of toiletries, unlocking the door and pulling it open. “If you’re not gone by the time I get out, I’m going to give you a matching set.” I stated firmly, gesturing to the very swollen, very bruised left eye. “I’ll see you in bio.”
I was surprised when he had listened to me. It surprised me even more that I had come out of the shower to a cleaned room; the bed had been neatly made, pillows fluffed and smoothed, and any remnants that he had been here had been discarded of. The lights had been shut off, he had folded my clothing and left them on the bed, next to an open sketchbook that showcased his profile, with a little blue sticky note attached at the bottom that read

This one is my favourite - Pea.

Sweet Pea showed up to Biology with his usual smugness gracing his sharp features. Truthfully, despite the late night we both had, he looked a little more rested. He plopped down into his chair next to mine, turning to me with a triumphant grin, “What’s your deal?” I asked, unable to hide my smile, watching him kick his feet up onto the table and lean back on two legs of the chair.

“Nothin’,” he said, training his eyes on Birdy as he handed out the midterm exam, “ready to fail miserably?” Sweets asked quietly when the group in front of us received their copies and groaned simultaneously. I took a calming breath, hoping to ease the anxiety that had instantly put me on edge.

“It’ll be fine,” I replied, leaning closer to him when Birdy neared us. I wasn’t sure if I was trying to convince him or myself, “as long as you don’t overthink it, can’t be so bad.” I offered him an encouraging smile, hunching over the booklet placed in front of me.

“You have seventy-five minutes starting now.”

“That was agonizing.” I groaned with a pout, looking up at Don while Kabrina rubbed my shoulders in comfort, “I’ve never experienced a teacher completely one-eighty a test like that.”

My cousin laughed, popping another cherry tomato into his mouth as he leaned forward so he could speak over the shouting of his friends at the table, “Birdy’s kinda known for that — most of the students aren’t paying attention anyway, so he gets away with it.”

I sighed out in frustration, resting my head against the cool metal of the table, “Unbelievable.” I muttered begrudgingly, looking up at Kabrina’s face. Her glossed lips were pulled back into a sympathetic smile, acrylic nails still raking over my back. “He’s gonna kill my average.” I groaned again, stuffing my hands into the pocket of my hoodie.

“Think about it this way,” Bri started, stabbing the salad she had purchased from the lunch lady with her fork, “if you fail bio, you can slum it with the rest of us neanderthals again next year.”

“Ooh,” Don litted, raising his eyebrows in a teasing manner, “that was a big word, Sobon. Did Phillips teach you that one?”

“Bite me, Hobbs.” she growled back, brown hues cutting to my cousin’s for a brief moment before she returned her attention to me, ignoring his quip back. “Seriously, Cal, you’re gonna be fine. It’s one midterm, don’t stress.”

I wanted to roll my eyes. When didn't I stress?

I pushed the remainder of my leftover macaroni towards Don, smiling when he squeezed my hand in gratitude. “Heard you left late this morning — everything okay?” he asked quietly when Kabrina turned her attention to something Danny had said, shoveling a large forkful of the pasta into his mouth.

I nodded, hoping to appear nonchalant as I sat upright, “Overslept, that's all. Did Dean mention anything about the
meeting this morning?” I asked in return, hoping Don would allow for the subject change. He briefed over the summary Dean had given him. Alice Cooper and Fred Andrews had spent fifteen minutes yelling at each other from across the hall, Betty Cooper and Jughead (I recognized the name from the previous night — he was the new kid Sweet Pea had talked about) had caused a commotion.

Joshua nudged my side and joined into the conversation, muttering something about some kid that had gotten jumped by a group of Serpents. “Rumor has it he was stabbed in the leg.” he whispered quietly; my eyes automatically looked past Don’s head to where the Serpents usually resided during lunch hour. My stomach rolled uneasily, as the tables were empty. No sign of Toni, no sign of Fangs.

No sign of Sweet Pea.

“I highly doubt he was jumped,” I interrupted, “isn’t it sort of unheard of for the Serpents to cross the tracks without reason?”

“Cal has a point,” Don nodded, “they don’t mix with the public often. The last they really bothered anyone was at the Twilight.”

“The Twilight?” I asked, raising a brow in question.

“Drive in,” Kabrina informed quietly; I looked over to her and smiled in appreciation. “It was a great hook-up spot till the Serpents started trashing it.”

I glanced down at my phone, grimacing at the time. “We should get going.” I grumbled, pulling my bag out from under my seat. I leaned over and ruffled Don’s hair, swiping my History notes off the table as Kabrina and I walked side by side out of the double-doors leading to the courtyard.

The sky remained grim and dreary, remnants of the previous night’s thunderstorm soaked the soil and grass but left a wonderful earthy smell in it’s wake.

My eyes caught sight of Sweet Pea’s lean figure bent over one of the tables at the bottom of the stairs, eyes locked the bystander that stood in front of him. My body relaxed. In the midst of the gloom of the outside weather, his lips appeared purple, as though he were cold but the rest of him didn’t give any indication he was bothered by the chilly wind as the muscles rolled under his bare arms. “You can’t be half a Serpent.” he pressed firmly, eyes narrowing at the boy in the red jacket before his brown hues lifted to mine, then they softened.

I followed Kabrina down the steps past the group, noticing the subtle nudge Sweet Pea gave Fangs as the group dispersed away from the table as headed to class. I gripped the strap on my bag tightly, gnawing on my lower lip as Kabrina dove into her usual pre-calc rant. I could hear the sound of heavy boots against the pavement behind us; I tried to appear nonchalant as I looked around and just over my shoulder.

Sure enough, the boys trailed along not too far from where we walked, faces void of emotion, hands shoved into the pockets of their jeans.

“I’ll catch you in fitness,” Bri sighed petulantly, turning to rush through the muddy grass towards the outside portable where her class was held. “try not to stress about Birdy!” she called out just before she disappeared behind the building. I waved once, feet slowing to aid in closing the distance between the boys that followed along quietly behind me.

In under thirty seconds, they flanked me on either side as we turned around the corner of the school; thankful to be out of eyesight to anyone that might care enough to tell my either of cousins, I held my notebook out in the same second Sweet Pea offered his hand to carry it for me. “Birdy got you good, huh?” Fangs asked, eyes trained forward as we passed a group of Ghoulies sporting heavy black and blue bruises. I traded a glance with Pea, noting the smug smirk that graced his lips.

“You could say that.” I grumbled, fixing the strays that had fallen out of my ponytail throughout the day. “I don’t know
how he expects anyone to pass if he’s gonna pull that kinda crap.” The boys swapped looks overtop of my head, their mouths pulled back over their teeth as they chuckled simultaneously. “What?”

“He doesn’t expect anyone to pass,” Fangs stated, shrugging his shoulders when my mouth fell open in horror, “given the lack of student involvement in this school, would you really expect any different?”

“Guess not.” I slipped through the open door that Sweets was holding open. Fangs and I walked side by side as the taller Serpent trailed along behind me, his heavy footsteps echoing through the nearly empty hallway as last minutes stragglers rushed to class. “Still, I need to maintain my average if I want to get into York.”

“York?” Fangs repeated.

I rolled my eyes, turning my head to look at him as we climbed the stairs to the second floor, “It’s a university in Canada I’m thinking about applying to. Their psychology program is one of the best in North America — I just try to meet their minimum standards. But they’re super competitive, so it’s a far fetched dream.”

“Canada?” Sweet Pea asked from behind us, brows pulled together as his eyes focused on the floor space right in front of him.

I nodded, “That’s the plan, boys.” I thought back to the photographs of the city that York was based in. Toronto was a growing New York City. Skyscrapers, culture, a city full of opportunity — goosebumps erupted over my arms at the mere thought. “I’m getting as far, far away from here as soon as humanly possible.” I stated firmly, meeting Fangs’ smile with a grin of my own.

Sweet Pea followed me to our seats on the right hand side of the classroom — today, Fangs kicked Abby out of her usual desk beside me to stick close to his friend. I offered her a sympathetic look, although it was futile, I’m sure she understood better than to question Fangs reasoning. Sweet Pea straddled his chair, arms folding across the top of my desk, then he absently propped his chin on his folded arms, eyes seeming lost.

Not squandering the opportunity, I reached forward to brush his bangs away from his face. His warm orbs looked up at me before he sighed tiredly, sitting upright.

When Fangs attention had been pulled elsewhere, I leaned forward, “So … I heard some Northside kid got stabbed last night,” I started, watching his face carefully for a reaction, “wanna tell me what that’s about?” Sweet Pea sat up a little taller, blankly staring back at me as I raised my brow in question, “Christ, Sweets, please tell me you didn’t stab some kid —”

“Wait — what?” I looked over at Fangs who was leaning in with curiosity etched into his boyish features; he nodded slowly, pressing his lips into a firm line. I licked my own, running a tired hand over my face as Sweet Pea’s skin paled.

“When?”

“I was late to first,” he responded, completing his seventh cube before he started on the eighth, “snotbag stabbed himself — with his own knife.” he added, eyes cutting to mine to drill it in.

“No one stabbed him,” he interrupted with a growl, stealing the pen from my hand so he could doodle on my notebook. “but that didn’t stop Keller from hauling our asses in this morning.”

“Wait — what?” I looked over at Fangs who was leaning in with curiosity etched into his boyish features; he nodded slowly, pressing his lips into a firm line. I licked my own, running a tired hand over my face as Sweet Pea’s skin paled.

“When?”

“I was late to first,” he responded, completing his seventh cube before he started on the eighth, “snotbag stabbed himself — with his own knife.” he added, eyes cutting to mine to drill it in.

Not Sweet Pea’s knife. His own knife.

“He stabbed himself and blamed it on you?” I asked dubiously.

Fangs leaned over, “Wouldn’t be the first time. This town is notorious for pinning everything that goes wrong on the Serpents.”

“What about the Ghoulies?”
Sweet Pea scoffed, dropping my pen on the table, “What about them? They’re not a threat to anyone unless they’re racing — and that’s if they get caught.” The boys shared a look, their faces simultaneously falling. “We’re the bad guys.”

I fixed my eyes on Ms Martensen as she entered the room, dropping her notes down onto her desk at the front with more force than necessary. A small part of me wanted to reach out and grab his hand. To squeeze it and offer some form of comfort. Truthfully, the way I saw it, the Serpents did a lot more to keep the peace on the Southside of the tracks than anyone else. They never posed as the initial problem or threat — perhaps a nuisance with their dive bar and assertive dominance, but not really the biggest problem this town had.

I hit his calf with the side of my boot, meeting his eyes with a soft smile. He spent the remainder of the period turned in his seat, not paying Martensen or her lecture any mind, but instead faced me and watched as I wrote down notes (I wrote his down, too — a habit we had fallen into). Fangs pulled his desk over to mine, an action that pulled the attention of several classmates towards our small group (to which Sweet Pea threatened to bash skulls if they didn’t mind their own business).

“What are you doing tonight?” he asked when we parted from Fangs; his spur-of-the-moment bad mood had vanished and was replaced with a new found optimism. Curious, I shrugged and stopped outside of our marketing class to look up at his tall frame.

Avoiding him at this point seemed futile. It wouldn’t matter if I transferred classes, or made an effort to ignore him daily. The reality was, I didn’t want to cut him from my life. I had grown comfortable having someone walk me to my classes, someone to tell others off so I wouldn’t have to. Like my own personal body guard so I didn’t have to tolerate the rest of the Southside student population. “Nothing — what’s up?”

“A couple of us are going to the Whyte Wyrm after this hellhole lets out. Wanna come with?” he suggested hopefully, tilting his head to the side as he leaned his hand against the wall above my head and leered over me. I thought back to the dimly lit bar; despite the obvious lack of care for most of the patrons, the bar was not only filthy, but also heavily smelt of booze and cigars. I tried to keep myself from cringing at the thought, failing miserably as Sweet Pea hung his head in defeat, “C’mon, sweetness, it’s not that bad. Fangs will be there, same with Toni.”

“Right — because she’s definitely my biggest fan.” I chimed grimly, watching a group of girls scatter their eyes when I looked up in their direction. After several moments of contemplation and chewing on my lip, I met his eyes again, “I just think it’s a bad idea.” I mused quietly, watching his mouth threaten a smile.

“You’re nervous.” he stated cheekily, lips breaking into a coy smirk when I turned my face away. The heat crept into my neck and cheeks — suddenly, his proximity was overwhelming. The scent of his breath, the cigarette and mint, was intoxicating. “Don’t be nervous,” he dropped his voice into a whisper, hand moving to caress my jaw and forced my head to move so he could meet my eyes. “I’ll make sure no one gives you shit. Serpents honor.”

“What a gentleman,” I lamented, leaning into the warmth of his hand momentarily before I reluctantly nodded in agreement. My heart beat erratically in my chest as his lips pulled back over his teeth, the normal smirk that graced his features melting into an excited, boyish grin. “I’ll try not to embarrass you in front of your friends.”

He pushed off the wall to stand tall, extending his middle digit towards me. “Promise?”

I had the mind to reach forward and slap his hand, but instead locked my finger around his and swung them lazily between our close bodies, “Promise.” I nodded, walking backwards towards the classroom. “You’re not coming?” I asked when he handed me my textbook.

“Got some business to take care of,” he replied, “I’ll see you later — don’t keep me waiting too long.”

“Bite me, Pea.” I retorted, casting him a playful smirk. His eyes trailed down the length of my body, pulling his lower lip between his teeth in hunger and bit back a reply, then turned on his heels, disappearing around the corner. The grin on my face was stretched so wide, my cheeks hurt; I felt so giddy, it surpassed any emotion I understood. I was definitely so far past trying to keep Sweet Pea at a distance, moreso wanted invited him in. Craved his presence. I wanted to know more
about who he was when you peeled back the layers, and I wasn’t going to find my answers by shoving my earbuds in and ignoring that he existed altogether.

My lips fell instantaneously when all students in the marketing room watched me as I entered; I tucked my chin into my chest and hurriedly made my way to my seat in the back of the room. The class was quieter without the presence of Sweet Pea and his friends. For the first time in my high school career, I pulled my headphones from my bag and turned the volume up on the music that blared through them in an effort to ignore the teacher droning on at the front of the room.

I pulled out my sketchbook, flipped to a fresh page and started with the outline of that goddamn smile.

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Once the bell had rung and signaled for us to leave for the day, I rushed as quickly as I could to catch up with Kabrina. Nervous to show up alone, I all but demanded she join me. Two hours later, I was staring at the neon signs just behind the chained fence and felt a shiver crawl along my spine. The outside was littered in cigarette butts and motor oil, bikes occupying all of the walking space outside of the front doors with their owner's not too far.

My feet carried me forward towards the bar as Kabrina stared into the screen of her phone to fix her lipstick. I stopped in my tracks, turning around to look at her with a quirked brow, “What are you doing?” I asked in annoyance. I found it hard to believe after all the crap she had to say about the Serpents that she really cared for their opinion of her. And yet, she had made an incredibly huge deal about going home to change and ‘get our bitch on’. We swapped looks, her face falling as she shoved the gloss back into her bag, and sneered in my direction.

“Some of them are hot.” she replied innocently, adjusting her top a little lower to promote her assets. I rolled my eyes. “Like who?” I pushed, shoving my hands into the pockets of my jean coat. “Fangs?”

She contemplated that thought for a moment, tapping her perfectly sculpted red claw against her cheek before she nodded slowly, “Maybe Fangs.” she agreed, then shook her head and nudged my side, “Sweet Pea’s a total babe. Once you get past the whole jackass thing, he’s totally fuckable.”

“Oh, gross,” I cringed, taking a step away from her in disgust, “can you not objectify my friend like that? He’s actually very nice.”

Kabrina’s lips sputtered before she laughed once, “Sweet Pea? Nice?” I tried to keep the annoyance off my face as she linked her arm around over my shoulders and leaned into my ear, “He’s just flirtin’, Cal. Nothing we all haven’t experienced before.”

While I believed her and knew she probably wasn’t far from the truth, I couldn’t help but feel a painful pull in my chest. Any optimism I had quickly vanished and was replaced with anxiety — perfect. Just what I needed. “Bri,” I stopped her in her tracks, forcing her to look at me. A group of men in their mid-thirties peered up at us from their bikes, their chatter dropping as we awkwardly stood on the front steps, “look at me.”

I didn’t have to spend much time with Kabrina to learn just how often she toked. While her eyes gave no immediate indication that she was in fact baked out of her mind, they did eventually start to appear different. The whites of her eyes had glossed over, appearing more dark and unfocused. I sighed, eyes pressing tightly together, pulling a quiet giggle past her lips, “Don’t tell Don. He’d freak, okay?”

“Don’t say anything stupid, Sobon.” I warned in annoyance, pulling the door open. The few feet in front of me were dimly lit by the setting sun outside, showcasing the floating dust prior to the door closing. It appeared much of the same way it did the first night I walked into it. Cigarette butts littered the floor, smoke clung to the air, patrons turned in their seats, brows furrowed as they stared at me. My eyes lingered on the choice in decor — wet t-shirt contest posters, half naked women, liquor brands, street signs — almost everything I expected out of the grimiest bar in every town in America. I beelined for the pool table that had Sweet Pea bent over, focused so intently on his shot that he hadn’t noticed when I’d
come to stand behind him.

“You’re late,” he accused, trading the pool cue from his right to left hand so he could sneak his fingers into the hair at the nape of my neck and hug me into his side. I felt my eyes involuntarily shut, bringing my arms up to wrap around his frame in a tight squeeze before I released him and looked to where Kabrina stood; she had already occupied the seat next to Fangs. Toni rolled her eyes.

“But I came.” I countered, watching the left side of his mouth pull up into a half smile. “And I didn’t embarrass you.” I added as he leaned against the table, pulling a disgruntled huff from Tall Boy.

“You.” Sweet Pea’s eyes leveled with mine, inviting me closer. I stood on either side of his right knee, arms folded as the group dispersed briefly to refill on drinks and light up their smokes. His black t-shirt had been tucked into his grey jeans, plaid shirt left open as he fixed his sleeves higher up on his biceps, collar popped out over the top of his leather vest. I pulled on his wrist, running my thumb over the bracelets on his right hand, “Guessin’ you’re not nervous anymore.” he noted, gesturing to my outfit with a coy smile.

I looked down, gnawing on my bottom lip anxiously. The rips in the legs all but left bare cut outs in my jeans, and my stomach was freely exposed. It wasn’t an outfit I wouldn’t wear — the clothing had come from my closet, they just simply wouldn’t have been my first choice for this particular evening festivities. “Blame Kabrina.” I grumbled, folding my arms over my midsection.

“Nah, you’re fine.” he shrugged, knocking his knee into mine, “Makes you look tough.”

“Tough, huh? What, my crippling social anxiety isn’t good enough for you?” I teased, stealing the pool cue from his hand.

We spent the better half of the next hour swapping between playing pool and darts; Sweet Pea (while impressed with my decent game play) was ecstatic that we had won against Tall Boy. Heaping mountains of fries had been placed onto the table as they paired off for another game. I watched Sweet Pea bend over the edge of the table and break, sending the various coloured balls into different directions.

Kabrina snapped her fingers in front of my face, pulling my attention away from the way his hair fell over his eyes as he set up for his next shot, “What?” I snapped angrily, shoving another fry into my mouth.

“Did you hear Fangs?” she asked, voice trailing off as I blinked and looked over at him. “There’s a bonfire at the quarry tonight — you coming?”

“I think Dean might totally kill me if he found out I went to a party on a school night — I’ll pass.”

“Next time for sure,” she decided, stealing a fry from the basket split between us, “and I won’t take no for an answer.”

“I’ll see,” I laughed, dunking the fry into the little barrel of ketchup; Sweet Pea’s voice broke over the hum of chatter, drawing my attention away from her beaming smile to see what the commotion was about.

“Think this Northsiders lost.” he drawled, annoyance thick in his tone. My eyes focused on the teen that had joined the group; all eyes of nearby patrons had moved to watch as he came to a halt next to Tall Boy.
“I’m not,” he said simply, exchanging a hard look with Sweet Pea. I watched Pea lift his chin, eyes displaying obvious doubt. “I’m over being half a Serpent.”

“That’s Jughead, FP’s kid.” Toni whispered; we leaned against each other, turning in our seats while swapping a knowing look as Sweet Pea stalked forward, brows pulled together in slight annoyance.

“Wow,” he started, hips swaying as he walked over to where Jughead stood, “you will do anything to protect your Northside buddies.” he spat, eyes glued to the table as his frame knocked into the offender’s. Jughead staggered back on his heels, bottom lip pulled in between his teeth.

“My father was a Serpent,” Jughead countered, staring the taller Serpent down. Pea rolled his eyes, picking up the blue chalk square off the edge of the table. Toni’s worried eyes watched the pair, fidgeting with the glass rum and coke in her hand. Fangs shot me a look, shaking his head the slightest when I grimaced. “he led you,” Jughead continued, turning to look over at Tall Boy who had rounded to our end of the table, “I want to stand with you guys.

I watched a group of women sitting behind Sweet Pea snicker, exchanging dubious looks of their own. Tall Boy’s face mimicked much of what Sweet Pea’s did: thin patience. From across the table, I saw Sweet PE look up at Tall Boy, his mouth taunt.

“Tall Boy was the one who gave me this jacket,” Jughead announced to the room; several patrons muttered to themselves and watched him closely, still analyzing his moves, “it’s finally time I start wearing it.” he sighed, looking towards where Toni and I sat for a brief moment before he cut to Tall Boy. Toni’s lips pressed into an encouraging half smile before she quickly downed the remainder of her drink.

“Now you wanna be a Serpent, huh?” Tall Boy’s voice was low and raspy, dropping the end of his pool cue against the floor as he came to stand in front of Jughead. “Let’s see if you survive the initiation first.”

His assertive dominance made me think about the night he decided appropriate corrective action to the gang’s problem with Dean was simply to burn his flesh until their brand was no longer recognizable. That his hands had held the torch, or held him down. Muffled his screams. That his words were law, that his decision was the final decision. It made him all the more terrifying to me; while he hadn’t appeared to be anything other than a stereotypical biker, the shake in his step, the intensity of the power his voice had, all contributed to how fearful I was of him.

Kabrina leaned across the table, trailing her fingers across my skin to pull my attention to her. “Initiation?” she hissed, the same confusion that washed over me mimicked in her features.

“It’s a series of trials to prove yourself,” Fangs started, sipping on his drink. “Your knowledge on the code, your fearlessness, your bravery, having the strength to go through whatever is thrown at you. We get cornered into difficult positions and sometimes our backs are against the walls. Sometimes we take the fall when we weren’t to blame to protect others. Sometimes we take physical torment for hours or days to protect our brothers,” He shrugged, “It’s intense, but that’s a choice each of us was willing to make.”

I felt a warm palm press against the exposed skin on my lower back; my head turned so that I could meet Sweet Pea’s slight grimace. He slid the hand against my back before he settled on resting it against the table as his chest pressed into my shoulders, stealing a fry from the basket in the center of the table. “It’s more than just some code, though.” Toni added, her warm hues darting over to where Jughead was retreating. “It’s a lifestyle. See you boys later, ‘kay?” she saluted the group as she shrugged into her jacket, pulling her bag across her chest before she darted after her friend.

I leaned forward onto the table, Sweet Pea following suit as his arm came up to wrap around my neck, plucking his drink from the batch. “You’re getting your ass kicked, Pea.” I said grimly, looking over to where Tall Boy sat counting and straightening out his earned cash.

He scowled adorably, shoving another fry into his mouth as he followed my eyes, looking over at Tall Boy. “Man cheats,” he stated firmly, propping his chin up on his knuckles, “you gotta help me, babydoll.”
I picked up my coke, taking a healthy swing as I rolled my eyes, “I’m not some bar game guru or good luck charm — don’t get it twisted, Sweets.”

“One more round,” he suggested, pulling me forward with his arm so that our noses almost touched. There was a snicker that sounded from the next table over, a tall blond male watching us straightened up and twisted his body to face us, pulling the toothpick from his mouth. “Got something to say, Jinj?” Pea sneered, the right half of his top lip pulling up.

“Yeah,” he laughed, nudging his friend in the side as I hopped out of my chair and wandered over to the pool table to rack the balls, “just wonderin’ how much you gotta beg for ‘one more round’ with snow bunny over there.” his thumb jerked in my direction; I averted my eyes, pretending I couldn’t hear him.

“The hell are you talkin’ about?” Sweets asked, folding his arms across his chest.

Jinj brought his beer bottle to his lips, smirking as he replied, “C’mon, Pea. Look at those legs,”

“And that ass!” A back of the room comment called, pulling my eyes up from the green of the table. Several eyes of bystanders darted between the boys and I, watching Sweet Pea especially close. Tall Boy looked up from his meal, eyes trained on the back of Pea’s head.

“Let’s not forget that mouth.” Jinj concluded, his tongue rolling along his bottom lip as he focused on my face. I swallowed uncomfortably, staring down at my hands that pressed flat onto the top of the table. When Sweet Pea made a point to have a fascination with my mouth, I didn't seem to mind as much. Hearing it come from someone else was unsettling.

“Are you fuckin’ stupid?” Sweets asked angrily, taking a step towards the male.

The blond took a step back, holding his hands up in defense, gesturing to me with the hand that held his drink. “Hey man, look at her!”

Sweet Pea did: his head turned, warm brown orbs longingly trailing up my body starting at my feet. He paused momentarily on my hips and waist, before his eyes trailed along my extended arms and then finally settled on my face. Whenever he looked at me, I felt as though he were peeling away all of the layers. Not just my clothing, but the walls I had built up to keep people (especially people like him) out. His eyes and mouth seemed to soften, inhaling deeply as though the sight comforted him.

I stood upright, pulling my lips into a weak smile.

Pea’s fist collided quickly with the side of Jinj’s face, throwing his body backwards. The raven haired Serpent grabbed hold of his shirt, lifting him off the ground as he turned to slam him down onto the pool table, scattering the balls I had racked. My body jumped back in surprise, watching Sweet Pea with wide eyes. His left hand came up to grip tightly onto the blond’s throat as his right hand worked at incredible speed to smash into his face.

“Pea,” I said loudly, pulling my hands down my arms anxiously. When he gave no indication he planned on stopping, I (against my better judgement) stepped forward under the lamp and slapped my hand onto the table hard, “Sweets!” I yelled over the clapping and hollering of the bystanders, causing his fist to pause mid-air.

He turned his head, nostrils flared as he examined my face. I counted three heavy breaths that he took, watching his face slowly relax. His hand dropped, but didn’t loosen his grip on Jinj’s throat. “Apologize.” He demanded, looking down at his victim with hard eyes.

“I’m s-so sorry, Pea, I didn’t —”

“Not me, jackass!” he slammed his head back onto the table with a grunt, ‘Her.”

Jinj tiled his head so that he could look at me. His eyes appeared frightened, nose bloodied and lip swelling on the right
side. I grimaced. “I’m sorry — so sorry.” he quickly spat out, side eyeing up at Pea worriedly. Sweet Pe tightened his grip the slightest, pulling a strangled cry from Jinj, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” he yelled weakly, face turning red under Pea’s vice hold.

“Ease up,” I pleaded, taking another step towards their bodies, hand resting on the arm that still held Jinj captive. “he said he’s sorry, let him go.”

Pea watched Jinj’s face for two heartbeats before he pulled him upright. Once he was certain Jinj could stand on his own, his hands came up to fix the blond’s jacket, straightening it out before he turned to the table, finished his drink and then slapped a twenty on the wood.

He exchanged a brief set of words with Fangs; I watched Kabrina’s face brighten as she turned to me with a subtle thumbs up. I almost smacked my palm against my forehead. Sweet Pea pulled my jacket off Fangs’ chair, holding it out as he walked towards me, “Let’s bounce.” he said quietly, holding a hand against my back to usher me towards the door.

I followed without much complaint, happy to be evading the curious and nosy stares of those around us in the bar. That, and fresh air was certainly a bonus. Pea continued walking after he descended the stairs, long legs stretching across the parking lot faster than I could keep up. I struggled behind him, jumping over puddles and potholes.

“Pea,” I called, slipping my arms through the sleeves of my jacket as the cool air bit at my exposed flesh, “tiny person speed, please.” I complained, thankful when he halted his steps to turn and wait for me. He resumed walking once I stood next to his side, leading me towards the sidewalk across the street. “Gonna tell me what all that was about?”

“Jinj is a sexist prick,” he spat, shoving his hands into the pocket of his jeans, “no further explanation required.”

“Fair,” I started, looking sideways up at him, “anything else?”

He glanced down at me quickly, face pulling into slight annoyance as he sighed, “No.”

We walked in silence to the parking lot two blocks down. Nestled into the corner was another group of bikes left unattended. I recognized the largest of the group as Sweet Pea’s, noting the way the Harley Davidson chrome nameplate shined in contrast to the dark paint. Pea’s fingers pulled a set of keys from his jacket pocket, legs straddling his seat as he held out the silver helmet to me.

I awkwardly grabbed it, holding it in my tiny hands, catching a glimpse of the girl in the reflection. Her eyes were wide with adrenalin, face paled like the moon in the sky behind her. I gnawed on my lower lip and glanced down to the spot behind him that I was expected to sit on.

“What?” he asked, eyes focused on the hesitation on my face.

“Can’t we walk?” I responded, nose crinkling the slightest.

Sweet Pea laughed once, turning the ignition on. The engine revved; he looked over at me before he sighed, “Get on the bike.” he said, lips pulling into an excited smile.

“That’s not even a seat.” I accused, pointing to the small leather patch behind him.

“How big do you think you are?” he asked me, face serious as his hands rested on his thighs. “You’re the same size as Toni and she fits just fine.”

“I’m just trying to make it to graduation with all of my skin, okay?”

He laughed again, shaking his head as he leaned forward on his handle bars. “Y’know your lack of confidence in me is a little insulting, right?”
“I’m walking distance — why do we have to take the bike?”

Sweet Pea sighed in irritation, “Do you really wanna know?” he asked, sitting upright with his hands in his thighs again. When I nodded once, he looked forward into the darkness of the street, tongue rolling along his lips, “You on the back of his bike is the closest I’m gonna get to the inside of your thighs.” he admitted, casting a sideways glance at me to gauge my reaction. “Get on the fucking bike.”

I rolled my eyes, reluctantly shoving the helmet onto my head. Not because of what he said, but merely because he wouldn’t give in. I snapped the visor down, throwing my leg over the seat to straddle it comfortably. That proved difficult when I realized my legs were too short to reach either side, forcing me to grip tightly around Pea’s stomach, fingers clutching onto the fabric of his shirts.

My thighs involuntarily squeezed when he rounded turns, weaving in and out of traffic, mapping around the entire Southside before he took the main street down towards Dean’s, ensuring he parked one block down so that the boys wouldn’t notice us if they by chance happened to look out of the window.

“Can I come upstairs?” he asked quickly when I started to walk up to the sidewalk.

I turned on my heels, throwing him an incredulous glare, “You already know the answer to that. Serpents aren’t allowed through my front door.” Sweet Pea nodded slowly, trying to keep whatever smile that threatened his lips hidden. I folded my arms, and shrugged, “It’s a personal thing.” I explained, “Not really my place to impose.”

He dismissed me with a wave of his hand, folding his arms across his chest. “Goodnight, Calliope.” he mumbled, leaning against his bike with a defeated look as I backed away.

The warmth inside the house hit me immediately; Dean sat on the couch, book in hand as I shut the door and smiled impishly, silently apologizing as he looked over my outfit, “You look like a hipster hobo.” he commented, returning his eyes to his book. “I’m on board with the rips, but this is a little weird.”

I looked down at my jeans, nodding in agreement. They had started out with cut knees and trendy rips. Somewhere over the years, the front parts had been ripped and stretched completely, leaving a large cut out in both pantlegs. “Bri picked it out.” I sighed. “Guess I should consider going back to Greendale to get some new jeans.”

“How was your night?” he asked, eyes not lifting from his book.

“Good,” I said honestly, thinking back to the parts of the night that didn’t involve any Serpent drama. “I had fun.”

“Good.” Dean repeated, nodding once in approval. “Glad you’ve made some friends.”

I tried to keep my face neutral when he met my eyes. “Yeah,” I mused, rearing my thoughts back to Fangs and Toni. How different they were from Sweet Pea, yet so alike. It were as though they were different sides of the same coin. All incredibly intense and volatile, but unique with their separate personalities, “me too.” We sat in silence for a few moments before he coughed into his hand and returned to his book, silently dismissing me. “Night.” I called once my feet hit the stairs, arms already shrugging out of my jacket.

I pushed open my door, absently draping my coat on one of the hooks by the door as I kicked off my boots. A warm hand grabbed my arm, turning me quickly as their fingers came up to wrap over my mouth when I began to squeal. In the darkness with my back pressed against the door, Sweet Pea pressed his finger to his mouth. Once he was certain I wouldn’t scream, he removed his hand and cracked a smile, “He said no Serpents were allowed through the door. He said nothin’ about your window.”
EIGHT

It went on like that for the next few days. On nights when he didn’t have the opportunity to see me at work, I’d receive a warning message fifteen minutes prior to him crawling through my window. We’d eat snacks, watch movies on my laptop and stay up late talking about all of the what if’s we’d ever wondered about. He still tossed in snide comments and compliments, seeming more at ease with each passing night. More confident. More sure of himself (although I was certain that wasn’t really possible).

Admittedly, I’d found myself allowing the elusive comments. Even engaged in continuing one conversation, watching his lips pull wider as I fully accepted the suggestive compliment. Sweet Pea would run his fingers through my hair, massage my skull and draw circles on my back until I had fallen asleep. He’d then sneak back out of the window and say nothing about anything we talked about at night during the school hours. We were two different people within the school walls, making my time with him alone at night all that much more interesting. Private. Intimate.

Danny, Don, Josh and their friends played hooky for the day, leaving Kabrina and I to fend for ourselves for lunch. We sat at our regular table, glancing around at the rows of empty seats. We hadn’t been seated for more than five minutes before Kabrina’s phone lit up and three texts from Fangs came through.

“They want us to sit with them.” She whispered, looking up at me with a quirked brow. I slipped my eyes past her head, blue hues focusing on the group that simultaneously turned their heads to look over at us. Toni waved her short arm, smile beaming from across the room. Involuntarily, I smiled, too.

Damn her.

I watched Kabrina sling her bag onto her back, shoving her phone into her rear pocket with her eyes focused on me. “Well?” She asked, tucking her dark hair behind her ear. “Let’s go.”

“I don’t know if we should.” I hissed, shivering slightly as a cool chill ran down my spine. “Hanging out at the Whyte Wyrm is one thing — this is different. If anyone cares enough to tell Don or Danny, it isn’t your ass that’s getting shipped out of town.” Her brown orbs rolled, hand darting quickly to swipe my phone off the table before she turned and began walking towards the fenced in portion of the cafeteria. “Hey!” I whined. Fangs smiled, moving over as she entered so she could sit next to him; Sweet Pea draped his arm lazily over the empty seat between he and Fangs, head tilting to the side.

I remained seated, nervously gripping onto my mother’s necklace as I stared down at my sandwich. While I enjoyed what time I was able to spend with the group outside of Southside High, I wasn’t willing to partake in obliterating the wall between them and the rest of us that didn’t belong to either gang.

I started to shove my earbuds in when a bottle of apple juice was set down in front of me. My eyes trained on the familiar thumb tattoo and ring, shoulders involuntarily relaxing as I looked up at Sweet Pea. He flipped the chair around and straddled it, “I was gonna get myself one.” I mumbled, wrapping the cord of my headphones around my iPod.

“Now you don’t have to.” He responded with a shrug, leaning forward onto the table with his elbows. He tossed my phone onto the table; I shoved it into my sweater pocket. The cafeteria had lulled into a quiet hum, tables upon tables of students turning their heads to look at the pair of us in the back corner.

I brought the bottle to my lips, fingers playing with the cap as I looked around. “You do realize literally every human being in this room is staring at us like we have seven heads, right?”

Sweet Pea shrugged, ripping open my bag of chips, “So?” He asked as he chewed around a Dorito, brown orbs lazily looking up to me. “Who cares? Not their business.”

We ate in silence in the center of the chaos. It was odd, imagining the visual people were witnessing. Without a doubt, seeing the school’s loudest and most intolerable (yet lovable) Serpent sit in the middle of the entire student body with a
girl who seemed to be everything but his type, eating lunch in utter silence. We finished our meals, only meeting eyes every once and awhile. After he tossed his empty chip bag into the trash, he returned to his seat and watched me thoughtfully, “What are you doing tonight after work?” He asked, rubbing his hands together.

I shrugged, lowering my voice, “Boondocks with you?” I questioned, curious as to why he had to ask. “Why? Are you not coming?” I asked, cringing inwardly when my voice appeared worried and desperate.

“Of course I am.” He chuckled, “Jughead’s trials start tonight. Figured it might be a learning opportunity for you. See what we’re really about. Get a feel of the environment.”

I looked down at my empty sandwich bag, “If you’re trying to convince me you’re not a bad guy, you can save it.” I said simply, offering another shrug, looking up at him from under my lashes, “You’re my best friend, unfortunately. It would kind of suck to hate you.”

He nodded in agreement, leaning forward onto the table, voice as quiet as mine, “Come because I want to see you showing a little more skin than usual, bent over a pool table and stealing all of Tall Boys money before some kid screams in his face and sticks his hand into a bin with a rattlesnake.”

“What?” I asked quickly, feeling the horror cross my features. I disregarded the first half of his sentence completely, moreso concerned about Jughead. “Why is he sticking his hand into a bin with a rattlesnake?” I cried loudly, feeling my cheeks start to warm under the flesh as the students around us watched us with complete confusion.

“Come with me tonight and you’ll see why.” He countered, patiently waiting for my answer.

I sighed, looking past his shoulder to where Fangs and Toni sat, heads thrown back in laughter with the remainder of his friends. “You’re paying for my bets.” I concluded, watching my favourite boyish grin break through. Sweet Pea swiped my history textbook from the table and stood, smugly grinning when I stood with him and walked towards the doors, pausing momentarily to let Fangs catch up before heading to class.

I held the rum and coke to my lips, watching Pea nervously when he shot back his fourth drink in the last half hour. I hardly drank, especially not when Dean had no idea it was something I had tried. I wouldn’t consider myself an alcoholic, and hardly ever drank (if at all), courtesy of daddy dearest. Pea draped a lazy arm over my shoulders, hugging me into his side as he waited patiently for Tall Boy to finish his game with Toni. I leaned into his warmth, noting that as the cooler weather rolled around, I would have to resort to longer sleeves (or longer tops in general) and less skirts if I planned to visit the bar frequently. “Are you even going to have time for a round? Jughead should be getting here in what? Twenty minutes?”

Pea nodded, “He’s almost done.”

“They just started.” I reminded him, throwing back the rest of my drink. I watched Tall Boy hit ball after ball, each rolling clean into their desired pockets. “Oh.” I said after his fifth straight hit, brows pulling together.

“There’s a reason why he’s got so much cash.” Sweets said with a chuckle, noting the awe in my features.

“No kidding.” I grumbled, watching Toni’s arms fold across her chest with a slight eyeroll. “Your games are much longer.”

“I spent a lot of time in this bar growing up. Got real good at it real fast.”

Within minutes, Toni was shoving the pool cue into Sweet Pea’s outreached hand, taking her stool next to my spot behind the glass cage. The snake hissed eagerly, slowly creeping along the bottom of the glass. I grimaced, training my eyes forward as Sweet Pea leaned over the table to pull the balls together. “He cheats.” Toni grumbled.

“I think Pea said the same thing.” I laughed, nodding to Fangs as he pulled up beside us with refills, licking his lips hungrily as Teddy set the basket of onion rings down in front of us. We all reached into it, humming happily as the
warmth settled into our empty stomachs. “Is he nervous?” I asked Toni, separating Pea’s drink from everyone else’s.

“He’s determined.” She replied with a sigh, lifting her shoulders in a half shrug. “I think something I said to him sent him on this hellbent path that he has to be apart of this gang to prove something to everyone — or himself, I can’t decide which it is. Gonna cause a lot of issues with his girl.” I rose an eyebrow in question, pressing her to continue as I brought my drink to my lips. “Betty Cooper — her mom was a Serpent once upon a time. Dunno what happened, don’t care. He’s all hearteye emoji’s and Romeo with her, it’s —”

“Sickening?” I asked, finishing the sentence for her.

To my surprise, she corrected me, “Wonderful.” I watched her curiously, “I think we’re all silently hoping we’ll have the same luxury. The kids in this generation of Serpents .. we want to be different than our parents. We don’t want to just be in a gang and have it be that. We all want an epic love that lasts forever. Without the fighting and yelling, without abuse. Something wholesome.”

“I think that’s just most people in general, Topaz.” I laughed once, looking down at the table.

“Maybe,” She sighed, watching Sweet Pea and Tall Boy for a moment before she popped another onion ring into her mouth, chewing thoughtfully. “Bri and Fangs are a thing now, did you know?”

I rose my brows, “I did not. What the hell, dude?” I asked, smacking Fangs in the shoulder lightly around Toni’s body. “What gives?”

“We’re not a thing. We’re just fooling around.” He defended, holding his hands out like it were the obvious.

Toni rolled her eyes, “He’s got it bad.”

“Oh, fuck off, Topaz.” He growled, pulling his straw between his lips, eyes narrowed as he stared forward.

“Mhm. Case and point,” She said quietly to me, “Speaking of being athing, you and Pea.” Toni raised her brows suggestively, smiling behind her drink.

I leaned back, eyebrows pulled together, “What?”

“Oh, c’mon. Standing together, hugging, walking you to every class? Everyone can see.” When I maintained composure on my face, she huffed in frustration, “Neither one of you will just come out and say it, that’s the problem. I know for a fact that if you looked Sweets in the eye and told him you wanted him, he would never look at another female again.”

I leaned forward onto the table, ready to comment on just how wrong she was when the outside light broke into the bar. We all turned our heads, the crowd silencing as Jughead entered the establishment, eyes scanning over the crowd confidently. Sweet Pea and Tall Boy stood up straight, exchanging looks before Fangs and Sweet Pea jogged around to the table, pulling his jacket off the back of my chair.

“Showtime, sweetness.” He winked as he popped the collar on his jacket; I watched Fangs join Pea’s flank as they moved to settle in front of the snakes cage.

The crowd was deafening, and yelling into Tall Boy’s face was intimidating enough as it is. Having an entire area jammed pack full of Serpents screaming profanities at you was just as bad, if not worse. The boys separated when it was time for his second trial. I watched Sweet Pea’s arms drop as he stood, eyes transfixed on Jughead. Pea had mentioned having his doubts that the boy would be able to follow through on everything. That Jug wouldn’t make it. And that if he did make it through, and came out of the gauntlet alive, he swore up and down he’d have a newfound respect for the boy. Jughead hesitated briefly with the snake, looking up at Toni every so often for encouragement.

When the crowd separated in cheers, Jughead slammed the knife down onto the pool table and gripped his hand tightly, eyes pressed shut tightly. He rushed over to where Toni sat; I took that as my cue to leave. Sweet Pea was snickering,
reaching his arms out to wrap comfortably around my shoulders and into my hair. I linked my arms together around his stomach, chin rested on his chest as I started up at him, “What’re you laughing at?”

“The look on your face.” He teased, reaching a hand out to take the drink Fangs extended towards him. I relished in the warmth of his jacket, smiling to myself when I realized how small I was in comparison and how the leather engulfed me entirely.

“A rattlesnake, Toni.” I overheard Jughead as he wrapped his hand in the white gauze she had provided. “A rattlesnake bit me and drew blood.”

“One that had its venom glands removed.” She rolled her eyes, leaning forward onto the table. ‘Kay, the important thing is that you showed no fear, you grabbed the knife and you remembered all the laws. Which means you’re almost a Serpent now, Juggie.”

I watched Jughead snap his head up abruptly, the pair sharing look before Toni dropped her eyes and sighed.

Sweet Pea finished his drink, right hand sliding down the fabric of my cropped tee until his fingertips reached the exposed skin of my lower back, palm pressing into the warm flesh. I glanced up at him, noting the way his face was pulled into a deep train of thought; his eyebrows were pulled together in the middle, brown hues unfocused. “Stop doing that.” I said grimly, pulling a piece of fluff off his chest.

He smiled smugly, shaking his head, “No.”

I thought back to what Toni had said earlier; curious, I rolled my eyes clinked my bottle against his. “So .. can you tell me why the guy with no standards doesn’t want to sleep with me?” I asked, taking a swig.

“Are you serious?” He asked, pulling the bottle from my mouth, then leaned toward me. “First of all, I have standards. I’ve never been with an ugly girl. Ever. Secondly, I wanted to sleep with you. I thought about throwing you over my bed fifty different ways, but I haven’t because I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

I couldn’t hold back the smug smile that crept across my face. “You think I’m too good for you.”

He sneered at my second insult. “I can’t think of a single guy good enough for you.”

Admittedly, my teeth had begun to feel numb, and I was leaning against his frame to keep from swaying. He lowered his chin, warm brown orbs watching me carefully. The smile that tugged on the corners of his lips filled my chest with adoration, blue hues watching him as he dipped his face down, mouth leaving warm kisses against my cheek and forehead. I hummed in delight.

“So, you didn’t end up leaving.” He mused suddenly, resting my head in the crook of his neck as he hugged me. I felt his hand wander along my side, easing over the gentle curve of my hip,. “I spent most of the initiation thinking you were going to completely hate me and walk out.”

“You know what, Pea?” I tried not to laugh, the mixture in my stomach rolling uneasily. Instead I rested my eyes and exhaled, “In another life, if you weren’t part of this world and so forbiddingly tempting, I could love you.” I mumbled.

His lips pressed to my neck; my body ran cold and I quickly pulled myself away, looking around frantically to see if anyone had noticed. As far as I was concerned, no one was watching us. My eyes, angry and narrowed, cut back to Sweet Pea who stood leaning against the table, lips still slightly puckered and face drawn in confusion. “What?”

I shook my head, leaned around his frame to grab my coat and turned on my heels. Sweet Pea didn’t do relationships. I didn’t do relationships. I was terrible at all things involving commitment to anyone but myself. He deserved better than someone that was completely emotionally unavailable.

Was I? Emotionally unavailable? I hadn’t given the idea as much thought as I should have. I had been so hellbent on
trying to convince myself that Sweet Pea wasn’t good for me, and that I wasn’t good for him. That we were just bad for each other. That it was a mistake waiting to happen. Two people that happened to be polar opposites, with unsteady emotions, crippling self doubt and more anger than the entire town combined … we were a bad omen. Chaos would follow, and we would ruin everything.

Pea stopped me once my feet reached the bottom of the stairs outside, his fingers gripping my arm tightly to pull me back. “Okay, what is your problem?” He asked when I shrugged out of his grip and continued walking, “Hey, I’m talkin’ to you!”

“Pea,” I sighed, stopping in the middle of the crowded lot. I turned to face him, throwing my hands up in the air in frustration, anger building in my throat as I cried out. “You can’t just do that!”

“I’ve been drinking, ‘kay?” He growled in defeat, “Your skin was three inches from my face, and you smell fucking awesome when you sweat. I kissed you! I’m sorry!”

His excuse (despite just being an excuse) made the corners of my mouth turn up. “Just take me home, okay?”

We walked shoulder to shoulder in comfortable silence. Once in the comfort of Dean’s home, I went through my regular nightly routine, rushing through my shower and drying off before slipping into my dimly lit room. Sweet Pea had already snuck in through my window, nestled under the covers, laptop already rested on his stomach. He hiccuped once, eyes resting on my oversized shirt.

“No pants? How will I ever behave myself?” He asked eagerly, watching me drop my towel into the laundry bin in the corner and lift up the hem of my shirt slowly, face falling when he caught a glimpse of my black shorts. “Fuckin’ spandex.” He grumbled, returning his eyes to the laptop screen.

I laughed once, pulling the covers back to crawl into the bed space next to him. He lifted his arm, waiting until I had settled comfortably into his side before he wrapped it around my shoulders. We watched a few episodes, the alarm clock on my bedside table read 2:34 AM. We had to be awake in less than five hours for school. Sweet Pea was scrolling through Netflix, fingers working against the touch-pad so delicately and quickly; beneath my ear, his heart beat erratically against his chest. I allowed myself to be comforted by the sound, snaking my arm across his abdomen to hug him tightly. “You’re so warm.” I noted with my eyes closed, hearing the laptop shut quietly.

He shifted then, removing the device from his lap so he could face me, eagerly securing the other around my waist to hold me in place. The sigh that left his lips sounded a lot like the billion others I had hear in the last twenty-four hours. I pulled back so that I could look up at him, blue hues keeping a careful eye on his mouth and brows, knowing any tells would be found in a slight twitch of them. “What are you sighing for?”

It was a sad sound. Something about it indicated clear displeasure and frustration. “Nothin’.” He mused, snaking a hand under my shirt to gently run his fingers along my bare spine. My eyes fell shut.

“You’re lying.”

He paused for a moment before he entwined his fingers into my hair, and pressed my face into his neck, tucking the top of my head under his chin. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Hey,” I said quietly, pressing my nose into the pulse point, admiring the way he smelt. “Tell me.”

There was a moment of hesitation. His fingers pulled down my spine, then around my hip to my stomach. His flat palm rubbed the skin, trailing up and down my side, focusing on the dip before the curve of my hip. “You’re soft,” He sighed quietly, “It’s so unfair. Knowing you like this, being with you like this.”

Worriedly, I pulled away from his frame, hands braced flat against his chest, “If I overstepped any boundaries, I’m sorry. You don’t have to come her —”
His arms constricted me to his body, holding me close. “Stop trying to push me away. I didn’t say that at all — I’m the one who —” He stopped himself, pursed lips pressing against my head. “You’re driving me crazy, Calliope. You know that?” His voice was barely above a whisper, but he kept talking. “Absolutely batshit crazy. And I wouldn’t have it any other way. Right here. This,” He squeezed me tightly. “This is all I want.”

“Pea,” I started, feeling my brows pull together, “You’re not a soulless monster, you’re gonna have all of this.”

He laughed once, rolling onto his back, arm pulling away from me so he could rub his face, “So I’m really just your friend?”

I rose a brow, “Well, yeah?” I strained to see his figure in the dark, rewrapping my around around his stomach. “Am I not yours?”

“You’re a little more than just a friend, Cal.”

I felt the unease settle deep in the pit of my stomach, feeling my lips tug down in the corners. “Don’t say that.” I pleaded quietly, pulling my arms into my chest. “Don’t make me explain it again — I don’t do boyfriends. I don’t do fuck buddies, or friends with benefits, or intimacy at all, really —”

“Then what the fuck do you call this?” He asked, squeezing my shoulders with the arm that was still wrapped around my frame. “You have an issue with giving it a title, fine, I can deal with that. But don’t pretend like what’s going on between us isn’t fucking intimate.”

“We’re not intimate — nothing about this is crossing any lines.” I lied.

He turned onto his side again, this time he propped himself up on his elbow, rolling me onto my back to look up at him, “Really? So you’d be completely okay if I said I wasn’t coming tomorrow night because I had to cuddle Toni.”

“You don’t cuddle Toni.” I sneered, glaring up at his face.

“There’s a reason for that,” He responded, just as hard. “Because friend’s aren’t like this. The way I am with you isn’t normal, the way I feel isn’t fucking normal, Cal. I don’t even know if I’m me anymore.”

“You seem to be having a really hard time coming to terms with the fact you’re not a piece of shit gangbanger, Pea.”

He sighed loudly again; for a moment, I feared my cousins would be able to hear him. “It doesn’t matter, okay? This is fucking pointless. I’ve been trying to be this person that’s good enough for you and it’s completely useless. You’re a virgin with high morals and high standards. I should’ve known better.”

I tried not to be bothered by his words, or be insulted by how frustrated with me he sounded. Instead I pulled away entirely, sitting up right on the bed, keeping my back to him. Maybe he hadn’t changed at all. Maybe he was the guy Kabrina, Danny and Josh painted him to be. Maybe Sweet Pea was a guy that just loved a good challenge — and maybe I was his biggest conquest. Spending all this time, forcing himself into my good graces — maybe it was all a ploy in breaking through whatever walls I had built.

There was a petulant sigh, followed by the warmth of his hand resting against my back. “I didn’t mean that.”

“Yes you did.” I shot back, keeping my eyes locked on the silhouette of my computer desk. His fingers lightly rubbed at the bare skin, palm pressing firmly into my spine. “If you didn’t mean it you wouldn’t have said it.”

“It came out wrong.” He tried again, “I just mean that you deserve more than I can give you. I mean … you want to go to school in Canada.” His laugh was sad; I turned my head, looking down at him. “You have your entire life already figured out, Cal. I don’t fit.”

I turned entirely then, eyes scanning his face. Even in the darkness, I could tell his brows were knotted together and his
mouth was pulled down in the corners. “To be fair,” I started, lowering myself into the mattress again, hugging into his side. “My life has already completely flipped upside down since I met you, so you fit better than you think.”

“I’m getting far, far away from here.” He quoted quietly, arms wrapping around my waist. “You’re not the only one that doesn’t do relationships. But I want this with you. In spite of everything I believed I wasn’t capable of feeling for another person, I feel it all and it’s —”

“Overwhelming?” I tried grimly, pressing my face into the crook of his neck, fingers playing with the dog tags that rested on his chest. He turned so he was facing me, propping himself up on his elbow again to watch my face carefully. “I get that.”

Sweet Pea’s eyes fluttered slightly, brown orbs intently watching my mouth as my teeth involuntarily pulled my bottom lip between them. I watched as the lighting from the moon danced across his features. His jaw was relaxed, eyes gleaming with emotion as his lips graced a small smile. A smile I had grown so fond of, I couldn’t bear to see him lose it. It was safe to say that my feelings for Sweet Pea had grown; I felt the bond whenever I was near him. It was something automatic, I couldn’t contain it. So many times I had pictured myself wrapped in his arms until the sun rose up from behind the tree tops. So many times I stayed up at night, thinking of all the possibilities we could be. The tenderness of his touch, the sweet, gentle yet firm care only his body could provide. I couldn’t begin to explain the desire to stop him mid-sentence during his tangents and kiss his full lips.

Come on, stop that.

It was times like this where I started to hate myself. Despite how much I knew I deserved this, despite how often Toni reminded me that it was okay to just feel, to stop giving into my better judgement, I was being stubborn. Incredibly stubborn.

I felt the mattress dip under his weight as he leaned forward; involuntarily, my head pressed back into the pillows. Sweet Pea seemed to notice my hesitation, causing the smile to vanish quickly. Inwardly, I cursed myself with my eyes pressed shut, and gripped his tags a little tighter, holding him steady.

“What —”

I shook my head, silencing him. When my eyes reopened, Sweets expression had softened into a look of wonder. His eyes, usually weary with thin patience and intensity, remained neutral and inviting. The seemingly endless brown pools sent a spur of goosebumps along my arms and down my spine; I let out a shaky breath. I was nervous, that much was obvious.

“Can I trust you?” I asked quietly.

But I wanted this, too. That much I was certain of.

“Probably not, but you will anyway.” His lips remained parted, soft and beckoning me silently. I gently ran the tip of my thumb across his bottom lip, admiring the way it moved. I pulled gently on the tags, guiding his face closer to mine with a slight tremor in my fingers, removing my thumb from his lips to close my fist around the chain. Once the tips of his bangs gently tickled the bare skin of my cheeks, my mouth parted in a slight quiver. Not because I felt obligated to give him what he wanted. Because I was inexperienced. Because I half expected him to completely hate this form of intimacy with me, and I was scared of what would happen next. Scared that he wouldn’t stay. That he would decide this wasn’t really what he wanted. That I wasn’t what he wanted. That I had let myself attach to him, and that he would leave me.

“Good to know.”

He wasn’t what I needed. He reminded me too much of a father that was idle and absent. The gambling, the violence — it was all apart of a life I was trying to avoid. Then, the small part of me that gripped too tightly onto hope, reminded me that I could take him away from all of this. This life. I was certain that he enjoyed being apart of a family, and that the Serpents offered him a home when he felt he didn’t have one. I couldn’t ask him to leave them — I wanted him to want to
That was far fetched wishful thinking.

“Look at me,” He commanded, his voice both tender and hard — a mixture that pulled the breath from me. My heart was pounding in my chest, I could feel the blood in my ears, and my breathing hitched as I finally — finally — tilted my chin up, fingers pulling gently on his tags to bring him down so that I could press my mouth against his. Our lips moved achingly slow together, melding to one another with a fevered intensity.

Most first kisses were tender and gentle, sweet and innocent and presumptuous. This kiss may have started off on that note, but maybe it was the familiarity we already had after weeks of boundary pushing friendship. Maybe it was all this dancing around each other and the fevered pitch of all the sexual tension and nervous anticipation that caused our mouths to more hungrily against each other.

His tongue glided along my bottom lip, demanding entrance, to which I obliged eagerly. The soft, warm, flat muscle cautiously explored; in the need for more of his deliciousness, I moaned involuntarily into his mouth and knotted my fingers into his hair to keep him close. It was wonderful. The taste of cigarette on his tongue mingled with the crisp mint flavour was intoxicating. My head was swimming.

A chuckle reverberated in his chest, the hum tingling my lips as he pulled up and away. Breathless, he pressed his forehead to mine, “Wait a sec,” He whispered with an amused smile, “We’ve got plenty of time for more of that, babydoll.”

“I’ve got a few years of catching up to do.” I mumbled sheepishly, relaxing into the pillows as he pulled the duvet over our turning bodies. He encouraged me to lay on my side, pressing his chest against my back while his arm wrapped around my waist to hold me closely. Sweet Pea’s face nuzzled into my back, warm breath saturating the hair at the nape of my neck.

“Right now,” He started, pressing his mouth against my flesh, “You need to get some sleep.” I shivered slightly, draping my hand over his around my waist. Reluctantly, I nodded and tried to shut my eyes.

When Sweet Pea had thought I had fallen asleep, he shifted carefully and pressed another kiss to my shoulder, a quiet laugh muffled by my shirt. I could feel his eyes on my face, felt his arm squeeze me once before he peeled himself away from me, pulled his boots on and slid the window open. Before he slipped out, he brushed his fingertips against my temple, pulling my hair away from my eyes with a soft sigh. This time, he sounded happier. Once he had safely shut the window, and his shadow had disappeared, my eyes shot open and I remained still.

*What had we done?*
In spite of all of the crippling doubts I had about allowing myself to emotionally attach to Sweet Pea, I found myself craving his touch and company more than I did initially. If I wasn’t working or busy with the boys, I would be settled comfortably in a corner table at the Whyte Wyrm while Toni worked and Sweet Pea played pool. Somedays, I would work next to Jughead — not that he ever associated with me much. He was always too immersed in his own world to care for conversation. He’d walk me home after a shift a Pop’s, made sure to buy a milkshake to split (always vanilla, just because it was my favourite).

My relationship with the tall Serpent remained private; we continued to make an effort to keep our distance during the school hours, for my sake. I had explained what had happened to Dean to Sweet Pea, hoping this would provide him with some form of solace. After several hours of arguing back and forth, he understood that my position in the household was still considered temporary and entirely possible of being taken away should Dean feel necessary. Neither of us liked having to restrain ourselves throughout the day — it was becoming increasingly difficult to not reach out instinctively and brush his bangs out of his eyes, or hug his large frame.

Every night, I left my window unlocked and cracked open so that he could sneak through it. Some mornings, I would wake up in an empty bed, while other mornings had the pleasure of being starting with delightfully gentle kisses pressed along my shoulders and warm arms circling me. It was those small moments of getting to be together alone that made the wait worthwhile.

I was happy when I was with him, surprisingly. Admittedly, I had not expected myself to succumb to deeper desires that lurked in the back of my mind. I always expected that I would push through it all, and come out on the other side as the person I wanted to be, just alone. Maybe I was capable of having both. Having a great love, the companionship, as well as becoming who I envisioned myself to be. Just with my rock. My person. The more time I spent with him, the more I accepted what we had become. How important and crucial he had been for my growth. He was the beginning of a new chapter in my life.

Strong willed, mindful, and stubborn; three of many traits I had begun to appreciate more in the Serpent since I had started seeing him. His perseverance was admirable, not once had he ceased chasing me — because of this, I was quick to demolish any doubts I previously had about his feelings for me. I was confident that I understood them completely now. Things just felt better when he was here. Like there wasn’t parts of me empty and missing. Not necessarily because they had been taken from me, but because they had never existed in the first place.

I could feel whole, and warm. I had never felt warm, and I hadn’t noticed that about myself until I touched Sweet Pea for the first time. His skin always left a burning sensation on my fingertips, and despite that feeling, I craved more of his touch. I stopped pulling away when he wanted to caress my arm, or face. I no longer hesitated to rest comforting hands on his shoulders and arms. I never stopped hugging him under his jacket, because it was intimate, and that was how I wanted it. He was my Sweet Pea.

Not that I’d ever admit any of that to him.

I rested my head against the cabinet door, draping my arms around his shoulders when he placed his palms on the counter strategically on either side of my hips. His nose along my jawline, inhaling as he neared my hairline and then he sighed, resting there. “You’re supposed to be watching the food.” I reminded him, raking my nails through his hair appreciatively.

Sweet Pea hummed in response, lips latching gently onto my neck, licking and sucking the flesh. A quiet giggle slipped through my lips as his fingertips gently tickled my sides. I brought my knees up to squeeze either side of his waist tightly, lips breaking open into a smile. His grin softened, hands then slowly moving to wrap around me fully, and I resettled my hands on either side of his face.

Sweet Pea then rested his forehead against mine, hooded lids fluttering as he spoke, “Maybe I can’t wait for the food,” he
suggested teasingly, fingers trailing towards my inner thigh. My fluttered nervously in my chest, body tensing in response to the light touch.

I pressed my lips to his feverishly, arms desperately holding him close when we heard the front door; voices belonging to my cousin's drifted into the kitchen as the sounds of shopping bags hit the floor. My eyes snapped to the entryway, horror mirrored in Donovan’s wide blue orbs. We remained frozen, Sweet Pea’s lips removed from mine, his hand still (thankfully) concealed. “Danny?” Don called cautiously. I pressed my index finger to my lips, eyes pleading. “Can you go upstairs and grab my gym bag?” he asked over his shoulder, eyes setting into an angry glare.

I relaxed, dropping my forehead onto Sweet Pea’s shoulder.

With a groan of reluctance, we heard Danny’s feet hit the stairway. Sweets worked quickly then — he grabbed his phone off the table, and leaned over to press a feather-light kiss to my lips before he slipped past Don’s stiff frame and retreated out the front door. My cousin's eyes did not move from my figure sitting on the counter.

Sweet Pea was out of the house before Danny had even found his brother's bag. I hung my head in my palms, rubbing my tired eyes with a petulant groan. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.” I mumbled angrily to myself, sitting upright to meet Don's piercing glare in defeat.

We remained in that moment, eyes locked together, expressions conveying a thousand words neither of us could utter in fear Danny might overhear. Finally, Don stepped forward into the kitchen, voice low and controlled, “What wasn’t? Fucking around with Sweet Pea, or me finding out?”

I sneered, “I’m not fucking around with him, Don.”

His brows shot up at my tone, taking another step towards me, “Right, you expect me to believe that you're dating him?” I dropped my gaze quickly, avoiding making eye contact by looking everywhere but at him. “Oh my god,” he gawked briefly, then smacked his palm against his forehead, “You’re dating him. Cal, what thefuck are you thinking?”

Danny finally descended the stairs, their gym bags in hand. We recovered our composure quickly; Don leaned against the wall with his arms folded as I sat up taller. Danny slapped his ball cap down onto his head, poking his head around the corner to sniff once and hummed. “Whatcha cooking?” he asked with excitement evident in his features.

“Tacos.” I smiled weakly, meeting Don’s eyes for a brief moment. “Want some?”

“No,” Don replied for his brother, ripping his bag from Danny’s hand. “We’re long overdue for a run. Let’s go.” he smacked Danny’s chest, and turned to the door. I slipped off from the counter, bringing my hands up to my hair to run through the tangled blonde mess, courtesy of Sweet Pea.

“Save some!” Danny called out as he followed along behind Don, shutting the door behind them.

I leaned against the ceramic counter and gripped onto the ledge tightly, feeling the vibrations in my pocket. I pulled out my phone, reading over the three unread messages from Pea:
I placed my phone onto the counter and sighed heavily, letting my eyes slip shut. I had been pushing my cousins limits for a while now — and knowing Don and his unpredictability, he could decide enough was enough at any time. Which meant that my relationship with Sweet Pea was likely to be outed to the remaining two members of our family, and it would have been happening soon.

Sometime later in an effort to piece together everything and to give myself more reasons to believe that what I felt for Sweet Pea was wrong, I took every chance I could to ask Dean about what happened when he was seventeen. The picture he painted me was horrific, perhaps more than I imagined. It certainly presented a side of the gang I had yet to witness, and hoped I never did. Dean felt so strongly in his opinion of them.

“It’s so easy to get caught up with them. It’s exhilarating. There’s honestly nothing like sitting on a bike and feeling the
rumble beneath you, or being someplace you ought not to be where you might get caught.” he sighed fondly thinking of his memories, picking at the label on his beer bottle. “It starts out that way. You have the right intentions. Everything seems crystal clear. Then suddenly you’re neck deep, trying to keep your head above the water, and they’re all hoping you drown.”

“I thought you said the Serpents were all mainly family related.”

“They are.”

“Then how’d you get in?”

Dean leaned forward in his seat, his lips twitching at a smile, “Our fathers.” he admitted sheepishly, as though I were being let in on a family secret he hadn’t let the boys in on yet. “Your old man was the first of the two to join. Didn’t cause a fuss, didn’t draw any attention. Lived his life under loyal protection. Eventually they found their way out.”

“So they left? No questions asked?” I asked, confused. “And you couldn’t just leave?”

“They’re not going to hold you hostage and force you to be loyal. Every situation is handled differently. People grow up, they have children. The Serpents aren’t going to hold that to you. I remember dad saying it was the hardest decision Byron ever made, choosing to leave them to move with your mom to Pelham when she was pregnant with you.”

I sat on that thought for a few days, trying to process the information. That all along I hadn’t been an outsider. I had belonged, just unknowingly. And I intended to keep it that way — I didn’t want Sweet Pea thinking I was going to throw myself into the middle of the mess, to prove something to him. Because I wouldn’t. My interest in gang affiliation both began, and ended, with Sweet Pea.

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I waltzed out of my first period classroom, bumping hips with Sweet Pea as he greeted me in the hallway. “Lookin’ good, sweetness.” he smirked, surveying the ripped denim and jean jacket he had loaned me after class the previous day. His fingers pulled the textbooks from my arms, holding them against his side as we moved down the stairs towards biology.

“Thanks,” I smiled cheekily, gripping onto the strap of my bag tightly, “it’s my boyfriend’s.” I forced the smile to stay as I said the word; it was still incredibly new for me. Felt foreign and bitter in my mouth.

Sweet Pea’s lips threatened a smile, “Is that so?”

I nodded, ensuring to keep my eyes on the sea of students rushing in between periods, “He’s got great taste.”

Pea hummed in satisfaction as his arm moved to drape over my shoulder. “Not going to get over hearin' you say that.” he murmured quietly into my ear. “You’re not worried about Danny seeing?”

I shrugged, stepping around a group of teens conveyed in the middle of the hallway, “I’m a dead man either way — might as well get the full girlfriend experience while I can.” I joked, peering sideways up at his towering figure.

His mouth was pressed into a firm line and his brows were drawn together as he thought; he then casted a worried look down at me, “We don’t know if Don’s gonna say anything.”

“I’m gonna stop by Fangs locker quickly, I’ll catch up in a min.” I stopped in my tracks to force him to turn on his heels and face me, “look, neither of the boys have class on this side of the school anyway, so I’m in the clear till lunch.”

We turned onto the second floor, Pea gently touched my lower back, “I’m gonna stop by Fangs locker quickly, I’ll catch up in a min.” I nodded absentely, too focused on Jughead standing in the middle of the bustling hallway with a panicked redhead. I circled around them, curiously looking back over my shoulder as Jughead's face twisted. If I had developed any sort of ground friendship with him, I might’ve stopped to interrupt. Instead, I continued forward.
Kabrina stood outside her first period, leaning against the wall with a knowing smile when I twirled as I approached. “Girl,” she bumped her fist against mine in greeting, pushing off the wall, “you look seriously hot.”

“Pea seems to think so.” I mused coyly.

“Thought you were coming out about it yet.”

I lifted one shoulder up in a lazy shrug, “We aren’t — it’s just a jacket.”

“His jacket,” she added, pulling at the sleeve, “and everyone knows it.”

We had made it halfway down the hall when a loud bang startled me; the doors I had just come through burst open and slammed into the concrete walls heavily, deputies quickly infiltrating the hall. The students scrambled hastily, scattering down the hall, groups dispersing immediately. My eyes settled on the several canines that pressed their noses to the floor, muzzles pulled back over their teeth. Lockers swung open, pat downs began to those who willingly complied.

Those who didn’t were restrained

“Toni!”

Jughead and his friend shouldered past me, “Hey, hey, hey! You want to help her? You can’t do that from behind bars, c’mon!” I followed Jughead’s gaze; the survival instinct buried within Toni came through as she shouldered past the swarm of students. Just behind her I could see Fangs raise his arms, face dropped in annoyance as the officer patted him down thoroughly, jaw clenching under the skin.

My chest heaved with worry. I searched over the crowd desperately for Sweet Pea.

“Calliope!” I snapped my head towards the voice; Pea charged through a pair of officer’s, his hands forcibly pushing them away from his body. His face was pulled together in a mixture of anger and fear. He was trying to reach me, hopelessly trying to evade the grabbing hands that pulled on the leather of his jacket. “The jacket!” he yelled to me anxiously, looking at the jean on my body. Four sets of hands gripped onto his outerwear tightly to haul him back, then pressed down on his spine firmly, pushing his face and chest into the row of lockers. Sweet Pea’s eyes locked with mine, his pupils alight with flames in anger as the officers screamed into his ear. He lifted his hand to push himself off the lockers, quickly punching his fist into the metal before the deputy gripped onto his wrist tightly and twisted it behind his back.

“We’ve got another one!” I was surprised when my shoulders were tightly encased in a steel grip. I twisted abruptly, holding my hands out in defense as I took a step back. “Ma’am, I’m gonna need you to stay still. Mayor’s orders.” the male ordered gruffly, advancing forward again.

“This isn’t my jacket.” I stated firmly, looking over my shoulder to where Sweet Pea remained pressed against the lockers, hands wiggling under the officer’s grips as they struggled to cuff him.

“Just co-operate.” the officer in front of me demanded, reaching forward to grip my arm. I ripped my limb from his fingers, wincing slightly at the pain that laid in its wake.

“It’s not my jacket.” I repeated firmly, a little louder, a little more desperate. My eyes locked onto Kabrina’s — she was trying to push past the teacher that had a group of students pressed into the wall to keep them from the mayhem. My fear was mimicked in her eyes.

“Don’t touch her.” Sweet Pea's growl cut through the distress, the sound low and menacing enough to send men running for the hills.

“Let’s get her restrained!” The officer called; I immediately shot my eyes up to his, shaking my head violently.
Now I jerked back in reaction, folding my arms across my chest, trying to keep his hands from obtaining a secure hold of me. “Don’t fucking touch her!” Sweet Pea yelled again as the officer in front of me grabbed the lapel of the jacket and slammed me back into one of the lockers. I winced on impact, head pressing into the metal with a throbbing ache.

I glanced around desperately, noticing that the majority of those being patted down or restrained by officers happened to be Serpents. The handful of eyewitnesses and general bystanders had their phones pointed towards the chaos that unfolded in the middle of one of the busiest hallways of the building. My gaze locked with Don’s; his eyes were wide but he remained on the sideline.

I had to explain.

He tried to step forward, but he was stopped instantly; Kabrina grabbed onto his arm and mumbled something in his ear. His face fell the slightest; I felt the nausea creep up my esophagus. I snapped my neck over to where Sweet Pea stood, heavily secured in place with an officer on either side of him. His eyes remained focused on mine; I tried to find comfort in the depths of his brown hues. “Stop resisting.” Don commanded over the noise in the hall.

When we started to file out through the front doors, I briefly met Don’s eyes as I passed, “Don’t tell Dean.” I pleaded quickly, hoping my face conveyed just how desperate I was. The students of Southside High lined the sidewalk, their phones still pulled out, videotaping the scene as one by one, Serpents were shoved into the back of cruisers.

Unfortunately for me, my eyes caught hold of a familiar blue pair among the swarm of bystanders. “Danny?”

“Cal? What’s going on — hey, let her go!” I heard his angry voice behind me, heard him struggling against a deputy. My head ducked into the back cab of one of the vehicles, my legs barely fitting between the seats when I looked through the glass of the window to see him towering over one of the officers, pointing angrily in my direction. “This is a misunderstanding — she’s not one of them.”

Sweet Pea entered in on the opposite side; once the doors had shut, he leaned forward and pressed his mouth against my shoulder comfortingly. “You’re okay,” Pea mused gently, scooching himself closer to my frame. Danny was still working against the Sheriff, trying to reason with him as they both turned to look at me. “It’s gonna be okay.” Pea’s voice seemed distant now that Danny’s eyes had settled on us closely linked together in the car; recognition gathered on his features, eyes alight with a new sense of anger.

“I’m cuffed in the back of a police car, Pea, nothing about this is okay!” I hadn’t noticed the tears that were streaming down my face until I gasped for breath I hadn’t realized I needed. My shoulders shook violently, feeling the nausea in my stomach roll uncomfortably as Danny willingly stopped protesting and took a step back, eyes locked on mine. “Danny, please!” I cried desperately, pushing myself up to the window.

From the outside looking in, I could only imagine the visual. Seeing me screaming, pleading, crying from the back of a cruiser, cuffed and scared. Sweet Pea hovering so closely, trying to whisper comfort into my ear. Everything muffled from the outside, like something out of a bad dream.

“I know.” Sweet Pea sighed, nudging me gently with his shoulder. “Don’t look at him, look at me.”

I shook my head, trying to breathe deeply as the nausea rolled in my stomach again. My mouth shut tightly, lips clamped together.

“Calliope, look at me.” He demanded, voice hard. I remained still for a few moments, wrists sore and raw as I pulled uselessly against the metal. Slowly, I twisted my body so that I was facing him; his eyes were cold, assessing the scene outside the vehicle as dozens of students were either shoved into cars or against the chain linked fence. His face softened slightly when his brown irises flickered down to mine; he pressed his mouth to mine, lips hard and rough, moving quickly. Desperately. I pressed my forehead to his, eyes shut tightly, as though I were trying to erase what was happening from my
mind. “Better?” He asked quietly, brushing his lips against mine again, only this time they were softer.

I nodded once.

“Two counts of breaking and entering, one of auto theft and four counts for underage drinking.” I leaned my head against the wall, eyes focused forward as Officer Reyes stood just on the other side of the holding cell, reading through my record. Out loud. “And all they gave you was a criminal citation and a slap on the wrist.” He shook his head, letting out a quiet whistle. “How’s it feel? Finally being cuffed.”

I could feel Sweet Pea’s eyes carefully watching me from his side of the cell. I tried not to give Reyes the satisfaction of getting to me, instead chose to remain silent. We had been sitting in that cell for hours; many families had come to claim their children already, leaving Toni, Pea and I remaining.

“What’s he talking about, Cal?” Sweet Pea hissed, leaning forward with his arms still restrained behind his back.

I waited until Reyes slapped the folder onto the desk and exited the room; I then sighed loudly and pressed my eyes shut tightly, “Greendale is definitely more a little more lenient.” I grumbled, feeling my mouth pull down in the corners. I had managed to go two years fighting tooth and nail to get to where I was. I had sworn I’d never find myself mixed up in this kind of situation again — and here I was. In a holding cell. Cuffed and being treated as though I had actually done something wrong.

Like any of us had done something wrong.

“Grand theft auto?” Toni asked quietly from next to me, “Badass.”

“Don’t.” I snapped, cutting my eyes open to glare at her. “They were all infractions, hardly anything admirable.”

She rolled her amber hues, “C’mon, Cal, we’ve all been there. Nothing to be ashamed of.”

“What part of criminal citation don’t you understand, Topaz?”

“Easy, sweetness.” Pea chided from his corner, “No one has to know.”

“Everyone already knows.” I growled, more frustrated than anything. I was thankful that Pea understood my anger wasn’t directed at him; his face softened, eyes weary and pained when my voice cracked.

“C’mon you two,” Keller said as he walked into the room, Tall Boy and Fangs following behind him with annoyance plastered on their faces. “Let’s go.”

“What about Cal?” Toni asked worriedly, standing on her feet to twist and stick her locked hands through the slit in the bars.

“Her guardian should be here shortly.” He responded absently, freeing her wrists. He pulled the door open, hand on his hip as he looked over to where Sweets sat expectantly, “Well? Let’s go.”

“No thanks,” He muttered grimly, pressing his back against the wall. “I’ll pass.”


“Don’t be stupid,” I snapped harshly, narrowing my eyes at him, “Go, Sweet Pea.”

We held our gaze for several heartbeats, the group outside the cell growing increasingly impatient with each passing moment. Reluctantly, Pea stood, his boots echoing heavily against the cement floor as he wandered to where Keller stood, and extended his cuffed hands. Pea peered over his shoulder to where I sat alone in the empty cell, eyes apologetic.
“Call me so I know you’re okay.” He pleaded through the bars once the door had been shut again.

The sun had set outside the windows; the cell was now illuminated by the dim light that hung in the center of the room. No one had come in since Tall Boy had come by for Toni and Sweet Pea — I had started to wonder if Dean would show up at all.

My stomach rumbled hungrily, wrists raw in pain as I readjusted them for the umpteenth time in the last hour; I hissed loudly.

“Quiet.” Reyes muttered.

I shot my eyes towards him, “I hardly think the cuffs are necessary anymore.”

“Can’t trust a snake.” My blue hues rolled again, lowering my chin to my chest in frustration. “Shit happens when you get mixed up with the wrong crowd.”

“I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but every teen you wrongfully arrested today was let out with no charges. I highly doubt the towns going to see the Serpents as the real problem.”

“What are you implying, Hobbs?”

I didn’t meet his piercing glare, instead I lifted my eyes to the door that opened. His face was void of any emotion, which caused my stomach to turn uneasily. Officer Reyes stood from the chair, nodded to Dean once before he shut the door behind him and left us in isolation. I stood from the bench and walked forward, “Dean, I can explain —”

“I hope you can.” He said calmly, moving to stand in front of me with his arms folded across his broad chest. I wanted to tell him everything, that much I know he deserved. I wanted to reason with him, make him understand that Sweet Pea was not a bad guy, and that his involvement with the Serpents wouldn’t affect me or the household. That he made me happy. Made me feel normal.

That had to be enough for him, right? He could see how much I struggled, how distant I could be. He wasn’t oblivious to the person I was. Surely he had noticed how much more involved I seemed to be, how more at ease I appeared. That Pea cared for my happiness. He wouldn’t need to worry about my safety — I was perfectly safe.

He had know that.

“Seven infractions.” He started, pulling the chair into the center of the room, leaning forward onto his elbows. “Breaking and entering? Grand theft auto? Underage drinking? Really, Cal?”

My eyes dropped to my feet, analyzing the scuff on the side of my boot. “I made some bad choices.” I responded quietly, trying not to let myself feel too bothered by how disappointed he sounded.

“I thought you said everything was perfectly fine in Greendale.”

I sighed loudly, meeting his questioning eyes briefly before I looked out the window, “They were. I wasn’t the only one charged, Dean, things happen when you don’t have a stable home or parental guardian.”

He scoffed, lips pulling into a sad smile as he shook and hung his head, “You’re living under my roof, under my supervision. What’s the excuse this time?” There was an implied ‘where did I go wrong?’ that hung unspoken between us; I felt the guilt roll in my stomach uneasily. I was typically used to hearing disappointment from others, but this was different. So much different.

“It’s not my jacket —”

“Obviously.”
I tried to keep my annoyance at bay, pushing through his interruption, “It’s Sweet Pea’s, okay? I’m not mixed up in any
gang or criminal activity. I’m not doing drugs, I’m not drinking —”

“Cal,” He stopped me, brows pulling together, “What are you doing wearing his jacket?” I paused, reply caught in my
throat. Was he asking because he already knew and wanted to hear it from me? Had Don or Danny said anything? Or was
he simply curious and confused as to how I ended up in this situation. My lack of reply confirmed whatever suspicion he
had; Dean let out a loud sigh and dropped his head again, “I warned you.”

“It’s not what you think.” I responded quickly, taking another step forward. “This isn’t me trying to fit in, Dean. I don’t
want to be apart of that —”

“But you’re already apart of it!” He yelled angrily. I pressed my forehead to the metal bars, feeling the burning sensation
gather behind my closed lids, “And look at you now, Callie. You’re cuffed and behind fucking bars — for wearing a
jacket with their name on it.”

“It’s a misunderstanding.” I pressed quietly, trying not to let the defeat consume me.

“I told you what happened. I get that right now things are good. That you believe him when he says he’s sure about you,
and makes you feel like you’re all that matters,” Dean’s voice sounded desperate, as though he were trying to reason with
me but I could hear the anger underlying it all. “But you’re not. At the end of the day, that gang? That’s all that matters to
him. He’ll never pick you over them. Don’t get caught up in it, Cal, I mean it. You’ve got good intentions, and you’re
going to make it out of here in one piece and move on with your life but if you think he’s going to go with you, you have
another thing coming.”

“You said my dad left without any issues — why can’t he?”

“Because people like Sweet Pea grew up with this! He’s a product of circumstance — and not one to be proud of. This
place? Those people? That’s all he knows. That’s his family. Don’t drown yourself for someone who isn’t going to get in
the water for you.”

I shook my head slowly, “You’re wrong.” I sighed, finally meeting his gaze. “He’s not like that, he’s —”

“Different?” Dean asked curtly. His fingers moved to the collar of his shirt, pulling it down just enough to expose a bit of
flesh on his chest that appeared mangled, raw and angrily pink. The space his tattoo used to be — the place he had been
burned. I swallowed thickly. “They’re all the same, kid. Don’t get it twisted.” He stood, and took a few steps back,
adjusting his shirt before he exhaled loudly and moved towards the door.

“Wait, where are you going?” I asked worriedly, moving down the cell with him.

He paused, hand gripping the knob on the door, contemplating his choice in words before he responded, “I’ll be back
tomorrow before five —”

“You’re leaving me here?” I interrupted, voice cracking as I blinked in shock.

Dean took a few moments to respond. His shoulders rose with each deep inhale, head hung slightly as he contemplated his
response, “Let this be a learning opportunity, Cal.” He sighed grimly, looking over his shoulder to where I stood in the
cell. “I guarantee you won’t make the same mistake twice after today.”

“No, Dean, wait —”

The door slammed shut.
I stared down at the messages on the screen, palm pressed to my forehead, sitting with my wet hair and towel on the edge of my bed. A constantly incoming stream of texts from Sweet Pea illuminated my screen once my phone had rebooted.

That, along with several messages from unknown numbers (I assumed they belonged to Toni and Fogarty) in an effort to reach out to me to see if I was okay. Truthfully, I didn’t know how to answer that question.

Was I okay?

My mind reared back to the disappointment on Dean’s face. I hadn’t known what to expect when he finally came to sign the papers and bring me home. He had persuaded the Sheriff to turn an eye to my past citations; I had weakly thanked him and made an effort to keep my head down when exiting the building. My wrists were raw and an angry red; the skin was so tender it hurt to move them.

Dean had requested I be ready for dinner — he wanted to have a sit down discussion with Danny, Don and I about what would happen moving forward. Noticing the time on my alarm clock, I hastily pulled on a pair of jeans and sweater, pulled my comb through my hair a few times and then retreated from my room.

Downstairs, the heavy scent of garlic filled my nostrils and guided me into the living room where the boys had opened several boxes containing pizza, garlic sticks and an assortment of wings. Looking around the room, I opted to sit on the outskirt in the recliner; we ate in silence for a few minutes. No one seemed to be too comfortable talking to anyone, no one made an effort to keep eye contact. If I wasn’t obligated to sit down for the meeting, I would’ve left. It was glaringly apparent none of the males in the room were too happy with me.

“Alright,” Dean licked his fingers and leaned forward in his seat, “So let’s talk about what happened.”

“Yeah, Cal, where the hell have you been?” Danny asked, brows pulled together as he wedged another piece of bread into his mouth. I tried to contain an disgust, ignoring how loud he chewed.

I peeked over to where Dean was, his green hues watching me expectantly. I could play his game, or I could play my own. I only really knew how to play one; “Dean left me at the Sheriff’s station in a holding cell.” My cousins eyes rolled, and he fell back into the loveseat.

“What?”

“Dude, seriously? Was that necessary?”

“Tell them why.” Dean pressed, shooting his brothers a look in warning. Don looked up at me from under his brows, mouth twitching at the hint of a grimace, “She’s dating Sweet Pea.” Dean finally said. Slowly. Confidently.

“They know.” I mumbled quietly, setting my half eaten slice onto the table. Suddenly, I couldn’t hold an appetite.

I felt his eyes shift away from me; Dean leaned forward again, clenched fists pressed against his knees and his face pulled into anger as he narrowed his eyes at Danny and Don, “You knew? And you didn’t think to fucking say anything to me?”

Danny spewed right into justifying himself; that he had only seen Sweet Pea kiss my shoulder, had visibly seen the worry he had on his face. That he wasn’t sure if it had meant anything to me, if it was one sided, or serious — because it was Sweet Pea.

Meanwhile, I locked eyes with Don. He conveyed no emotion. No anger. No sadness. No disappointment. Not seeing any reaction was more unnerving than anything, because as much as I thought I knew my cousin, I hadn’t the slightest idea what was going on in his head. He blinked, pulling his eyes from mine to stare down at his plate, “I caught them kissing in
the kitchen last week.” Don said finally. From that point forward, he refused to meet my eyes.

Last nail in the coffin. I sunk back into my seat.

“You brought him here?” Dean’s voice was low, controlled. “Into my house? Under my roof? After I had specifically and openly reminded you that they weren’t welcome here.” There was a new sense of irritation in his voice — like something had flipped. This part of Dean I was certain the boys had never had the opportunity to witness was coming forward. I almost felt bad for triggering that side of him.

The room sat in silence — they were waiting for me to say something. To apologize. To explain myself. As though they were hoping that I was going to turn it all around on Pea, that I would throw him under the bus. That anything we had was going to be swept under the rug. And I wished it were that easy. I really did. I wished I could walk away from him now. Wished I could make the right decision of putting my family first, to appease them.

Truthfully, I wasn’t sure I would be able to leave him behind. And that scared me. To think that a month ago, I was Cal Hobbs. The girl that wanted to get by unscathed, to go to university, to move on with my life and leave who everyone thought I was behind. Now I was Calliope Hobbs. A little of that same girl, still as reserved, still as nervous and unsure but this time there was an emotional barrier that had started to crumble. I was his, and he was mine. This version of myself didn’t belong to anybody but him. If I couldn’t be here with him, I didn’t want to be this person ever again.

So I picked my side, and swallowed my pride.

“I’m sorry.” I muttered weakly, finally lifting my eyes to meet Dean’s. His face was stern, jaw clenched tightly under the flesh. “I don’t know what you want me to say.” It had becoming obvious that my happiness only mattered so long as it didn’t involve the them. Any sort of hospitality they had given me, any friends I had made — the shell I had broken out of because of these people — didn’t matter to him. None of that matter to any of them. I was sure they’d rather I was miserable and alone, if it meant I had zero affiliation with anyone from that gang. “They’re my friends —”

“They are not your friends.” Don hissed angrily, eyes cutting to mine quickly with a venomous glare.

“They are.” I pressed, dropping my hands into my lap. “I understand that what happened to you,” I pointed to Dean, hoping my face didn’t convey anything but empathy, “Was terrible and awful, and should have never happened. But they’re not like that. They aren’t dealing drugs, or pimping out girls, or killing people — you were one of them. You believed in what they believed in!”

“That was a very long time ago.” Dean countered.

“Who cares?” I asked, shaking my head. “I’ve spent the last two years completely wrapped up in myself, unable to make friends or fit in anywhere —”

“Thought you said you wanted nothing to do with them?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose in frustration, tongue running along my bottom lip, “The people are fine. You don’t have to worry about me sticking my hand into a box with a rattlesnake or —”

“Is that what you think you’d have to go through to be one of them? To be apart of that world?” He asked suddenly; his face no longer appeared angry, moreo amused. “You have no idea, do you? The kind of games they play, the shit they make people do. You think it’s all unity and brotherhood? You think it’s respect? It’s a bunch of crap, Callie, don’t try to sell me that pitch.”

“He’s not a terrible person.” I felt like I was talking to a wall. I wished I could just show him the Sweet Pea I knew — the people I knew. Because they were different people. Toni, Fangs, Pea — hell, even Tall Boy. The image they portrayed for the public was different than what the reality was. “He treats me like I’m normal.”

“And the second they decide they have no use for you, you’ll be tossed aside.” Dean concluded, standing on his feet. “We
won’t be here to pick up the pieces.” His words were so heavy, like it left a bitter taste in his mouth. My throat involuntarily began to close in on itself, chest tightening. I knew those words. I knew that tone, and I knew what followed it. “I think it would be best if you found somewhere else to stay. Until I figure out whether or not I’m going to call your support worker and let her know what’s happened.”

“You’re kicking her out?” Don asked suddenly, voice worried. He and Danny exchanged looks; one seemed far less concerned than the other, “What the fuck, man?”

“Language.” Dean growled, shooting his brother a look in warning.

“English,” Dean shot back, rising from the couch. “Riverdale doesn’t have a fucking shelter, Dean, where is she supposed to go?”

Dean’s shoulder rose in a shrug, “She has savings. Rent a room at the motel.”

“She has a room here.”

“Let me make this perfectly fucking clear, Donovan.” Dean stepped forward, head tilted to the side and for a second — just a second — I could see the side of him that worked well in the Serpent environment. “Under no circumstance will I tolerate being lied to or disrespected. I did this as a favour to her — I’m not obligated to keep her here. This was a trial and error process. As far as I’m concerned, she’s as unwelcome here as any Serpent is until I decide what happens moving forward.” He lifted his brows, as though asking his brother if he understood the words coming out of his mouth. “I won’t tolerate a mutiny, either, Donovan. Get on board or you can get out, too.”

Danny’s eyes remained locked on his plate, unwilling to lift his head to speak or to watch, but he had winced slightly at Dean’s last words. He knocked the back of Don’s knee with his elbow, causing Don to buckle back onto the couch.

I settled my eyes onto the large frame that towered over me; Dean’s face contorted for a moment, as though he were second guessing his decision. And for a moment, just a moment, I thought maybe he would crack. Break. Give in. Not to the idea, but just to keep me here until he figured out what he wanted to do.

“You can leave whatever you can’t fit into your duffle here — I want you gone by eight.” He finalized, picking his plate off the table to retreat into the kitchen, “Leave your key on the table when you go.”

“Please insert a dollar twenty five for an additional three minutes —”

“Shit.” I huffed angrily, digging in my bag for my wallet. I held the payphone receiver between my ear and my shoulder, hearing the chuckle on the other end. “Don’t start, Sab, my phone plan doesn’t include long distance. This was cheaper.”

“Payphones still exist? Shocking.” I rolled my eyes, pushing the coins into the slot to lock in another few minutes with my best friend. I hadn’t known what else to do. I panicked. I shoved most of my clothes into my duffle bag, packed some essentials including an empty sketchbook and left Dean’s without saying anything to anyone. It wouldn’t have been the first time I had been kicked out. Foster families weren’t big on sixteen year olds with an attitude problem. I was a foregone conclusion of a dead end for most of them. They knew they couldn’t help me, and they knew I was unhappy. To spare us all the misery, they’d kick me out.

Sabine had been helpful with most of the moves. From home to home, always knowing I’d end up back in the shelter. She had tried to convince her parents to take me in, more times than I could count on our four hands combined. I leaned against the glass, staring out into the misery of the rain and sighed, “What am I gonna do? This isn’t Pelham — or Greendale. I tried the church, they don’t have beds. And the south side isn’t exactly notorious for habiting the homeless.”

“What about the friend you made? Katrina —”

“Kabrina.” I corrected, running a tired hand over my eyes. “I texted her but I haven’t heard anything and I don’t know
where she lives.”

“And what about the boy?” She pressed. I had mentioned Sweet Pea once or twice, but never by name. Just simply had told her that there was a guy (which had interested her, because let’s face it. I’m me) who I spent most of my time with and we had happened to get along well.

I had already considered messaging him, and asking him if he knew of anywhere I could stay. Maybe in the back of the Whyte Wyrm, maybe Jughead had some ideas. But then I thought about how my association with him landed me here in the first place. But it wasn’t his fault, this was my choice, my doing —

“Don’t push it, Sab.” I sighed sadly, “I miss you. I wish you were here. I wish you knew everything so you could tell me what to do because I’m just lost.” I pressed my shoulders into the glass, eyes watching the trees bend in the wind on the other side of the street. “This place is a nightmare; there’s a serial killer on the loose killing people for no real reason, I have just over four-hundred dollars in my bank account for that’s to buy a car. Realistically I have no money, no friends, no home —” I slapped my hand over my mouth and pressed my eyes shut tightly. I slid down the back of the booth until my bottom hit the floor, holding the speaking end of the phone away from my mouth as the sob ripped through my body; I had no home. For the first time in my young life, that thought broke my heart.

I had found my family. That was the sad thing. I had found a place I was comfortable in. I felt welcomed in. A place that felt like everything I should have had. Warmth and food. Arm wrapping shoulders and laughs. A real home, for the first time in a very, very long time, I had a home.

A home I wasn’t welcome in anymore.

Whether or not I would be welcomed back or shipped off was pending — I wasn’t sure how long it would take Dean to make that decision. I wasn’t sure what had been said when I left, or if they would say anything at all. I didn’t know what the following school day would bring, I didn’t know if I could associate with Don or Danny — I didn’t know if they’d want to talk to me.

“Allie,” Sabine was frantically calling my name, anxiety lacing her every syllable. “Hey, Allie! Listen to me! Just go. Wherever it is you’re thinking of that you don’t wanna go to, just go. You’re better off somewhere with a roof than on the street — God, please don’t fucking sleep on the street. I’ll save and drive down when I can, we’ll book a motel room for a week over Christmas or spring break or something, but baby,” I tried to find comfort in promise. We had made these plans multiple times. The truth was that I hadn’t seen her since the last day of school — her parents didn’t particularly care for me. I stopped letting myself be disappointed when they wouldn’t let her come see me. “Be safe, okay?”

“Yeah.” I sniffled, wiping my eyes wearily. “I’ve gotta go. I’ll text you tomorrow so you know I’m still alive.”

I could sense her anger through the phone, “That’s not funny.”

“Love you, Sab.” I mumbled.

“Love you, too.”

I gripped onto the strap of my bag, hood pulled around my head to keep the droplets of rain from soaking my hair. I stopped at the sign, lips pressed into a tight line as I examined the area; trailers scattered around in remote places, never too close together, giving each individual their privacy. Some were decorated with string lights, some were bare, some had graffiti on the sides. I wandered through, admiring the uniqueness of each home. How each person inside had a story, and each story was just as complex as my own.

Several of the homes were paired with motorcycles, so I definitely felt as though I were in the right place. Truth was, I hadn’t the slightest idea if Sweet Pea lived alone, with his family, with anyone of the Serpents — this is when I began to realize I hardly knew anything about him. I didn’t know if he had parents, or if he was an orphan, like myself. I didn’t know if he had siblings. He hadn’t mentioned any, so I assumed he didn’t.
My eyes caught the glimmer of a familiar chrome plating; I cautiously stepped around the picnic table set up outside the steps, staring up at the trailer. The light inside was a low blue tint that slowly shifted into a light purple. While I found it odd, I was certain I was in the right place. My legs moved reluctantly up the steps to the door; I adjusted the strap over my shoulder, wiped my nose on my sleeve and then quickly knocked twice.

What if he wasn’t home?

What if he didn’t want to see me?

What was I doing here? As far as I was concerned, Sweet Pea didn’t have a job of his own and most of his money was made by playing pool with the guys. I hardly doubted he could afford to house me. My stomach churned uneasily, suddenly I felt as though I had no business being here. Asking him for this. Expecting him to be okay with everything I’d be asking of him.

Of course I knew he’d do it, though.

My eyes lifted to the door as it swung open, toothbrush hanging out of his frosted mouth. His eyes, previously annoyed and tired, melted into relief as he hung his head and leaned against the threshold. When he lifted his head, his mouth was pulled back into a scowl, “Where the fuck have you been? I’ve been calling you for hours, Calliope.” He wiped away any remaining toothpaste from his lips as I lifted my shoulders into a shrug.

“It’s a long story,” I grimaced, realizing I hadn’t texted him once since I had gotten home. That had been hours ago. The sun was long set and it was nearly midnight; I had spent a solid two hours sitting in Pop’s trying to think about a game plan before I even bothered calling Sabine. “I should’ve called first, I’m sorry.”

Pea shook his head, brows pulling together as he noticed the duffle bag in my hands, “I see Dean didn’t take things as well as we hoped.” He noted, cocking his head to usher me inside. I complied reluctantly, kicking my boots off at the door as he locked the deadbolt behind me and pulled my hood from around my hair. “Wanna talk about it?”

“Not really, but I’ll probably end up talking about it at some point.” I shrugged, stepping forward into the trailer. It definitely belonged to Sweet Pea, and he certainly seemed to be the only person that resided here. The area was illuminated by a disco looking lamp on the edge of the kitchen counter, and from what I could see, a UV light had been installed in his bedroom to give the same mood lighting. The table in the corner was pushed against the wall, and only had two chairs. There was a couch facing the television, and a small oval table set in front of it, littered with empty bottles and chip wrappers. “Got any left?” I asked, pointing to the empties.

Pea nodded as he passed, dropping the duffle he stole from my hands just on the inside of his bedroom before he turned to the fridge. I took this alone time to further investigate the spinning light on the counter, sinking into the cushions on one of the dining room chairs as I leaned over the back. “It was a birthday present from Fangs and the guys. They thought it would be funny.” Sweet Pea said he as he popped off the metal tabs on the drinks with the edge of the counter.

“You prefer this?” I asked, fingers reaching for the bottle he extended forward, “Doesn’t this give you a headache?”

Sweets shrugged, leaning against the wall in the kitchen, “The regular light bulbs burnt out and I’m too cheap and lazy to get new ones. The look grew on me.”

I lifted my brows with a coy smile, “Is that so? How’re you supposed to do all of this?” I gestured to the homework spread open on the tabletop, “With this kind of mood lighting?” My eyes drifted across the sheets on the table, fingers pulling through the papers as my head shook in disbelief —

I stopped shuffling through the papers, my index finger halted on the booklet that read **BIOLOGY MIDTERM** across the top of the first page. I then shifted my eyes to the grade, and felt my brows pull together.

I lifted the sheet up, face pulling together in anger as I steadied myself on the table, “What’s this?”
Pea’s eyes fell to the paper before his eyes shut tightly and he leaned his head back against the wall, “Fuck,” He breathed, bringing a hand up to run through his hair. “Don’t say anything, okay, it’s not a big deal —”

“Not a big deal?” I asked dubiously, pulling the booklet away from his hand as he reached forward for it. “You told me you needed help with bio.” I accused, narrowing my eyes up at him.

“So I lied,” He rolled his eyes, leaning forward again to take the papers from my hand. “It’s not a big deal.” He repeated, shoving the booklet into a folder.

“You had me thinking you were straight stupid sometimes, you know that?”

Pea shrugged, collecting his binder and homework from the table. “I wanted an excuse to spend more time with you.”

“And you couldn’t think of anything better than helping you study for biology?”

Sweet Pea dropped onto the opposite dining chair, leaning back so the front two legs lifted off the floor, “I tired finding an alternate solution — you got mad at me for coming to visit you every shift.”

I laughed once, bringing the bottle to my lips, “That didn’t stop you, Pea.”

His lips broke into a smirk around his drink, ensuring to swallow before he answered, “You’re right — hey, I was gonna order some chinese, did you want something?” He asked, pulling the takeout menu from the empty tissue box he had crafted into a menu holder. I glanced at the clock on the stove, and then reluctantly nodded as my stomach gave way and offered a loud growl.

“Chinese sounds great.”

“He just left you there?” Sweet Pea asked, hand halting on the dip before my hip; I nodded against his chest, shivering into his warmth. The trailer was significantly colder than Dean’s home, and while Sweet Pea was my version of a personalized space heater, even his body warmth couldn’t keep the chills at bay. I regretted opting out of the sweatpants I had packed. In an effort to take the next step into becoming this new version of myself, I had decided that I wouldn’t need to wear pants to bed.

I had spent the better part of an hour in the bathroom brushing my hair, my teeth, washing my face and getting ready for bed. When I had started getting dressed, I had thrown on one of Pea’s shirts he had left at Dean’s, and contemplated heavily on whether or not I wanted to wear the one pair of panties I owned that didn’t make me feel like a fourteen year old prepubescent teen.

My fingers absently came up to finger the edge of the lace, smiling against his chest as I shrugged, “It’s not exactly like I had much of a say in the matter.” I grumbled, snaking my leg up over his hip. “This is Dean’s world, remember? I’m just living it in.”

I could hear a quiet growl rumble deep in Pea’s chest, “He shouldn’t be able to just kick you out like that.”

“I think I care less about the fact I got kicked out,” I started, picking at the stray strands of chest hair, lightly rubbing my fingers across his skin, “And more about the fact I’m not welcome in a place I actually felt like I belonged. I never stayed in one place for too long, hated being the new kid, hated being the outsider. It was different with them. They’re family, y’know?”

Sweet Pea watched me closely for a moment, bringing his hand up to brush my hair away from my face, “Does it make you miss him? Your dad?”

I paused.
I hadn’t considered that, honestly. My dad wasn’t exactly father of the year by any means, and I never once made excuses for him. But I couldn’t complain much about the life I had. I had a home, I had everything I needed and most of what I wanted. He made sure there was food, and if there wasn’t he let me use his credit to order something. He didn’t care if I wasn’t home for Christmas, so I spent more than enough time in my best friend’s bed, watching her family, vicariously living through Sabine. Through all of her boyfriends, her first time, every family function and gathering. I could almost pretend like everything in my life was normal, and okay.

I envied that life of hers. How perfect everything seemed to be. How she seemed to fit in no matter where she went, no matter the situation. She knew what to do. She was strong, and independent. Not because she had to be, but because she was capable.

Being with Sweet Pea had changed things for me, that much I could admit. Being independent now that I was with him didn’t mean I had to do it alone. It meant I could, but I didn’t have to. But I would.

I found myself living the life I had envied from afar for so long, and nothing seemed to be looking up. There was nothing that had changed. I couldn’t be excited about this part of my life. It was still private. It was still just for me. Just for us. But being here, in this bed, with this person — god, everything felt like I was made for this. Thick skin. A cautious heart. Nervous hands. They all fit perfectly with his confidence, with his ability to dive into everything and anything with his unwavering loyalty and security.

If I had to pick between the two halves of me that seemed to be at war, I would choose this version. The one that gets to experience something scary, and wonderful. The one that knows what’s it’s like to have your heart jump into your throat, to scream from the top of your lungs, to laugh like it’s nobody’s business.

I wished they could see me, now.

“Yeah,” I said after a while, “It does. He was a great man. Worked as a correctional officer, spoiled me rotten. There was nothing that he wouldn’t do for me.” I lied, hoping my poker face was more convincing to Sweet Pea than my own words were to me. “I miss him everyday.”

Pea hugged me to his chest tightly, lips firmly pressed to the top of my head in a comforting embrace. “You know you deserve the world, right?” He whispered quietly, rubbing his hand along my thigh and backside. “Are you okay?”

I hadn’t even noticed the shake in my hands; I gasped for the air I had been holding, angry when my eyes betrayed me and let tears fall. I shook my head, the hollow pain in my chest growing as I thought about the family I had found and possibly lost forever, “I’ve never been less okay in my life.” I whispered, pressing my face into his neck.

Sweet Pea, unsure of what to do, rewrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me into him. The weight of the grief I left was crushing, and an irrepressible need came over me to save us both. I lifted my chin, but hesitated; what I was about to do would change everything. I reasoned that Sweet Pea didn’t see intimacy as anything but a way to pass the time, and I shut my eyes again and swallowed back my fears. I had to do something. Something to help me, to show him that I was here and I was willing to give me all of him. I’d be damned if I lost him, too.

My heart pounded as I touched his neck with my lips and then tasted his flesh in a slow, tender kiss. He looked down with surprised, and this his eyes softened with the realization of what I wanted. He leaned down, pressing his lips against mine with a delicate sweetness. The warmth from his lips traveled all the way to my toes, and I pulled him closer to me. Now that we had taken the first step, I had not intention of stopping there.

I parted my lips, letting Pea’s tongue find its way to mine. “I want you,” I said.

Suddenly, the kiss slowed, and he tried to pull away. Determined to finished what I had started, my mouth worked against his more anxiously. In reaction, Sweet Pea backed away until he was on his knees. I rose with him keeping our mouths melded together.
He gripped each of my shoulders to hold me at bay, “Wait a sec,” He whispered with an amused smile, breathing hard. “You don’t have to do this, babydoll. This isn’t what tonight is about.” He was holding back, but I could see it in his eyes that his self-control wouldn’t last long.

I leaned in again, and this time, his arms gave way just enough for me to brush my lips against his. I looked up at him from under my brows, resolute. It took me a moment to say the words, but I would say them, “Don’t make me beg.” I whispered against his mouth.

With those four words, his head leaned back, eyes closed tightly as his brows pulled together. It took me a few moments to realize what that meant; instantly, my body ran cold. Colder than usual. All of the previous emotion I had, every feeling vanished quickly as I felt the embarrassment creep into my neck and face. I slowly relaxed back onto the mattress, staring at his chest so I didn’t have to look him in the eyes.

He didn’t want this.

The ice was replaced with heat; my chest and face erupted in warmth, the corners of my lips quivering just a fraction before I composed them into a tight line. All the confidence in me diminished. Suddenly, I was questioning what I was doing. Wearing the underwear I was wearing, laying in his bed, begging him — god, I felt so stupid.

I took a deep breath to steady myself. And, as the anger began to fade, I felt something else. It took me a minute to recognize why I was staring down again, the heat under my cheeks returning, engulfing me in flames.

Rejection rocked through every part of me. Through my veins, my chest, my aching heart. My fingers ran numb.

I’d never allowed myself to be so vulnerable in the past. And there would have been a time I would have said I’d never be this vulnerable, especially in front of a man.

“So?” He asked, still sitting back on his knees, fists keeping him propped up as he examined my features.

“Nothing,” I sighed, shaking my head slightly.

He watched my face for long moment while I failed in keeping my emotions off my face. Sweet Pea rose his brows, and his expression became mortified. “Baby, did I make you sad?” he asked, disbelief lacing his words.

“No,” I lied.

Sweet Pea’s head hung, eyes pressing tightly as his hair fell forward and he sighed, “Calliope, I’m sor —”

I shook my head, scooshing back on the bed to sit upright — away from him — pulling my legs into my chest, “Don’t apologize,” I tried to smile, wrapping my arms around the limbs. “It’s okay, really.” I wasn’t sure if I was reassuring him or myself.

He didn’t want this.

“I-it’s okay Sweet P —” I hear the words come out of my mouth shakily. My hearts still racing, not in happiness or love, but in pain — heart achedly beating behind my lungs, reminding me to calm the fuck down and breathe. Breathe and forget, breathe and forget, breathe and forget of what we had almost (should have never) done. Fuck, he didn’t. He didn’t force want me, it was all me. Only me, it was only me on the table — an idiot begging for something I shouldn’t have. That I didn’t deserve.

Foolish girl.

“Calliope — I didn’t —” Sweet Pea tried but the words, he didn’t know which ones could make it right. Was there any? I heard him curse under his breath but in the eerie silence of the room it was heard loud and clear. And it only seemed to push me further from him.
He didn’t want this.

“I get it, it’s alright, I know.” I nodded haltingly, turning and digging my nails against my palm and body. Real pain burning the palms of my hands as I dug into my flesh; this was a pain I understood and could compartmentalize.

“No, listen — Calli —”

An idiot, I was such an idiot — how did I allow this? How did I get carried away? Everyone warned me! Dean warned me. Danny and Don warned me. Fuck, Kabrina warned me! Sabine told me not to be reckless! To take care of myself, to keep sight on who I was going to become. Why on earth did I —? How could I do this to myself? How could I hide now that I had allowed him to do this to me — me.

He didn’t want this.

Sweet Pea moved forward to reach for me, the movement in my peripheral simply spurring me to flee /his/ bed. “Don’t.” I whispered, jumping away from him. Out of his bed, I had made the first step — but it didn’t feel like I did it, I didn’t feel in control of my body, or my mind. It was as if I were just watching a love story gone off the tracks — unrepairable. Doomed from the start.

He didn’t want me.

Sweet Pea’s hand remained outstretched, as if he could reach me — through all of my mess of emotions. He would be separated from me because of what he did — again. Not again Cal, please.

I stumbled away from him, bumping into the dresser at the edge of the room. I barely noticed the door was just beside it. My eyes hazy, my hand instinctively reaching for my mouth as though I could contain the sob that erupted from my throat.

Run.

Once in the bathroom, I slammed the door behind me and twisted the lock until I was certain it wouldn’t be opened. I could hear Sweet Pea on the opposite side, his fist worriedly banging against the frame, voice drifting into the bathroom from the crack between the floor and door. I looked up into the mirror, hands braced on either side of the sink.

The girl that stared back was the definition of a hot mess; her blonde hair was wild and left unruly around her small face. Her neck and cheeks were covered in a thick red layer, mascara smudged under her eyes as she worked to blink against the tears. I turned to the shower, ripping the lever as far to the left as it could go, not even bothering to check the temperature as I stepped into the tiny cubicle and doused my head.

My fingers worked to pull the clothing from my body — I ripped his shirt from my torso, dropping it onto the shower floor with a wet plop. I then slid the panties down my legs. Once removed, the tears in my eyes that brimmed the edges fell as I examined them in my hands. Those same hands then stretched the fabric far enough the elastic gave way and ripped the lace. Satisfied, I leaned against the cold tile and slid until my bottom hit the floor.

“Cal, c’mon, open the door.” I could hear him over the whine of the shower head; I didn’t move. My eyes remained locked on the ripped fabric, regret hitting me in the next moment as I realized that was the only pair I had that didn’t make me feel like a grandma and had one or twice given me enough confidence to get through some incredibly draining social interactions.

“Crap.” I breathed, picking up one half of the lace with my hand. “So stupid.” I whispered, pressing the heel of my hand into my forehead as I pulled my knees to my chest. “So, so stupid.”

After thirty minutes, the banging on the door had subsided, but I could see Sweets shadow through the crack as he sat against the wall and waited patiently. The longer I sat in the shower, the less embarrassed I felt about the situation and rejection. I now only really felt nervous — my reaction was uncalled for, and I was certain once I left this room and he
started talking, I would only feel worse.

I knew it was the insecurity in me talking. Most of how I immediately felt about anything stemmed from the self-doubt I had accumulated over the years. I constantly went back and forth between thinking I was moderately attractive with good fashion sense and being handy with a makeup brush and thinking I didn’t resemble enough of a woman to be considered one. My chest was incredibly small (if I laid down, it disappeared altogether), my hips weren’t wide and my ass — well, my ass might’ve been the biggest thing on my body next to my hair, but it was still fairly small given the size I was. I had started wearing heavier makeup and dressing differently as a way to make up for what I lacked physically.

Part of me wanted to believe that Pea didn’t care for any of that. But I knew, and he knew. I couldn’t go about the rest of my life thinking anyone I dated would never find another person attractive, that was crazy. It was human biology to be attracted to several different people. I knew that he found parts of other women desirable, and I had to remind myself that he never looked and lusted for them because I lacked what they had, but just simply because that’s who he was.

After several minutes of silence, I begrudgingly washed my hair and body. I exited the shower and wrapped the small towel from the back of the door around my frame. “Pea?” I mused quietly, pressing my palm flat against the door. “Can you bring me my bag?”

It took him a few moments to reply, “Are you going to leave?” Sweets asked, his voice grim and tired.

I tried not to laugh, instead pressed my lips into a tight line and inhaled deeply as I pulled the door open. He sat on the floor, looking up at me from under his bangs with a frown pulling his lips down in the corners. “No,” I said quietly, hugging my arms around myself. “I’m not leaving. But I would like to get dressed.”

Sweet Pea watched me carefully, looking for any indication I was lying. Once he was satisfied and certain I was telling the truth, he stood from his place on the floor and leaned into the bathroom to press his lips to my wet hair, arms pulling me so that I was pressed into his body. His arms constricted around my frame, squeezing my shoulders tightly, “You know I want to.” He said finally, warm breath saturating my head. “I just didn’t want you to think that was something you had to give me.”

“I told you I wanted you.” I countered, eyes pressing shut once I realized I had allowed for him to continue the conversation. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“Yes it does,” He groaned, pulling away from my frame to run his hand through his disheveled hair. “I’m just not going to take advantage of you. You were upset about Dean, and what happened at home. I’m not going to use your misery and vulnerability to get some ass.”

I lifted my blue hues to meet his, brow raising at his choice in words. “Some ass, huh?”

“Calliope,” He started, letting the breath leave his body in a slow exhale as his eyes shut when he caught his mistake, “I’m still new to all of this.”

“Great. Me too.”

“So work with me, then! Don’t run away when things get weird or awkward or —”

I frowned again, shoving past his frame to slip into his bedroom. I shut the door behind me. “Things didn’t get awkward, Pea, you rejected me.”

I heard his head hit the door as I bent to pick up a pair of trackpants from my bag, “I didn’t say I didn’t want you,” I pulled my arms through the sleeves of my fathers hoodie, scrunching my hair to drain any remaining water from the strands. “I just said that tonight didn’t have to be that kind of night.”

I grabbed the extra pillow from his bed, chucked my bag back into its corner and ripped open the door. Sweet Pea stood on the opposite side, arm supporting his weight as he leaned against the threshold. “What kind of night, Pea?”
“You’re a virgin, Calliope.” He reminded me, following me as I stomped into the living room.

“Exactly.” I hissed over my shoulder, flipping the lights off as I went.

“What do you mean exactly?” Pea asked angrily, flipping the switches back on to keep the rooms illuminated. I dropped the pillow onto the couch and pulled the overthrow off the back, “Why aren’t you treating this like it’s a big deal?”

“Is it?” I asked, seating myself into my makeshift bed. “No one treats sex like it’s supposed to have meaning. Fangs and Bri have been fucking for weeks now —”

“So you have to do what Kabrina Sobon does? What the fuck, Cal?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and exhaled loudly; my legs kicked the blanket around so it covered my feet, and I collapsed back into the cushions with my arm thrown over my eyes. “The point is I’m a virgin and I wanted to do something with you because I trust you, and you said no.”

Sweet Pea’s fist came down onto some hard surface — I jumped a little at the sudden noise. “I didn’t say no!”

I shot upright, glaring at his frame from the opposite side of the room, “Yet here we are!” I started, licking my lips as I pulled my hair into a bun hastily, “Screaming at each other at three-thirty in the fucking morning instead of passed out in your bed.”

“So this is my fault?” He asked in disbelief, brows knotting together as he gripped onto the back of a chair to lean forward. “We can go pass out in the bed, but I’m not sleeping with you tonight.”

He’s missing the point, I thought wearily to myself. My hands dropped into my lap as I rested into the pillow again, pressing my eyes shut to block out the light that traveled in from the bathroom. “Go to bed, SP.” I grumbled tiredly, feeling the hurt pull at my heartstrings again.

It was quiet for a few moments; the sound of his breathing could be heard over the gentle thrum of the fan from his bedroom, and the quiet melody of the crickets outside. “Fine.” His voice was sharp and cold, feet heavily stomping against the floor of the trailer as he retreated to his bedroom. The door slammed, causing whatever frames he had on the walls to shake against the impact.

When I opened my eyes, the trailer was pitch black. If I listened close enough, I could hear the gentle groan of Sweet Pea’s bed as he settled into it. After what felt like an eternity, his snores quietly drifted into the living room. I glanced towards the kitchen, reading the clock on the stove with a sigh. It was nearly four in the morning, and while neither of us had school in the morning, I did have an early shift.

Despite the exhaustion that weighed down my lids and body, I couldn’t find the will to shut my mind down for the night. I flipped on the television and muted the channel, repositioning myself with the blanket wrapped around my feet. “Today’s gonna suck.” I mused quietly, propping my head up on my knuckles.
Chapter Summary

** NSFW-ish

My body had ached with every slight move, and so I had opted to remain as still as possible on my stomach. I spent two hours trying to pass out; I set my alarm and attempted to get at least three hours of sleep before I had to leave for work. This effort appeared to be futile when the early morning birds began to chirp.

Come sometime later, I was pulled from whatever ounce of sleep I had managed to get with a loud bang. I lifted my head from the pillow, squinting against the sunlight that poured into the trailer through the tiny windows along the walls. My nose registered the scent almost immediately; I pushed myself up into a seated position and looked to where Sweet Pea stood facing away from me with his arms folded across his bare chest, (bravely) cooking bacon and sausage.

“Pea?” I asked, voice thick with sleep. “What time is it?”

He turned to look over his shoulder, a grimace pulling his lips taunt. “Sorry, I was trying to let you sleep.” Sweet Pea looked at the stovetop, and called “Twelve-twenty-four.” over his shoulder.

“It’s past noon?” I deadpanned, sitting upright instantly. “Why didn’t you wake me, Pea? I had to be at work four hours ago!” The annoyance dripped off every syllable; I stood from the couch, kicking the two blankets off my legs just barely before I caught myself on the table. Pea must have put the second blanket on me when he got up.

“Relax, Cal. Pop called looking for you — told him you were up late with a stomach bug.” Pea shrugged, leaning back on his heels as I walked into the area between the kitchen, bathroom and his bedroom. “No biggie. Says he hopes you feel better and he’ll see you tomorrow.”

Wrong answer. “No biggie?” I asked, taking a step towards him. “That’s money out of my pocket, Pea, what the hell do you mean ‘no biggie’?”

“Woah — wait —”

I took another step forward, holding a finger up in warning. “What gives you the right,” My arm shook, and I was unsure if it were due to exhaustion or the anxiety that pressed on my chest and made the air feel so weak in my lungs. “To make that kind of decision for me? That’s my money.”

Sweet Pea quickly pulled me into his chest, hands finding purchase in my hair as his fingers gripped onto the thick strands. “Hey, relax —” He whispered, his free hand rubbing smoothly along my spine, “I’m sorry. You just looked so dead when you showed up yesterday; I figured you deserved some sleep.”

My arms remained at my side, reluctant to give him the satisfaction after the previous night. After a solid thirty seconds, I rolled my eyes at myself and eagerly snaked my hands around his waist and back, locking comfortably around his waist, soaking in the warmth that radiated from his frame. I smiled contently, pressing my face into his chest, and offered a pleased sigh.

Pea chuckled, rocking our frames back and forth as the meat sizzled angrily in the pan next to us. “Calliope, listen,” I closed my eyes, letting out another sigh, only this time it conveyed less joy and more contempt. “I really think we should talk about last night, because there is obviously a lot of miscommunication.”
He dropped his arms as I pulled away, trying not to show the clear defeat on his face as I plopped into one of the kitchen chairs and pulled my knees to my chest. “Okay, so we’re going to talk about last night, because I said so.” His eyebrows raised, as though he was waiting for my rebuttal. When I didn’t meet his gaze, he flipped the stove off and moved the cooked meat onto a plate. He set the syrup and a bottle of apple juice in front of me before he treated into his room. He continued talking, a little louder so I could hear better, “But not until later. I have someone I need to go see — meet me at the Wyrm for six?” He asked as he fixed his leather on over top of my father's blue plaid shirt. I kept my eyes on his chest, admiring the way he stretched the fabric with this broad frame, “Look at me.” He mused quietly, sneaking his index finger under my chin to tilt my head up to meet his gaze, “I’ll see you later, okay? Try to get some sleep.”

I nodded slightly, offering him a weak smile prior to his lips gently pressing against mine, one, two, three times before he offered an infamous lopsided smile. “I’ll see you later.” I promised. He had pressed one last kiss to my cheek before he disappeared into the living room, and then just as he pulled the door open, I spoke up again. “Pea?”

“Yes?” He asked, holding the door open with his hand.

“Wake me up next time.”

His face dropped, and he nodded once, “Yeah.”

I heard his bike start, and then listened to the engine die into the background as he traveled up the main street. That night, we had spent several twenties on drinks and played pool in the back corner away from the rest of his friends. Sweet Pea had explained his reasoning, and what he was trying to do. After two hours of trying to tell him otherwise, I started to realize that Pea was just trying to be a gentleman.

We made our peace, gave lengthy kisses throughout the evening in silent apologies and then walked back to his trailer shoulder-to-shoulder, opting to leave the bike back in the parking lot and enjoy the bitter start to the cold November air.

That was Saturday. It was now Monday afternoon over a week later, second period had just let out and I was standing in the lunch line with my cash waiting for the line to move forward so I could pay for my inedible meal and apple juice. My eyes scanned the room, lingering on the area that consumed the portion of the school that remained untainted and unaffiliated with either gang. While the school halls were noticeably emptier with the lack of Ghoulie presence since the race (and it was quite nice, having the remaining Ghoulies resort to silence for the time being), it only made my cousins and their friends stick out like a sore thumb.

I watched Don toss a carrot at his brother; lips pulled back over their teeth as they laughed at each other over something one had said. I inhaled deeply, shifting my eyes to Kabrina. She sat next to Josh; earlier that weekend, Bri and Fangs had a falling out. Fangs blamed it on her inability to keep herself from anything that had a dick and paid attention to her — I blamed it on her relentless infatuation loyalty to Don.

The line moved forward, and I only just noticed the lunch lady yelling at me from behind the counter, giving me my total. This pulled the attention of my cousins — most eyes at the table glanced over their shoulders at me, conversation seeming to come to a halt as Josh leaned forward into Kabrina’s ear.

His lips pulled back into a wicked grin, and her face pulled together in a sort of sadness.

I dumped my change into my back pocket and turned to look at the available seats. I could have sat at my locker again, and saved myself the misery of having to actually sit alone in the cafeteria with all of the peering eyes. My eyes swept the length of the room, unsure if I should even bother trying to find someplace to sit or if I should take the opportunity to retreat back into the halls of the school.

I heard Fangs’ boisterous laugh echo from the opposite side of the room, which involuntarily caused my lips to form a smile. As though it were second nature, my feet began to move me towards the chain link fence that separated the Serpents...
from the remainder of the school.

The tailgate of Joshua’s comment as I passed caused my heartbeat to stutter, but I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of being bothered by his words. “Complete waste of time — she’s a lost cause, Donny.”

Gritting my teeth, I lifted my chin and continued forward until my feet paused briefly on the outside of the fence. Jughead looked up from his book, brows raised as I rocked back on my heels and inhaled deeply, “So the white rabbit finally joins us,” He teases lightly, causing the remainder of the group to look up at me. “Little late, don’t you think?”

Sweet Pea pushed Fangs’ boots off the end of the end of the bench so he could slide over and make room for me. I set my tray down with a loud bang and sighed, “When your neck’s on the line, gotta keep a steady pace.” I replied grimly, cracking the seal on my drink.

“Careful,” Jughead warned, brows raising in a silent gesture to the crowd behind us. “If the queen senses your disloyalty, she’ll have your head.”

I snickered, crumpling a napkin to toss at him.

“Who?” Sweet Pea asked, adjusting himself so he was straddling the bench and facing me fully. I draped one of my legs over his, and squeezed his hand in reassurance.

“It’s a book reference,” I dismissed, looking down at the poorly wrapped sandwich. My appetite seemed to diminish as I forced myself to chew on the stale bread, training my ears to focus on the conversation that carried over from where Joshua sat. He was still going; making suggestive remarks, finalizing what I could only assume was the reputation I would carry until the day I graduated from this hellhole.

Toni picked at one of the cherry tomatoes on my plate, popping it into her mouth before she spoke, “Just ignore them.”

As if a reflex, I looked over my shoulder to where they sat. Danny and Don had locked their eyes on mine, the entire table watching as Sweet Pea placed his hands gingerly on my waist to pulled me closer to him, lips at my ear, “Look at me.”

So I did.

That line appeared to be an SP favourite; whenever he was trying to ground me, whenever he thought I was beside myself and unsure, he’d say those three little words and everything would melt away. All the fear, all the anxiety — it seemed to never exist when I was looking into his eyes. I found comfort in that.

“None of that matters, ‘kay?” He asked, voice low and controlled as his fingers moved to tuck stray strands of hair behind my ear. His thumb ran across my jawline, lips pulling into a content small smile when I leaned into the warmth of his hand. “It’s just you and me, sweetness.”

The remainder of our friends divided into their own pairings, giving us some form of privacy. I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth, looking up at him from under my lashes, “Just us?”

The smugness returned; Pea’s brows smoothed out, lips curling up in the corners deviously as he wrapped his fingers into the hair at the base of my neck, “Middle fingers to the world —” His hand extended upwards, middle finger pointedly aimed towards my cousins — to Joshua — as his mouth crashed onto mine. My hand reached up to grip onto the lapel of his jacket, fist moving to push him away as hard as I could but something snapped.

The instant calming sensation that overwhelmed my body felt so foreign — so intoxicating. Everything felt numb, the warmth trailing from my lips to my fingertips and then down to my toes. I melted into him, only just tasting him when the sharp whistle and claps of the nearby Serpents slowly escalated. My teeth gripped onto his bottom lip, tugging it as he pulled back to move his extended finger in the perpetrator’s direction.

Stunned, I drunkenly looked up at Pea in confusion. Jughead made a snide comment, to which Sweet Pea unknowingly
cracked my favourite smile. The warmth erupted across my chest again, and I sat upright abruptly, composing myself on
the tabletop, bringing my fingers up to play with my mother's necklace.

Sweet Pea noticed my immediate shift; he then was pulling the hair away from my ear, lips touching the shell shortly
after, “What’s wrong?”

“That was a bad idea.” I admitted quietly, side glancing at his jaw to watch for any signs of anger. Instead, he pulled away
and leaned down to look at me, brows pulled together as he shook his head in disagreement.

“Why? Because the boys saw? Because I flipped them off?” He questioned, getting closer with each one. “Calliope, this?”
He said quietly, pressing his lips against mine once more, delaying his pull. I hummed in pleasure, unable to contain the
smile that spread as he continued, “This is fucking fantastic.”

I nodded quickly, bumping into this frame to knock him back as I sat up and grabbed my drink. “Whatever you say,
baby.”

Sweet Pea froze, his lips pulling into a lopsided grin as he analyzed me with adoration and amusement. I started to
apologize, but he just shook his head and kissed me quickly, “It’s cool, babydoll.” He smiled, “I’ll catch you in history —
got business to take care of.” Fangs and Pea rose simultaneously, throwing their bags over their shoulders as they exited
the chained area.

I waved as I noticed Pea winking from outside the fence, shoving his hands into the pocket of his hoodie. The Serpent's
relaxed back into their usual quiet demeanor, returning to their private conversations and exclusive groups within the
gang.

“As happy I’d like to be for the two of you star-crossed-lovers, that was incredibly revolting, Cal.” Jughead laughed, lips
pulled into a tight line as he leaned forward onto the table.

Toni stole another tomato and shrugged, “I think it’s kinda hot. Pea’s usually a pretty private guy, it’s nice to see him
being so forward with you.”

I continued to follow the boys as they exited the lunchroom, brows pulling in. Since when did the boys wear backpacks?

—

“Earth to Cal? Hello?” I shook my head, slightly annoyed by the snapping in my ear as Toni shifted so she was sitting on
the table top. “Home boy’s really got you hooked, huh?”

I rolled my eyes, unscrewing the lid on my drink as I spoke, “Bite me, Topaz.”

“Just don’t tell Pea.” She joked, ripping open the packet of ranch sauce for the carrots as she and Jughead shared a laugh.
Pea was on time for history, sneaking in just before the bell rang with Fangs on his tail. He greeted me with a quick kiss;
happy to finally be able to be open with him, I reached forward and squished his cheeks between my hands as he
straddled his seat in front of me.

Sweet Pea rested his head in his arms on the table and closed his eyes. Not wanting to squander the opportunity, I brought
my hands to his skull and pulled my fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck. Fangs’ desk connected with mine,
and we shared a look as he pulled my textbook from my bag and opened it on his desk.

“Tired?” He asked Pea as Martensen dimmed the lights and pulled the television on wheels to the center upfront. The only
response we received was a tired grunt and a slight nod of his head. My fingers got lost in the long strands, eyes carefully
studying him as he (remarkably) drifted to sleep.

By the end of the period, my sketchbook had yet another candid drawing of the raven-haired Serpent.

“You’re really good.” Fangs complimented as Martensen flipped the lights back on, slowly turning through the pages of
the sketchbook I had allowed him to go through. “There’s a gala in the spring Riverdale holds every year — you should put something in.”

I scoffed, dropping my pencil case into my bag, “Why?”

Fangs shrugged, turning in his seat so he was facing me, “Why not?” He countered, raising a brow. “Look, it’s the same shit every year. Some old guy gets more money for some half-assed shit that took him five minutes to paint an hour before the show, the Pussycats sing, there’s usually some Vixen dance-off bullshit —”

“Did you have a point with this, Fogarty?” I interrupted, gently tickling the underside of Pea’s chin and neck to pull him from his slumber.

“There’s no Southside representation.” He stated, looking down at his friend as he stirred and groaned, hiding his face in his arms.

I sat back in my seat, “So you want me to put you on the map?”

“I want you to give this town some substance. Actual talent. Give them a reason to never doubt the underdog again.” He concluded with a shrug, leaning forward to slap his hand on Sweet Pea’s shoulder twice. I smacked his arm and pushed him away from Sweet Pea’s grumbling frame, narrowing my eyes at him in disapproval as I thought over his suggestion.

I didn’t really like sharing my work with anyone — Sweet Pea only knew and saw because he went snooping through my sketchbook when I wasn’t around. Fogarty had been the only person (aside from Dean) that I had willingly allowed to go through it. Still, the compliment resonated in my chest, giving me hope I hadn’t realized I had been holding out for.

Beside myself, I let out a sigh and reached for Pea’s hands. I squeezed them tightly, rubbing my thumbs across his palms before he entwined our fingers and slowly sat upright; his hair appeared a little more tousled than usual, but still, he looked gorgeous nonetheless.

After several minutes of trying to coax him away from his seat, and trying to convince him to stick around for business, we finally descended the stairs that led us to marketing with McGuire. “If I leave now, I can get a nap in before tonight’s tourney.”

I shook my head again, pulling on his hand (that was still entwined with mine) to lead him towards the business wing. “C’mon, Pea. We’re late and it’s only seventy-five minutes — you’ll survive.”

“But, baby.” He whined, feet dragging along the floor as we rounded the corner. Just outside of marketing (which, up until that moment I had forgotten I shared with a few of my cousin’s friends) Don and Danny leaned against lockers with Joshua and Luke getting ready for departure.

Pea’s fingers tightened around mine.

Josh turned to face us, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jacket as his lips turned upright in the corners to reveal a devious grin, “We were just talking about you, Cal.” He said, eyes narrowing on my face — I was much too preoccupied with the look on my cousin’s faces as they locked their eyes on Sweet Pea’s hand entwined with mine. I swallowed nervously.

“Too bad I don’t care.” I responded coolly, tongue darting out to run across my lips.

There was a collective snicker amongst the group as Joshua sauntered forward, still leaving a solid fifteen feet between us. “That was quite the scene earlier.” He commented.

Sweet Pea’s frame melted into his typical cocky demeanor. “Well, I mean, if you’re gonna make it a habit of starin’ at my girl,” He started, dropping my hand so he could snake his arm around my shoulders, “I figured you could use a little show.”
“Bite me, Sweets.” Joshua snapped, mouth pulled back into a snarl.

“What’s the matter, Dunmel?” Sweet Pea taunted, head tilting to the side as he scrutinized his opponent. “Pissed you got stuck with Fogarty’s sloppy seconds?” Sweets turned to me, looking down at me with amusement in his eyes as he continued, “No guy should get every woman he wants. Keeps their douchebaggery to a tolerable level.” He winked.

I stifled a laugh.

“I thought you said you didn’t do boyfriends.” Joshua cut his eyes towards me, ignoring Pea’s jab. Thankful for the change in conversation, I offered Josh a sad smile and shrugged. “Sweet Pea? Really? Of all the fucking losers —”

“Watch it.” Pea’s voice said in warning, his arm leaving my shoulders so he could fold them over his chest.

“How about you let me know when you come to your senses and decide his pecker isn’t workin’ for ya.” I removed my eyes from his, turning on my heels as though I were going to leave, but then looped back around and continued forward until I stood behind Pea’s stiff frame. “This is assuming you’re getting the most out of your new title.”

“Her title?” Sweet Pea’s face contorted together in confusion, looking down at me. I’m sure my confusion mirrored his own; from my peripheral, I could see Don push off the locker and put his hand around Joshua’s arm to pull him back.

There was a quiet exchange of words, my cousin’s clenched jaw indicated that he wasn’t too pleased with the situation. No doubt trying to convince Josh to shut his mouth for five seconds —

“Y’know,” Josh ripped his arm from Don’s grip as he stalked forward again, “A Serpent slut.”

I felt my face drop, my heart along with it. Neither Danny nor Don would meet my eyes, leaving me with no one but Joshua to stare back at in disbelief. It had been eleven days since the raid, ten days since I left home — and I was already the school’s version of a walking, talking joke.

With my bottom lip pulled between my teeth, I dropped my eyes to my feet and knocked lightly into my boyfriend’s back. I looked up at him, leaning forward so I could get a better look at his face. His brows were pulled together, jaw tense and working under the skin as he inhaled deeply and burned holes into the back of Joshua’s skull. I quickly pulled my eyes up to Danny and Don; they were also carefully watching Sweet Pea. “Babe?” I asked quietly, snaking my hand between the fabric of his shirt and jacket to scratch his back lightly.

“Who’s saying that?” He asked demanded, arms dropping from his chest as he dipped his right hand into his jacket pocket.

I started to shake my head, stepping in front of him while my hands moved to keep his stuffed in his pocket, “Let’s just go.” I pleaded, looking up at him. He refused to meet my eyes, even when I tugged on his leather lapels, “Pea, please don’t.”

“Because you care, right?” Joshua asked, picking his bag up off the floor. “I give it a month, maybe two. You’ll toss her to the side when you’re bored, leave her behind. Kinda like everyone else in her life. Kabrina wants nothing to do with her, and Dean doesn’t — hell, even the boys can’t be bothered to play nice. She can’t keep a home. Shouldn’t that raise a couple of red flags, Pea?”

“Fuck you, Dunmel.” Sweet Pea snapped, stepping away from my body as he started to move forward.

“Pea, don’t.” I said again, this time a little harsher. I grabbed his arm. He ripped it from my grasp.

I persisted, regardless.

Sweet Pea worked quickly; it didn’t take much for his long legs to close the distance between him and Joshua. I watched as he gripped onto his shirt to haul him up off the ground, and then slammed him into the locker between Danny and Don.
No one bothered to remove Pea, or to help Josh.

Sweets cocked his head, bangs falling into his dark eyes as he glared forward. I watched his fingers tighten their grip, brass knuckles gleaming tauntingly in the fluorescent lighting in the hallway. Don and I shared a look in worry; Danny took a step back, hands raised. “You think you have the right to talk about her?” He asked, venom dripping off every syllable. “Talk shit about me all you want, jackass, that don’t bother me. But my girl?” Pea’s laugh was short lived, rearing his fist back before he launched forward and met Joshua’s face with a thunderous crack!; I winced, wrapping my arms around my waist. “I don’t wanna hear her name come outta your mouth ever again.”

There was a snort that came from Josh as he lifted his head and ran his tongue along his bottom lip, “What? You’ll beat the shit out of me, Iron Man?”

Sweet Pea lifted the right side of his mouth in a half smile before he proceeded to viciously attack Joshua. I turned on my heels, taking a few steps away from the situation as students eyes peered curiously at the door from their seats in the classroom down the hall.

I looked over my shoulder; Pea released his grip to let Josh fall to the ground, satisfied with the loud cries that trembled past his victim's lips. His breathing was swallowed out, and he lay limply on the floor, covering his face with his hands. Don looked from his friend to the raven-haired Serpent, shaking his head, “How the fuck did you get those in here?” He pointed to the bloodied brass knuckles.

Sweet Pea wiped his hand on his black denim, making a point to ignore my cousin. Don seemed to notice. He rolled his eyes, pushing off the locker he leaned against prior to his feet carrying him to me. He didn’t get as far as he had hoped — Sweets blocked his path and used his shoulder to shove him back, “Where do you think you’re going?”

“She’s family, Pea, butt out.”

Sweet Pea laughed once, then shook his head, “Funny that you say that,” He started, taking a step towards Don with his face void of any emotion, “After you let this trash bag talk shit about her like she fucking deserves it.”

“Eat shit, Sweet Pea.” Josh growled from the ground, slowly picking himself up.

“Cal, we’re gonna sort this out, okay?” Don said, although his eyes didn’t move from my boyfriend’s. “We’ll get you home. Sooner rather than later.” There was an implied ‘I promise’ that lingered in the air between us; when he finally met my eyes, his face softened, and he broke.

I placed a hand on Pea’s arm, instantaneously offering him some sort of peace as his body melted in response. He dropped his folded arms, shoulders returning to their normal relaxed position as he rocked back on his heels. I slipped an arm around his waist, molding myself to the side of his frame, “I have my doubts about that.”

“Don’t,” He pressed, fixing his bag on his shoulder, “Dean’s pretty torn up about the whole thing. Thought he was making the right choice, but honestly —”

“We miss you.” Danny said once Luke managed to help Joshua off the floor; they disappeared around the corner into the stairwell. “Just come home. We’ll hash it out with Dean, you can move back in.”

My head shook, “It’s not that simple. Yvette’s due for a drop in and she’s gonna know —”

“You support worker gave your case to someone in Riverdale, Cal.” Don interrupted, brows pulling together, “I thought you knew that.”

I blinked, unsure of what to do with that information. My fingers clutched the fabric of Pea’s sweater, kneading the material anxiously. What did that mean? I lifted my chin, searching Pea’s face for any sign of understanding but his brown hues remained locked on Don’s, appearing as stunned as I felt. “Who?” I asked, all surprise replaced with confusion as my hands moved to comb through my long strands. “When?” I corrected.
“Babydoll, you should probably get to class.” Pea said quickly then, turning his body to block Don out of my line of vision. “I have long distance, you can call her later, leave a message.” He promised, his large hands rubbing along the tops of my shoulders comfortably. When I nodded reluctantly, he smiled weakly and squeezed reassuringly.

“Cal,” Don’s face fell with defeat, “Take care of yourself.”

I leaned forward onto the table, taking another bite out of the burger with a hum in satisfaction. As often as we ate at the Wyrm, I never seemed to mind. The menu had more than enough options to keep me interested. The anxiety from the day’s festivities seemed to push to the back of my mind as I popped another onion ring into my mouth. Sweet Pea’s fingers twisted into his napkin, clearing any remaining grease from his hands before he spun in his seat to look to where Toni and Tall Boy sat.

“What are they talking about?” He asked, clearly annoyed.

I felt my brows raise in amusement; my lips wrapped around the end of my straw and I sucked, filling my mouth with the bubbly liquid as Pea settled his hand on his knee and he leaned forward, “Probably trying to talk Tall Boy into paying some of the tab he owes.” I tried, laughing silently when Sweet Pea threw me a look that screamed ‘as if’. “Aren’t you all just waiting on Jug anyway?”

“Yeah.” He sighed, bringing his bottle to his mouth. He threw back the remaining contents, narrowing his eyes on the back of Toni’s head, “Have you seen Fogarty today?”

“What are they talking about?” I asked worriedly, mentally scolding myself in fear I might be overstepping.

“Will be once I can talk to him.” He concluded, lips pressed into a tight line. There seemed to be a heavy blanket of stress that weighed down on Pea’s shoulders. He had stripped from his sweater and replaced it with one plaid shirt and a black vest. I wiped my hands on my jeans and then carefully rubbed his back, “He won’t answer his fucking phone, either.”

“Everything okay?” I asked worriedly, mentally scolding myself in fear I might be overstepping.

“Need to talk to him.” He concluded, lips pressed into a tight line. There seemed to be a heavy blanket of stress that weighed down on Pea’s shoulders. He had stripped from his sweater and replaced it with one plaid shirt and a black vest. I wiped my hands on my jeans and then carefully rubbed his back, “He won’t answer his fucking phone, either.”

“I’m good.” He asked, seeming surprised.

Teddy paused for a moment, watching me carefully before he lifted his eyes to the crowd and narrowed in on Sweet Pea, “Is he giving you a hard time? I’ll kick his ass for ya.”

“No, no,” I waved, dismissing the idea before he could even think to entertain it. “We’re fine — I gotta get ahold of someone from Pelham but my phone’s dead.” I lied, smiling impishly when he pulled his off the counter and offered it to me. “You don’t mind?”
“Course not.” He shook his head, stray strands falling from his pony. I smiled thankfully, punching in Sabine’s digits quickly prior to pressing the phone to my ear; I looked over my shoulder to where Sweet Pea sat. He remained preoccupied with whatever Jughead was talking about. The crowd clapped.

“Hello?” Her voice was thick with confusion with a hint of sass. I nearly rolled my eyes, instead pressed my hand to my forehead and leaned against the wooden bartop. “Allie?”

“Yeah.” I sighed, wiping my face tiredly, “I’m alive.”

“What the fuck, Allie!” She started, voice rising an octave with each word, “It’s been over a week, did you forget to fucking message me or?”

“I’ve been going through some stuff .. listen, I need you to do something for me.”

There was a petulant sigh that echoed through the receiver, and I felt my body get rigid with annoyance. I typically made good to keep my mouth shut, mainly since I knew Sabine had a soft heart for me and she usually gave in, but it still made the hairs on my arms stand when she bothered resisting. “What now?”

“Yvette signed my case off to someone in Riverdale,” I said quickly, bringing my voice down to a hushed whisper as I spun on my seat. “I’m not going to have a phone with long distance during her office hours, and phone tag is a waste of time — could you go in and see her? See if you can get a name or an organization or something.”

“She handed you off?” I nodded at Sabine’s doubts. Personally, I thought Yvette never would’ve bothered giving up a case — she was always the type to get super attached to her kids. “Why would she do that?”

“I have no idea.” I replied, still reeling my mind through every possibility. “Dean might’ve said something? Maybe had me transferred so he could deal with all the legal stuff more conveniently?”

Sab shuffled around, suddenly her voice was closer and easier to understand, “Maybe. It has been ten days .. if he didn’t want you in town, he would’ve had you removed already.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.” I agreed, spinning back around to face Teddy. He was already refilling the shot glass, tossing me a quick wink when I pouted in protest. “Whatever it is, I’ll deal with it.” I reminded her, shooting the liquid back quickly. “Just get me something to start with, Sabs, I’m counting on you.”

“Fine.” She grumbled, “I’ll text you details tomorrow, I’ll go after gymnastics.”

“Thanks, Sab.” I sighed, pulling the phone away from my ear to end the call. I returned the phone to Teddy, thanking him again for the shots before I slipped off the stool. “You lookin’ for a job, Cal?”

I paused, rocking back on my heels as I lifted my shoulders in a shrug, “I work as a waitress at Pop’s, so I’m not hard up for cash. Why?”

“Fresh meat,” He explained, pulling the towel off his shoulder to dry the cup in his hand, “You’ve got a pretty face, you get along with everyone — you spend all of your time here with Sweet Pea.”

I grimaced, “That’s a fair point .. might as well get paid if I’m gonna be here all the time.”

“Exactly.” He nodded, “We need another bartender and a waitress. Toni can train you on serving and orders, but we’ll do one on one training for mixing. Sound cool?”

I nodded, mainly to myself as I retreated, “Yeah, sounds great. See you tomorrow?” He shot me a thumbs up before he disappeared behind the bar. I turned on my heels, wedging my way back through the crowd to settle myself between Pea’s
thighs, hugging my arms around his waist comfortably. “What was that all about?” I asked, jutting my chin towards Jughead.

“FP’s getting out of jail.” Sweets beamed, squeezing my shoulders excitedly, “Jug’s talkin’ about sitting down with McCoy, clearing up a few things.”

“A revolution?” I asked with a smile, snaking my hands along his chest.

He lifted his shoulders in a shrug, bending down to press his lips to my temple as his hand wandered to my bottom and squeezed once tightly. “Appears so,” He hugged me to him tightly, tucking his chin on top of my head as he hugged me loosely, “Can’t complain. It’d be nice to not get shit on all the time.”

I nodded in agreement, resting my cheek against his chest, “Someday, baby.”

We sat in that position for a moment, watching the coloured balls on the pool table dance around before he patted my backside and sighed, “You ready to go?” Pea asked as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. I nodded again, taking his hand as he led me through the crowd towards the rear exit. I waved to Teddy as we passed, offering him a final salute before I disappeared behind the door and into the night.

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do.” I admitted honestly, raking a tired hand through my hair as I watched Pea from the bed. He vigorously scrubbed his head with the towel, water droplets still slowly cascading down his back. “I could call? Maybe talk it out with Don — he seems like the best place to start.”

“Guess that depends on his mood — you saw what happened earlier.”

I waved his worry away, falling back onto his pillows, “Danny doesn’t care much about anything, so Don has to. Means he plays good cop and bad cop.”

Pea’s brows raised as he pulled a white Henley over his head, “Is that what that’s supposed to be?” He asked dubiously, fingers moving to fix his hair in the mirror.

“Look, I know you’re not his biggest fan —”

“Oh good, you caught that.”

“He’s family, Pea.” I sighed, looking up at him from under my lashes. Sweet Pea dropped onto the bed next to me, holding himself up with one arm.

“Rotten excuse for family.”

I pouted again, letting my head fall back and hit the pillows in frustration. All I had wanted to do today was finally take the opportunity and chance to talk to my cousins, and instead I had walked away. “It wasn’t even a big deal. And Josh will keep his mouth shut —”

Pea’s lips touched my cheek.

“— And he’ll know his place —”

His teeth nibbled on my bottom lip.

“— God, I never want to see his smug fucking face ever again —”

Sweet Pea ran his tongue along my neck, pausing briefly on my pulse point to kiss lightly before he continued on. My breath faltered, and I let my head dip back, exposing a little more length for Pea to enjoy. Not wanting to squander the opportunity, he greedily latched his teeth into my skin which pulled a breathless moan from me. Our bodies shifted; he
moved himself onto the mattress fully, using his knees to push my legs apart so he could fit in more comfortably between my thighs.

I brought my hands up to run through his still dampened strands, lips falling into an ‘O’ as he sucked hungrily on a particularly sensitive piece of flesh. I hummed in delight, which then encouraged his lips to work unforgivingly against mine. My knees came up to secure his body in place, unwilling to let him go anytime soon.

My fingers scratched along his back and chest, just light enough to awaken goosebumps along his flesh and pull gentle moans from the back of his throat. Desperate to hear more, I locked my fingers into his hair and parted my lips, eager to taste him.

His fingers moved to pull at the fabric covering my torso; he slipped one strap down my shoulder, pulling away from my lips long enough to kiss the newly exposed flesh. I melted back into the pillows, feeling my eyes slip shut as he slowly kissed his way to the opposite side to do the same with the other. The shirt continued moving south, exposing more of my chest the further he pulled it down. I lifted my back, allowing him to scrunch the shirt around my waist, while trying not to let my insecurity get the best of me in this particular moment.

A wet tongue gently flicked over the top of one of my nipples, and my eyes flew open in shock. I watched Pea carefully, reading his face as he pulled back and drank me in. His eyes, previously a playful chocolate brown, had darkened into coal and his mouth fell open in desire. I squirmed slightly, forcing the need to giggle away as he pressed hot kisses along my stomach and sides, painfully making his way back up to my chest. Sweet Pea brought his hands to gently fondle the flesh, taking the light pink nipples between his index finger and thumb to give them considerate squeeze and pull.

I let my arms rest above my head, arching up off the mattress as his tongue tauntingly ghosted across the stimulated areas, pulling a needy whine from the back of my throat, much to my dismay. After a few moments of cruelly denying me gratification, he enclosed his warm mouth around one breast, using his hand to play with the opposite while he tongue worked to pull more noises from me.

Each new sensation lit my body on fire in ways they hadn’t been before. It almost didn’t seem to matter where he touched me during this state; I always gasped, and it always felt like new waves of pleasure crashed over me. When he finally resettled his lips against mine, I lifted my arms to wrap securely around his shoulders and hungrily bit into his bottom lip as Sweet Pea rose onto his knees. My hands slowly mosied their way down his muscular arms and chest, fingers gripping into the fabric of his Henley.

I rolled my hips up into him, body working with a mind of its own as his hand moved down to grip tightly onto my hip to hold me steady. Certain there would be bruises the following morning, I moaned involuntarily into his mouth and pushed myself up with my elbows, fingers gripping tightly onto his forearm as his right hand teasingly played with the waistband of my shorts. I let my head fall back, rolling slightly in anticipation as his fingers tickled the sensitive flesh. “Sweet Pea,” I groaned hungrily, pressing my fingernails into his flesh as his knees pushed my legs further apart.

I watched his hand disappear beneath the waistband of my panties, breath caught in my throat as my stomach rolled nervously. “Look at me.” He commanded. My blue hues snapped up to his immediately, focusing on the warmth in the chocolate brown pools. He waited patiently, watching as I inhaled deeply to calm my shaking legs and ease my grip on his arm before his thumb submerged within the slick folds. Pea’s eyes drank in my reactions; he was so intently focused on my face, watching the pleasure overtake my features as he touched me where no other man had before.

His cheeks erupted in a delicious pink, tongue wetting his swollen lips, pulling another moan from my throat. I collapsed back onto the pillows, hand still tightly wrapped around his arm, bringing my free fingers into my hair as my eyes fell shut and a slew of curses tumbled past my parted lips in euphoric pleasure as he circled his thumb over my clit. Sweet Pea happily reattached his mouth to my neck, this time biting deeply into the flesh to pull a loud cry from me. He sucked roughly, tongue sealing over the marks embedded into the clammy flesh.

“That’s gonna leave a mark.” I swallowed thickly, lifting my chin to give him more room to work.
There was a throaty chuckle that echoed through the room, sending another eruption of goosebumps down my arms. I smiled. “That’s the point, sweetness.” He mused against my skin, pressing needy kisses along my throat.

The front door to the trailer slammed against the wall, pulling Pea and I from our daze; his hand froze, his body shooting upright as he glared towards the bedroom door, leaning over to see who had intruded on our moment. I watched all annoyance melt away from his body as he recognized the figure, “About fucking *time!*” He growled loudly, “I’ve been calling you for hours!”

I whined in protest as he slowly withdrew his hand from my shorts, hands covering my face as I drew in a deep breath. There was another quiet laugh that sounded from Sweet Pea, prompting him to lean forward to press his lips to my forehead sweetly as he crawled out from between my thighs. Impulsively, I reached forward for his hand, fingers working to single out his thumb before I flattened my tongue and brought the digit into my mouth. The taste of me lingered on the tip of my tongue, and I sucked gently, watching Pea pull his bottom lip between his teeth.

Satisfied with his reaction, I popped off his thumb and offered him an innocent smile. His hand quickly knotted into my hair, crashing his mouth against mine, tongue eagerly searching for mine. We moaned simultaneously, pulling a disgusted groan from our intruder in the living room, “C’mon, Pea, we’re late!” Fangs called, his tone laced with contempt.

“Can you roll?” He asked me suddenly, removing himself from the mattress as he moved towards his closet to pull a sweater off the hanger.

I nodded, although not confidently. “I can try.”

Sweet Pea fixed his hair, winking at me in the mirror as I sat upright. My reflection casted back a girl whose hair surrounded her face wildly, her neck showing the early signs of lovebites while her chest remained naked and flushed a cherry red. “As long as it’s better than Toni’s, it doesn’t have to be perfect.” He concluded. Pea leaned down to press his mouth to mine one last time, smiling to himself as his voice dropped into a whisper, “When I get back, we can split one .. maybe finish what we started?” He suggested, bringing my wrist to his mouth to kiss tenderly.

I nodded quickly, fixing the curl in his bangs before he stood upright and wandered into the living room. I waited until the door to the trailer slammed shut, and the sound of their bikes blended into the night before I fixed my tank top back into its rightful place and grabbed the mason jar full of the sticky green herb from his bedside table and wandered into the living room, my hips swaying a little more than usual, body noticeably lighter and more relaxed as I settled onto the couch and twisted the jar open with a satisfied smile.
I flipped the stools, stacking them on top of the tables as I worked to clear the back portion of the bar, ushering the patrons into the main area. Through the legs on the chairs, I watched Sweet Pea line up another shot, surveying the table before he released and pulled back with a triumphant grin. Chuckling to myself, I grabbed the tray full of empties and weaved my way through the tables, narrowly missing Jughead’s arm as he shot it out during his story.

I set the tray down behind the bar, loading the dishwasher as Teddy grabbed the bottles and sorted them into their appropriate recycling bins. We both watched the shrinking crowd; I felt my aching body quiver with exhaustion as the last of the stragglers said their goodbyes prior to disappearing into the night. Jughead and Betty stopped briefly to thank Teddy for his hard work in preparing for FP’s party, earning a well-deserved grunt in response.

“Finally.” I sighed, securing the dishwasher shut with my hip, shoving a dry cloth into my back pocket. I wandered to where Sweet Pea sat, pencil tucked behind his ear as he counted through his earnings for the night. My fingers picked up the bottle left on the table, holding it up to him expectantly. He downed its contents quickly, pressing a swift kiss to my lips before he returned to his notebook. “How you doing?”

“There’s enough for the property tax, bills and enough for at least two weeks worth of food.” Pea replied smugly, smiling to himself as he wrapped rubber bands around his winnings. I stacked his plate in with the rest in my bin, hugging it against my hip while he tucked a sizable bill into my back pocket and patted my rear.

“You can’t tip me better than Teddy, that’s nepotism.” I laughed, swatting his grabby hands away.

“Says who?”

I snorted, “Says the tip jar at home that buys my horribly inedible lunches at school.”

Sweet Pea rolled his eyes, leaning forward on the table as I continued wiping off stools in the main area, “You won’t let me buy you lunch.”

“No,” I nodded in agreement, pursing my lips, “I can buy my own lunch.”

“Still rude not to tip your bartender.” He mused, bangs falling into his eyes.

After clearing the remaining tables and stools, I moved to the pool table to return any pool cues back to their rightful places, re-rack the balls and switch the overhead light off (not without difficulty, and no thanks to Pea). The front door opened; I felt a wave of annoyance roll down my spine when their heavy boots hit the wooden stairs, giving the indication they had not only entered the bar, but moved forward and towards me. I started to turn, resting bitch face in full effect as I turned to face the straggler with a hand on my hip. “We’re closed — go home to your family.”

Dean, wearing a pair of dark khakis and a jean button-down, leaned against a pillar. We both took this opportunity to study the other. I was sure his eyes were scrutinizing my outfit, given his lips pulled back with certain disappointment. “Leaves very little to the imagination.” He noted, lifting his eyes from mine to quickly glance at Sweet Pea’s back.

I looked down; my jeans were torn, showcasing the fishnet stockings I wore under them while my sweater was cropped high enough to show off the lacy black bralette I wore underneath. Paired with a heavy pair of hoop earrings and a pair of lace fingerless gloves, I was sure the entire ensemble screamed Southside Trash. I kicked out one of my heels, smiling to myself before I shrugged, “I made a hundred bucks in tips alone tonight — what’d you do?” When he made no clear indication to answer the question, I reluctantly invited him in with a tilt of my head, retreating towards the bar. “What’re you doing here?” I asked as I yanked the dishwasher open again and added the last of the glasses I had collected.

“Wanted to see how you were doing.” He admitted honestly, leaning forward onto the wooden bar with a shrug. “Obviously you’re settling in just fine —”
Teddy slammed a beer down in front of him, cutting him off. My cousin glanced at the label, examining the brew before he glanced up at him, face drained of all colour. Dean hesitated, eyes locked on Teddy’s for a few moments before he gripped the bottle and held it up in thanks. “Never thought we’d see the likes of Lucky Thirteen in here again.” Teddy mused teasingly, nudging me playfully.

“It’s Dean now.” He replied, taking a healthy swig from the bottle. “What’re you doing here?”

“Adult supervision.” I glanced between the two of them, raising a brow in question when Teddy shrugged. “It’s not Big Bear anymore, by the way.”

Dean’s green hues rolled as he scratched his beard, “Do you mind? Trying to have a private conversation here.” I was slightly taken aback by his hostile tone — Dean tried to keep the macho man facade up as long as he could, especially in front of others. With Teddy, it was like a barrier had been broken. It appeared as though that macho man didn’t exist.

Teddy pulled the towel out of my back pocket, tossing it over his shoulder as he slipped out from behind the bar, “Lights out in fifteen.” He reminded me, throwing Dean a look over his shoulder as he walked towards Sweet Pea.

We remained in silence, neither of us willing to speak. I watched as he finished the remainder of his beer, picking at the label with a sigh. Unable to keep still, I started wiping down the countertops, then turned to restock the fridge. I decided to talk while I worked, “I doubt you’re just here on a friendly visit,” I started, rotating the stock as I held the door open with my hip, “I mean, you haven’t set foot in this bar in, what? Almost a decade? What gives?”

“Don’s losing his shit on everyone at home.” He replied with a laugh, propping his chin up on his knuckles. “Said Pea beat the shit out of Josh, thought it would be a good idea to invite you home. Make peace with you before the others found a reason to beat on him, too.”

I threw him a glare over my shoulder, returning to my task at hand with a petulant sigh, “No one’s gonna put a hand on him.” I tried to reassure him; his dubious stare prompted me to continue, “Look, Josh was running his mouth. Wrong place, wrong time, wrong person to be running his mouth to. That’s all.”

Dean chucked his empty into the recycling bin behind the counter, knocking his knuckles against the wood as he looked around the deserted bar. “And you? You’re okay?”

I nodded slowly, pursing my lips into a tight line as I placed my hands on the counter and focused on the dents along the finish, using my nail to carve them a little deeper, “Yeah, I’m good.” I smiled, mainly to myself. “I’m staying with Sweet Pea — which I’m sure you don’t wanna hear, but it’s not exactly like I was left with many other options.”

Dean shrugged, “Don’t blame you. Kinda drove you to him, I guess.”

“Dean, it’s not your fault.” I sighed, thinking back to what Don had mentioned earlier in the week. “You thought you were doing the right thing; I don’t blame you. I tried to keep it from everyone, I did. Thought it might be easier.”

He waved it away in dismissal, running a tired hand over his eyes, “Still can’t let you come home.” I rose a brow in question, sensing that was something that was beyond his control. “Your new caseworker has doubts about the home environment being stable and secure for a flight risk such as yourself.” He quoted, unable to contain the scoff that trailed off his words at the end.

“Yvette was pretty lenient.” I admitted sheepishly, jumping up onto the counter. “She never asked questions, just found new placements. I can see how a new worker would have issues with that.”

“Yeah.” Dean nodded, looking to where Sweet Pea sat talking with Teddy. “You’re safe, right? I shouldn’t have any reason to worry?”

I nodded, staring at the lace on my gloves before I reached across the counter to grip onto Dean’s hand tightly. I squeezed in reassurance, “I’m okay. I eat three times a day, every day. I have hot showers and a bed. I’m working two jobs, I have
an incredibly supportive —” I paused, considering the word as I glanced to Sweet Pea. I laughed once and continued, “Boyfriend. He’s great.” I nodded, feeling the emotion bubble in my chest. I cracked a large smile, “I’m great, Dean. Really.”

I suppose he found some comfort in my words; he nodded to himself and spun in his seat as I came around the bar to walk him to the front door, knocking our shoulders together. Teddy looked up from his seat next to Sweet Pea, tilting his head to the side as he swept his eyes over Dean’s frame, “Leaving so soon?” He called, pulling his long hair back into a bun.

Dean’s legs didn’t slow until he reached the door, only turning to look at the pair of Serpents prior to his departure, “Fuck you, Teddy.” He grumbled, pulling me into a quick one-armed hug, muttering something about taking care of myself before he slipped into the darkness.

I turned around, almost crashing into Teddy’s chest as he followed Dean, “Lock up for me.” He said hurriedly, shoving his keys into my chest. I rocked back on my heels, staring at the keychain in my hand before I retreated back down the steps towards Sweet Pea. He was collecting his belongings, filling his pockets as he inhaled another pull from the cigarette that hung from his mouth.

“What was that about?” He asked, jutting his chin towards the door where boys had disappeared from.

“Dean or Teddy?” I asked, pulling a tired hand through my hair. Truthfully, I couldn’t find the energy in me to care. “You ready? I’m exhausted.” Pea nodded as he shrugged into his leather; I couldn’t help but smile as he fit into it as though he were wearing a second skin. I leaned forward, plucking the cigarette from his mouth long enough to press a quick kiss to his mouth before I offered it back to him.

He waited as I double checked the locks on the fridges and the coolers, fingers playing with the edge of the karaoke machine Betty had dropped off earlier in the day when Toni had been working. “She really thought this was our idea of a fun time?” Pea asked dubiously, throwing an arm around my shoulder when I flanked his side.

“I think it’s a great idea.” I retorted, snaking my fingers between his as we exited out of the back of the building. “We need more substance than just pool and darts and booze and half-naked women dancing.” I teased, bumping my hip into his as we walked. The crisp air invited our breath out in white circles, pulling shivers down my spine as we rounded the corner into the parking lot — my eyes locked on the pair that remained. Their arms were folded, distraught faces pulled into frowns, brows heavily embedded in the middle.

I waited as Pea started the Harley, toying with the silver helmet in my hands. The bike hummed to life beneath me, sending vibrations through my core as I slipped the helmet on overtop of my hair and squeezed my thighs around Sweet Pea’s hips. One hand gripped onto my seat tightly as he crawled forward; I held the keys out and dropped them into Teddy’s outstretched hand and smiled. “I’ll see you at the party.” He called over the roar of the engine. I nodded once, patting Pea’s back to signal him to leave.

Just before we turned onto the main road, I glanced over my shoulder to where Dean stood; his arms were extended now, and pointing towards me, face red with worry and anger as he yelled at Teddy — who stood leaning against his truck, completely unbothered.

I waved to Pop as I stood at the door that Thursday night, looking around the vacant parking lot. My brows pulled together, gnawing on my bottom lip while I surveyed the darkness beyond the train tracks in the distance. It wasn’t like Sweet Pea to show up late — if anything, he was always absurdly early and already waiting for me in the parking lot on the Harley. I pulled my phone out of my rear pocket, clearing the missed call notifications from Sabine before I quickly sent him a message. Maybe he had forgotten.

I sat down in one of the booths while I waited for a response, shoving my bag into the corner while I fished my headphones from my jacket pocket and plugged them into my phone. I had just started the BADLANDS album when an intruder slipped into the other side of the booth, interrupting the music that streamed from the speakers.
He had to be my age, if not older. His lips were pulled into a tight smile, brown hair meticulously pulled back and styled while his purple sweater pulled over a collared shirt indicated I was experiencing my first face-to-face Northside run in. Curious, I pulled my headphones from my ears, and half waved, “Can I help you?”

“You’re new.” He stated, narrowing his eyes as he scrutinized me.

I nodded slowly, “Got here just over two months ago.”

“Two?” He asked, leaning forward. His face broke into disbelief, and then he laughed to himself, “Can’t believe it’s been this long and no one has taken the liberty to reach out and get to know you.”

“Get to know me?” I asked, wrapping the cords around my fingers.

The man placed his hands on the table, offering me another smile before he continued, “You know, things like your name. Where you came from, what landed you in Riverdale, that sorta thing. This town has notoriously nosy children, and I’ve never seen you around Riverdale High so I figured I’d extend an olive branch and say hi —”

I started to laugh, bringing my knees to my chest as he trailed off. “You’ve never seen me because I go to Southside High.” The words left a rotten taste in my mouth, my grimace mirrored in his features. “Unbranded. Before you get any ideas.”

The teen scoffed, shaking his head as he stared out the window, “That wouldn’t matter to me.” He concluded with a shrug, lips returning to a tight smile. “I’m Kevin, by the way.” He extended his hand forward, chocolate orbs hopeful and kind.

I hesitated, staring at his hand as though it might bite me. Previously, I had made an effort to not make friends. Kept to myself, didn’t bother with pleasantries, and so on — but being with Sweets changed everything.

What’s one more acquaintance gonna do? I asked myself, reaching forward to lock my hand with his in a firm shake, “Cal Hobbs.”

“Hobbs?” He repeated, blinking rapidly. “You wouldn’t by chance be related to Dean, would you?” Kevin’s eyes sparkled in that sort of way that made it hard not to smile. He collapsed back into the booth, watching me in awe, “Swoon — Dean Hobbs is single-handedly the hottest male on the Riverdale gaydar.”

I paused, watching Kevin with a pair of pursed lips narrowed eyes as I processed that information. Was he insinuating that Dean was hot enough, even the gay men wanted a taste or?

“He is?” I asked curiously, leaning forward onto the table with my elbows.

Kevin nodded feverishly, placing a hand on his chest, “He and Teddy Bear Maxwell are a tragic love story but still endgame in my heart.”

“Teddy Bear Maxwell?” I inquired, raising a perfectly sculpted brow.

“Y’know, the one with the long hair and all the tattoos? Radiates the bad boy vibe? Probably batshit crazy?”

“You mean Teddy? The barkeep at the Wyrm?”

Kevin nodded excitedly, lower lip pulled between his teeth, “He does charity work with my dad and the Mayor every couple months — keeps the older gen of serpents out of trouble, that sorta thing. Total babeshow.”

I sat back in the booth, staring at the tabletop. Pieces slowly started to fit into place; no person spent this much time vehemently hating a group of people without reason. It didn’t explain why Dean and the Serpents had parted ways in such an ugly manner, but it did give me an idea on why he and Teddy had gotten off on a weird foot the other night.

I licked my lips, staring at my phone again with another sigh. “Do you have a boyfriend, Kev?” I asked, annoyance dripping off each word as I moved my eyes to the window to glare at the parking space Sweet Pea should have been
parked in. The unfortunate part of the situation was that I would never assume he just forgot about me, or was caught up in a game. My mind went to the worst possible scenario; Pea’s body, splayed across the road, struggling to breathe through all of the blood —

I sat upright slowly, feeling my heartbeat quicken and throat close at the mere thought. Suddenly I was looking at Kevin, this sense of urgency washing over me as I began again, “Actually, Kev, I really need to get home.” My body worked against me, pulling me onto my feet and into my jacket. I stopped, forcing myself to turn to him before I had started to wander too far, “Would you come with me?” I asked quickly, offering him a smile. I didn’t want to leave him — truthfully, he seemed quite nice. Much nicer than how everyone on the Southside would have described him.

But I needed to go home. I needed to know he was okay.

“What?” He had his arm raised, and brows pulled together in confusion.

“Walk me home, Kevin. You can tell me more about why you don’t completely hate the Southside.” I replied, relaxing when my words received an immediate smile from him, hinted with deviance.

“It involves a boy.” He warned, grabbing his jacket off the rack as he stood to follow me out of the restaurant.

I smiled in triumph, tossing him a quick, “Oh, good.” that paired with a wink. Most of the walk was quite pleasant; Kevin was a very chatty man, not that I complained much. He reminded me of Danny; just as loud, just as dramatic, just as perverted. The way Kevin described his time with his Serpent Joaquin was similar to how Danny had talked about his most recent partner (She lasted two months longer than the last, apparently). Numbers had been exchanged, as well as half-assed promises for milkshakes sometime in the near future. With picking up this second gig at the Wyrm, I found it hard to believe I’d have much free time, but I entertained the idea nonetheless.

We had linked arms once we crossed the track, which subsequently led him to grip me tighter as we neared Pickens Park. Sunnyside appeared not much later, pulling a confused hum from Kevin’s mouth. “Jughead .. lives here.” He noted, pointing to the lot on the right in the back.

I nodded, taking his hand to switch it to the left and up two, “That one with the pretty lights? That’s Sweet Pea’s.” I smiled, watching a grin threaten his lips.

“Sweet Pea? Who the hell is Sweet Pea?”

I laughed once, pulling him forward, “My boyfriend.” I repeated — I was sure I had mentioned this earlier. We stared at each other in confusion, walking together slowly for a few moments before I stopped and tugged on his arm, “What?” I asked.

“Your boyfriend’s name is Sweet Pea?” He asked dubious, looking up at the trailer as though he were worried Pea might overhear and come storming out.

I rocked back on my heels, inhaling deeply, “Dean’s ex was Teddy Bear, what’s your point?” I countered, using his correct name for the first time. Teddy Bear? Sweet Pea? Fangs? (Although, I was still undetermined on whether or not that was his legal birth name.) What kind of shit was going on around here? —

Kevin straightened, nodding as he shoved his hands into his pockets, “Fair.” He replied, looking around at the remaining trailers in the same way I had my first night. “Does he at least supersede his name?” I pulled my brows together in question, prompting him to continue, “Y’know, is his, uh .. sweet?”

I melted into a quick glare, shaking my head, “Hot man with hella sex drive stuck with a hot mess virgin — not as black and white as you think.” I replied.

He pulled back with a laugh, “You’re awfully vulgar for a virgin —”
We looked up instantaneously when the sound of a loud crack pulled our attention to the trailer; my heart jumped into my throat, hearing Sweet Pea’s disgruntled growl break the silence. “The fuck?” Feet already moving towards the trailer slowly, I cringed again when I heard another snap. I turned to look at Kevin, “I should go?” I said, although it came out as more of a question.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? Do you want me to come? Should I call my dad?” He asked cautiously, eyes glued onto the shadow that moved around Pea’s living room.

“Your dad?”

“The Sheriff?”

**What? Are you fucking kidding me —**

“No!” I said quickly, holding my hands out. “Don’t do that. It’s probably nothing.” I said, unsure if I were trying to convince him or myself. “Thanks for walking me home — I’ll see you around?” My feet already had me moving towards the door, taking the steps two at a time.

“**Text me!**” I could barely register his words; my heart was beating so loud. My fingers, numb from the cold, struggled with the knob; one foot in the door, I’m turning to grab the bat hung on the other side. The door slammed open, and my eyes snapped to the living room, bat raised, “Sweet Pea?”

Pea stood with his back to me, shoulders tense, hands balled into tight fists at his sides; he turned his head, glancing at me over his shoulder, “Calliope?” Pea’s eyes widened at the sight, starting with the bat in my raised hands and then moving to the panic on my face. After a few moments, realization hit and his face dropped into apology, “Shit, Cal, I’m sorry, I completely lost track of time — ”

I had already dismissed him, feeling the weight lift off my shoulders as I pressed my eyes shut. Sweet Pea was okay — our coffee table, however, was not.

I lifted my eyes to meet his, drinking in his expression. I dropped the bat, mindful of my feet as I stumbled towards him, arms extended to pull him into a tight embrace. My earlier thoughts of his suffering seemed to fade away. “You didn’t come to get me.” I accused; with the emotional torment I had been putting myself through gone, I had plenty of room for anger. “I had to walk home. It’s almost eleven, Pea.” I growled, pushing away from his body to slap a loud hand against his chest, pulling my brows together in annoyance. “Not only that, I had to ask Kevin to walk me home, so I didn’t have to feel bad about leaving him to come check to see if you were still alive!”

Confused, he pulled me back into his arms, fingers entwining into the hair at the bottom of my neck. “Why wouldn’t I be alive?”

I shook my head, willing the tears and anxiety away, “You’re never late. You’re always there — always. You never forget ..” I trailed off, fingers squeezing his shirt tightly. “I was just caught up with thinking the worst had happened to you the entire way home.”

Confused, he pulled me back into his arms, fingers entwining into the hair at the bottom of my neck. “Why wouldn’t I be alive?”

I shook my head, willing the tears and anxiety away, “You’re never late. You’re always there — always. You never forget ..” I trailed off, fingers squeezing his shirt tightly. “I was just caught up with thinking the worst had happened to you the entire way home.”

Sweets pulled back far enough so he could lean down and firmly press his lips against mine in reassurance. Reluctant to let him go, my hands rested on either side of his face to hold him steady, melting under his warm palms as he rubbed his hands comfortingly over my shoulders and down my arms.

When I did pull away, I noted the third body in the room for the first time; curious, I looked around Pea’s arm. She had her back turned to us, rubbing her hand into her neck as though it were kinked.

The brunette turned to me; her eyes were an angry green, lip pulled over her teeth in a snarl as she pointed a painted claw at Sweet Pea, venom dripping off her every word, “You have a fucking boyfriend? And you didn’t tell me?”

I swallowed thickly; Sabine’s features appeared smooth in the soft purple lighting, but I knew her eyes conveyed nothing
but contempt. Disappointment. Hurt. “Sabine?” Confusion, among many other emotions, poured into the word. She hadn’t given me any reason to believe she’d be visiting anytime soon — trying not to dwell on the why for too long, I relaxed my arms and sighed. I stumbled towards her, arms extended to pull her into a tight embrace. Face buried in her hair, I squeezed, gasping for breath I hadn’t realized I had needed.

When she released me, I pushed her away and pressed the heels of my palms into my eyes, stammering as I continued, “When did you? — Why? How? Do your parents fucking know about this? Do they know you’re here? Are you okay?” I asked finally, rubbing my cheeks.

Her delicate fingers pulled my hands away from my face; when I looked at her now, her face appeared much calmer and more gentle. Her lips pulled into a smile, and she shrugged, “They think I’m taking a road trip with Lydia. Going to her grandparents across the state for a week over the holidays.”

“She’s mouthy.” He grumbled, returning his attention back to the table, clearing the wood splinters from the carpet.

“Not fucking mouthy, Chachi.” Sabine clarified, folding her arms across her chest.

“How did you break the table?” I asked quickly, stepping in between them as Pea stood upright, dark eyes covered by his bangs.

Sabine paused, blowing her cheeks out in a puff before she gestured to the bag that leaned against the couch. “Her bag is unnecessarily heavy.” Sweet Pea spoke for her, clearly annoyed.

“More than me?” I questioned, raising a brow as I knocked my hip into his slowly, thinking back to our previous night. The thick layer of smoke that had settled atop our nearly naked bodies (Pea, being the gentleman he was, kept his boxers on), filling the living room with a white fog. The sensation of his tongue tasting me returned, causing my thighs to squeeze together impulsively. I thought about how cold the wood had felt against my bare skin, about the dozen or so lovebites that littered my inner thighs, the subtle bruises from his fingers left on my hips from where he had tried to restrain me.

Sabine rolled her pretty eyes, dropping onto the couch behind her with a petulant sigh. “Sorry about that.” She pointed to the table, tucking her feet under her bottom with an impish smile. I looked at the splintered wood with a grimace, patting Sweet Pea’s arm twice as we turned to pick apart the pieces, and clean up the mess on the floor.

I relaxed back into Pea’s frame, running a lazy finger along his arm as Sabine pulled from the joint in her hand again. Her face pulled together, exhaling slowly with a nod, examining the roll, “Not too shabby on the Southside, huh?”

Sweet Pea’s arms tightened around my waist, lips at the top of my skull. I shrugged, watching as Pea’s fingers played with my own, slowly collapsing around each other in a gentle grip. I squeezed his long digits, glancing up at my friend from my end of the couch. After more formal introductions had been exchanged, I reheated the pasta we had leftover from the following night, talking with Sabine at the kitchen table while Sweets rolled in the living room.

Sabine seemed to warm up to Pea once one of the joints had been lit and he extended it out as a peace offering. She had melted onto the opposite side of the couch, hanging her head over the edge. Twenty minutes later, my body was humming gently, sensitive to every touch and caress. The roach passed to my free hand; I inhaled deeply, resting my head against Sweet Pea’s chest as he kissed along the top of my hair. Eyelids heavy, I smiled at her from between my boyfriend’s
thighs, “No. Not at all.”

Noticing the time, Pea removed himself from around me and stood (despite my protests) to excuse himself to go shower; once the door shut and the whine from the showerhead sounded, Sabine bolted upright and grabbed my ankles, pulling me towards her.

“What the fuck, Sab?” I asked, noting the excitement in her eyes.

“Tell me about him.” She encouraged, moving forward to settle between my legs, head rested on my stomach.

“What do you wanna know?” My fingers carefully handed the jay back to her, propping my head up on my knuckles as I used the back of the couch for support.

“Like since when did you date boys?” She started, looking up at me from under her lashes.

I laughed once, pulling my fingers through her tousled strands, “It’s been a couple of weeks.”

Her eyes narrowed, “So you were dating him when you called me from the payphone.” She accused, pinching my calf.

I swatted her hand away, whining in protest, “It wasn’t a priority at the time.”

“But anytime before or after that? You didn’t think that might be info you tell your bestie?”

Sensing her anger, I placed a hand on her forehead and leaned forward to kiss the tip of her nose, “Relax, Sab. It was private for a while, and we were just seeing how things went between us without the added pressure of everyone knowing and staring and making it weird.”

Sabine pursed her lips, examining the roach in her fingers before she took another inhale, “And? How are things?”

I paused, rearing my thoughts back to our time together. Thinking about where we had started, how sure I had been that Sweet Pea was getting under my skin for the sake of driving me out. Because I said I didn’t like him. And how that first promise we made, while at the time seemed fleeting and silly, seemed to have created the foundation of our relationship. We had promised not to get attached — although that appeared to be a futile effort when week four rolled around and I was concerned about his well being and waking up in the middle of the night in cold sweats, just thinking about his hands running along my body and —

“They’re good.” I replied, glancing towards the bathroom door.

“Just good?”

I rolled my eyes, leaning back into the couch as she rolled over onto her stomach to face me, “First time for everything, right? It’s not perfect by any means, but .. things are good.” I stated confidently, offering her a smile, “I’m happy.”

It continued like that, Sabine asking things like who did all the cooking, how long did I plan on living with him, was there a carbon copy of him hiding elsewhere she could sink her teeth into, etc.

“Do you want a lookalike or .. someone you can vibe with?” I asked, encouraging her to elaborate before I allowed myself to feel bothered by her comments.

“Tall, dark, handsome. Gentleman in the streets, daddy in the sheets — that sorta shit.” I laughed at her boldness, thinking about Pea hovering over me in a similar manner. “Believe me, that shit matters. You’ll see.”

“Don’t think I have to worry much.” I admitted, lifting my eyes to the bathroom door to ensure he still remained locked inside.

After forty-five minutes, Sweets finally emerged from the shower, a towel tied around his waist as he worked a Q-Tip into
his ear. Sabine sat up, shouting something about manscaping while he had company, encouraging Sweet Pea to extend his middle finger and disappear into the bedroom; we shared a laugh.

“I feel bad making you sleep on the couch.” I admitted, helping her rearrange the cushions so she’d have a little more room to spread out. “We can go get a motel room for a few days?”

Sab waved me away, “And miss out on bugging Chachi? Forget it.” She snickered.

“I still have school.” I reminded her, “If I won’t skip for him, I’m not skipping for you.” I stated, concerned about how I was going to keep my live-in long distance best friend preoccupied while I spent the next week stuck in a classroom.

“And work.” Pea added from the bedroom, voice muffled from the distance.

“Two jobs,” I sighed to myself, standing tall as she collapsed into the makeshift bed and pulled the grey blanket up to her chin. “I might have outdone myself.”

“Nah,” She shifted, wiggling her legs as she twisted onto her side, “You’re a superhuman, Allie, don’t stress about it too much.”

I nodded, trying to find comfort in her reassurance. “You good? Need anything?”

Sabine sighed, reaching forward to grab my hand, “Fridge is right there, the bathroom is right there — best friend is in there.” She pointed to Pea’s half shut bedroom door with a smile. “I think I’m okay.” I squeezed her digits tightly, bringing her hand up to my mouth to kiss quickly before I dropped it. “I’m happy I came. Even if my parents find out and kill me, it was totally worth it.”

My head nodded, unwrapping the bun I had just finished securing my hair into, “I miss you.” I repeated for the umpteenth time that night.

God, how I missed her. Missed this. It was like no time had passed at all, everything fell right back into place when she came around. Like she hadn’t missed out on most of the last two years of my life like we still talked every day like we did when we lived in Pelham.

My shoulders slumped forward in defeat as my mind wandered to the possibility of having to choose between this life I had here and the life I wanted. I had (selfishly) been thinking about how I was going to convince Sweet Pea to run away with me when the time came, not thinking about Sabine. What her plans were after she graduated. Would she want to run away with me? Did she have something else in mind? I wanted them both. If I had to choose between one or the other, I wouldn’t be able to do it. It broke my heart thinking about having to let either of them go.

“I’ll see you in the morning, ‘kay?” I leaned forward and pressed my lips to her forehead before I retreated to the bedroom; Sweet Pea was lounging on his side in his boxers, cigarette hanging from his mouth as he scrolled through his Snapchat. He looked up at me from his phone, reading my expression carefully before he shoved his phone under his pillow, bit off the cherry on his smoke and opened his arms.

I dove into his warmth; face pressed into the crook of his neck as I forced my breathing to even out. Tears brimmed my eyes, threatening to spill as his hand moved to rub my back soothingly, resting his chin on my head. “You okay, babydoll?”

I forced myself to nod once, thankful when he didn’t push for more. Several minutes (and several forehead kisses) later, I felt my body relax as my mind slipped into unconsciousness.
I stared at my reflection in the mirror, examining both eyes with a slight squint. I used the blending brush to soften the edges of the brown I had applied in my outer corners, then picked up the charcoal eyeliner and tight-lined my eyes. I didn’t typically spend more than ten minutes getting ready for a shift at the Wyrm, seeing as they weren’t terribly picky about the way their staff dressed, so it was refreshing to put some solid effort into my appearance. I had offered to work the first half of the evening with Teddy behind the bar so that Toni could be with her friends for most of the evening.

I took a step back, pouting my cherry lips as I appraised myself in the mirror — something was missing.

As though she had read my mind, “You need falsies.” Sab said from behind me, fixing her hair into messy curls. I watched her in the mirror, noting the way she had used a clean brush to smudge her liner into a smokey eye — I’d have to keep that in mind for later. “I brought a few, you can borrow a pair if you want.”

I shrugged, separating a piece of my hair away from the rest so that I could wrap it loosely around the curling wand. “When did he leave?” I asked again, repeating my previous actions over and over to add a little more body to my hair. Sweet Pea had missed marketing nearly every day for the last two weeks, and it was getting difficult to go over the course outline with him in between my busy work schedule and his weird sleeping pattern.

“Around two-thirty.” She replied, turning back to face Sweet Pea’s bed that was covered in her various colourful clothing articles.

I pulled my fingers through the curls, breaking them apart slowly. “And he hasn’t come home yet?” I glanced at the digital clock in the corner of the room that was tucked away on his night-side table; it was twenty minutes past five, and he still hadn’t texted me. This was the fifth time he had disappeared to run some kind of errand, and he always only referred to it as business, a word that automatically pulled every bit of annoyance out of me.

Sabine held up the blue bodysuit, examining it in the reflection of Pea’s closet mirror before she sighed and moved forward to rest her chin on my shoulder, “Don’t worry about it too much.” She encouraged, rubbing her hand over my arm. “It’s probably embarrassing shit, anyway.”

I sighed, staring at our reflections in the mirror before I turned and faced her. We shared a look, Sab then smiled coyly and held the aqua bodysuit up against my frame and nodded, “No way,” I said, pushing it from my body, “I’m wearing red.”

“You’re wearing red because Sweets likes it,” She reminded me, turning back to her wardrobe, “The blue would make your eyes pop.”

I fixed my top, admiring the way the sheer top accentuated whatever small assets I had in the laced bralette I wore underneath. “I’m wearing red because it belongs to Pea and it covers my ass.” I countered, slipping the red and black checkered flannel over my arms, turning to ensure that its length was longer than the cutoff shorts Sab had lent me. After another thirty minutes of arguing back and forth over whether or not I should bring a second outfit, Sabine had convinced me to bring a bag that carried a pair of heels and a cream coloured dress.

I had less than twenty minutes to introduce Sabine to Toni; she was welcomed with a wide smile as my eyes settled on Pea’s large frame bent over billiard table in front of the stage. I fixed the top of my boot at my thigh, narrowing my eyes, “When did he get here?” I asked, slapping my hand on the table to get my friend’s attention.

“A little after Fogarty did.” Toni replied dryly, leaning back in her seat to sip on her beverage. “He went straight for the boys, barely said a word to me. He looks a little on edge.” She admitted grimly, twirling a faded pink strand around her finger.

“Fogarty?” Sab asked with a laugh, taking the boozy beverage that was placed on the table in front of her.
“Fangs.” I replied absently, leaning against the table. His black denim coat hardly made an appearance outside of his closet, and he had his collar popped in its typical Sweet Pea manner. I moved forward, weaving through the larger crowd with little difficulty before I placed a gentle palm on his back and pulled his attention away from the table, “You didn’t come home.” I said quietly, turning my back to the rest of the group to keep the words between us. “Where did you go?”

“Hey baby,” His eyelashes fluttered against this cheek as he lowered his eyes to meet mine, lips pulled back into a smile as he tugged on the bottom of the shirt I had worn and pulled me into his side, “Looks good on you.” He complimented huskily, pressing his lips to my hair.

I shoved him once with my hip, mouth pulling into a scowl as he leaned back against the table and sighed, “Where did you go, Pea?” I repeated, folding my arms across my chest, hoping I appeared more annoyed than anything else.

“I had something I needed to do.” He responded — just as vaguely has he had a few days prior — pulling a well-deserved eye roll from me, which prompted him to continue, “Cal, listen —”

“This is the fifth day in two weeks you’ve fucked off for hours on end without so much as a text or phone call, Sweet Pea.” I reminded him, shrugging out of my jacket to place over top of his. “I get that this is still your life, and I know that there’s a lot I asked to be kept from me.” I started, lowering my voice as I rolled the sleeves of his flannel up my arms, “But I didn’t ask for secrets.”

“It’s nothing, okay?” He finalized, voice a little harder than usual. “Don’t worry about it.”

We remained in that position, eyes locked on each other with mutual annoyance and desperation; I drew back with a few nods, mouth pressed into firm line as I flipped my long hair over my shoulder, “Right. Well, when you’re ready to talk to me like a sensible boyfriend should, you know where to find me.” I took a few steps back as I spoke, putting distance between us.

“Don’t do that,” His shoulders dropped, walls crashing down around him as I backed away from the table, “Calliope!” He called; I waved to him over my shoulder, ensuring to sway my hips just so as I walked away. He didn’t follow, instead watched me until I reached the bar and had successfully tucked myself behind its counter with Teddy flanking my left.

It was only six-thirty, and most of the guests wouldn’t be arriving until later in the night. Teddy had feared that the bar would be slammed more than usual for a Friday evening, so I had offered to pick up the odd three hours in place of Toni until Hog Eye came in. Teddy tossed a cloth my way, and I shoved it into my back pocket under Pea’s flannel. We worked quickly for the first hour, trying to keep any personal conversation to a minimum. It was most of the usual crowd, in just a little earlier than normal, and it wasn’t too long before all of our customers had been served and topped up.

We were careful to keep the conversation light and relaxed as patrons neared the bar and left. Once the area had cleared, and many members of the gang had gathered in the main area as the younger-gen filtered in, I finally turned to Teddy and placed a hand on my hip, “Why didn’t you tell me about you and Dean?”

He seemed genuinely surprised by the tone of my voice, pausing his movements in drying the glass in his hand for a moment before he continued and shrugged, “Didn’t realize I needed to.”

“Bullshit,” I growled, slapping my towel against his abdomen.

“It’s complicated.” He laughed, retreating to the back room with the ice bucket. “Dean’s a very private person .. I figured if he wanted you to know he would’ve told you.”

“What happened with you two?” I asked, returning my attention to the guest that had returned to refill his gin tonic; I took his cash, offering him a smile when he winked and waved his change away. Seven dollar tip on one drink, not bad. Teddy was watching me, waiting patiently. Unsure of what else he could want, I continued, “Okay, I knew that he was once apart of the Serpents,” I brought my voice down to a softer tone, “And that something happened to get him removed — I’ve seen the burn.”
Teddy nodded once, slowly, as he leaned against the wall and pulled a cigarette from the pack in the front pocket of his flannel, “That’s all, huh?” He asked, lighting it out of sight of the customers.

I turned to face the crowd, wiping down the counter, “Mhm,” I hummed, lifting my eyes to where Pea stood examining the table; he carefully lined his shot up, struck, and pulled away pleased when the crowd broke into another groan.

I tried to keep myself from smiling.

“He didn’t say why he they booted him?”

I shook my head, filling a few of the disposable cups with ice in prep for the next rush, “Dean’s a very private person,” I sighed, repeating his earlier words. “And as a private person myself, I don’t like to pry.”

Teddy scratched his beard, arms folded across his chest as he drew in another inhale of his cigarette, “We were seventeen,” He started, staring at his boots, “And Dean was .. incredible. He was an optimistic piece of shit, always looking for the good in everything and everyone, it was kind of admirable.” Teddy laughed, picking his beer up off the table in the corner of the bar, “For the record, I did love him, but David is a very persuasive man —”

“David?” I interrupted, turning to face him again as I leaned against the counter. “His dad?”

Teddy nodded, eyes seeming lost as he continued to stare at the floor, “David didn’t like the idea of his son dating one of us, let alone being one of us.” When he finally lifted his eyes to mine, his face was weary with misery and regret.

We stood in that moment, our eyes unmoving, somehow far away from the rest of the noise of the group. I broke first, turning to grip onto the edge of the counter with a hard exhale, eyes focused on the divots in the laminated wood. “Let me guess .. kicked him out?”

Teddy laughed once, dropping the butt of his cigarette into the ashtray next to his drink and pushed off the wall to join me, “He set him up. Unknowingly to Dean, of course.” His voice had dropped to a low and even tone, only loud enough so that I could hear, “We were on our way to Riverdale High’s Spring Formal when he got the call; David gave me false intel, knowing I would share with Dean.”

“And?” I asked, fearing he might not continue.

“There was a raid at the dance. David called anonymously. We got pulled in for questioning, and Dean threw Tall Boy under the bus.” Teddy turned, so his back was facing the counter, staring at the bottles that lined the wall. “And the fifth law —”

“I get the idea.” I interrupted, sensing that he wasn’t going to dwell any deeper with the details. “You never told him?”

He brought his hands up to pull his hair into a tight bun, shaking his head, “Would you want to know? That your own father was to blame for your entire world crashing down around you?”

“Yes,” Teddy shook his head in disagreement, folding his arms over his chest with a sad smile and I continued vehemently, “I’d hope to God Pea wouldn’t have the audacity to keep something like that from me.”

“When home is the only place you have left? When that person is all you have to turn to?” He asked, countering my anger with his own. “They didn’t just burn the tattoo from his body, Cal. They stripped him of everything that made him who he was — and when he left here that night, he was unrecognizable. In every sense of the word.”

Our conversation didn’t continue much past that; we returned to our corners, working with the crowd as more bodies shuffled into the bar. The two times Pea had started to make his way over to the bar, I already had his drink ready and hand waiting for his cash. Both of those times, we exchanged very few words, but he would lean over the counter to press a quick kiss to my cheek regardless.
I had ten minutes before my shift ended; Sabine had come to lean against my counter with a flirtatious smile and devious glint in her warm eyes, “So I met Fangs,” She started, reaching over to steal one of the lemon slices to suck on. I grimaced.

“I saw.” I replied with a laugh, thinking back to how she had (quite literally) collided with him as he was leaving the bathroom and spilt her entire drink down his front. “He’s a sweetheart.” I nodded, sharing a sideways glance with Teddy. Sweet Pea had once mentioned that Kabrina was infamous for sucking the good out of innocent girls — but none of us had expected her to make the same moves on Fogarty. Just as quickly as she had managed to capture his heart, she had also torn it from his chest and left it sitting in a garbage can to rot. He was unwilling to give anyone details, but we could all see how much whatever was going on affected him.

He had become absent, leaving a shell where Fangs used to be.

Trying not to let my vindictive anger towards Bri get the best of me (and my already on edge mood), I popped the tab on another Corona and set it down in front of Sab; she lifted it in thanks and winked before she continued, “He’s a total babeshow, Allie!” She swooned, letting her head fall back, so her curls moved behind her shoulders, pulling the attention of nearby patrons, “Don’t get me wrong, Chachi is good lookin’, but the muscles on Fabio.”

After five minutes of her rambling, Teddy set one of the frosted mugs down on the bar and chuckled, pressing his palm into his forehead, “You can go now if it means Cruella de Vil will stop talking about Fabio and his assets.”

Sabine smiled in triumph, “Deal.”

I rolled my eyes at her small victory, pulling the towel from my rear pocket before I joined her on the other side of the counter, “I’m gonna change quickly — can I leave my bag behind the bar?” Teddy nodded once, preoccupied with a customer as I slipped away from the laminated wood and pulled Sabine with me towards the girl’s bathroom, linking her fingers with mine.

Once we had managed to make it through the crowd and past the door, I waited until the last girl inside the restroom washed her hands; her raven hair was loosely curled, and her brows pulled together in the middle to accentuate the small dimple in her forehead. Definitely didn’t look like she ventured into the Southside often. She excused herself as she slipped past us, and once she had retreated from the bathroom, I flipped the lock on the door so that it was just Sabine and I.

“So,” She started, hoisting herself up onto the sink counter as she took another swig of her drink, “Sweet Pea is currently a walking ATM.” She started, filling me in on what my group of friends had been up to during my three-hour absence. I was unsurprised with Pea and his winnings, and even less surprised to hear that Fangs had taken too many shots and had already expelled the contents of his stomach (twice) behind the bar. Toni, however, was busy roaming between customers, just ensuring everyone was having a good time.

The music came to a halt as the karaoke started; surprised in the choice of song (I half expected it to be something I didn’t actually know), then came the voices of a couple. I kicked her shorts to the side and slipped my shirt and bralette over my head. I fumbled with the dress, slightly distracted by Sabine’s slow whistle as she leaned forward to examine all of me. Surprised by the response, I froze, “What?” I asked worriedly.

She shook her head with a laugh, “Girl, your ass is bangin’.” She stated, smirking when the heat crawled from my neck into my face. I scowled, shoving my head through the opening of the dress before I shimmed it down my body. I looked in the mirror, fluffing my hair with my fingertips as Sab pulled out the lipstick I had left at home. ‘How’re you hiding the thong lines so well? I never can.” She pouted, touching my hip with her brows kinked in the middle.

I turned and lifted the black string from my bag, “Not wearing them.” We grimaced at the piece of fabric, inspecting the hole that had formed just under the waistband.
“You need new underwear.” She stated with a slow nod, watching me drop them back into my bag. I nodded in agreement, taking the leather jacket she extended forward from her fingertips with a smile. I slipped it on, adjusting the collar before I flipped my hair back over my shoulder. We exited the bathroom, tossing my back behind the bar before we started to walk towards the remainder of the guests.

The voices that had been singing drifted out as I saw the girl from the bathroom flee the stage; there was a moment of silence before the crowds booing escalated. Confused, but not overly concerned with the sudden drop in performance, I scanned the sea of people facing the main stage, searching for the familiar raven curl. Surprisingly, he hadn’t been by the pool tables as I had anticipated. Instead, he leaned against the back wall at our regular table alone, arms folded across his chest as he opened his mouth to add to the obvious disapproval of the crowd.

I grabbed Sabine’s hand, tugging her forward with me through the patrons that observed the blonde that had taken the stage in replacement; Betty Cooper. I remembered her from earlier in the week. Her voice carried through the microphone as I weaved between the tables — there was a satisfied raise in Pea’s brows, his head falling back the slightest as his mouth coyly upturned into a smile.

For a moment I looked down the dress that hugged my frame tightly, smiling at the choice proudly before I felt Sabine tug on my head — roughly. “Holy shit, Allie ..”

I turned, looking to where she pointed her thumb discreetly; Betty Cooper stood on the main stage, eyes pinned to Jughead’s as her skirt dropped to the floor, leaving her exposed in a tight black ensemble. It took a few moments to register what was going on, and then in the following instant, my eyes returned to where Pea stood. A bitter taste coated my mouth with the next inhale I took, shoulders slumping when I realized the look hadn’t been because of my dress — fuck, it hadn’t even been for me at all.

It had been for the half-naked girl dancing on stage.

Sabine continued to talk into my ear, her words barely registering. Feeling defeated, I returned my attention back to Betty. Her arms gripped onto the pole as she twirled, snaking herself slowly up its length. Her face had relaxed into complete focus, unbothered by the several dozen or so middle-aged men watching her show.

“Baby!”

Sabine tugged on my hand again, brows pulled together in confusion, “Chachi’s calling you, babe.” She repeated, pushing me backwards towards Pea. Reluctantly, I braced myself and quickly smiled, turning to continue forward to where Sweet Pea stood.

He extended a bottle forward; I was hardly within arms reach when I lifted my hand to take the neck and bring it to my lips in the same instant. Hoping to numb the growing waves of insecurity, I sucked back half of its contents before I bothered paying him any attention. Pea slipped his fingers into the strands at the nape of my neck, pulling me into his side for a hug as his lips lowered to press against my forehead. “A dress, huh?”

“Something wrong?” I asked, hoping I appeared less distracted than I felt.

Sweets shook his head, snaking his other hand over my hip to my ass. Using one large palm, he cupped it and squeezed, grinning in satisfaction. “Nah,” He started, lips moving to my ear, “Everything’s pretty tight.” He seemed fairly pleased with his poor executed joke.

My attention fixed back to the man that joined Betty on stage once the clapping had ensued; his peppered beard gave him that rugged Southside look, but his face was careful and apprehensive. He placed his jacket over her bare shoulders, “Let’s give her a round of applause.” He sent her off the stage to where a woman grabbed her and pulled her close — her mother, I assumed.

The cheering continued, louder this time, a medley of hollers and loud bangs as the gentleman encouraged their
behaviour, “Let’s show her some of that Serpent hospitality we’re known for.” I hadn’t noticed Pea’s arms had dropped from my body and were now clapping along with the remainder of the bar.

Sabine and I shared a look.

“You know what? I’ve been in and out of the Serpents since I was younger than my son. And it’s been a … wild ride.” His voice picked up on a roughness I assumed had some with many years of practice, his brown orbs scanning the crowd as he continued, “Good times, bad times. But through it all, the Serpents stuck by my side while most other people turned their backs on me.” He shifted, side-eyeing the woman that had grabbed hold of Betty. “My own family included.” His eyes then focused on Jughead’s; I rested my gaze on the back of his head, understanding now that the man on stage was the man responsible for the cause of celebration.

I licked my lips and pulled my drink off the table.

“Now, the letter of the law says that I can’t be here in the Serpent den, that I can’t associate with my friends, my real family. My blood!” There was another round of hoots and hollers; uneasily, I scanned the crowd, and then refocused on FP. “But I’ve been thinking about that. And it’ll be a cold day in hell before a snake lets a pig tell him what to do!”

The bar erupted in applause again; I leaned into the table as Pea stepped forward. Serpents linked arms, grabbing each other’s shoulders tightly, shots lifting into the air in unity.

“The Northside wants me out of this gang. Well, they better bring a coffin, ‘cause FP Jones isn’t retiring. I am not going gently into the night! I am here to stay! So bring the fire!”

Pea’s large palms smacked together as he took another step forward, arm raising as he yelled, “Yeah!” Along with several other group members. Sabine and I looked around the at the patrons, watching as members rallied forward, engulfing FP in a hoard of people all too pleased to hear of his stay. Sweet Pea dropped forty dollars on the table, patting my backside once as he finished the remainder of his beer.

“You’re not staying?” I asked, slightly disappointed at his eagerness to join the others.

“Tall Boy and I are buying all FP’s drinks tonight.” He shrugged, adjusting the collar on his shirt.

Confused, I drew my brows together, “Didn’t Jughead say he was a recovering alcoholic?” I asked quietly, gripping onto his wrist tightly to keep him from leaving.

Sweet Pea’s face contorted into a look that read, ‘Yeah, right’ paired with a snort; he brought my hand to his mouth, pressing a gentle kiss to my knuckles. “Shots! Let’s line em up!” He yelled, winking at me prior to spinning on his heels.

“No, Pea —”

Horrified, I watched Tall Boy gingerly place a tall shot glass between FP’s index finger and thumb. “Hail to the King.” He said, nodding once in allegiance.

“Hail to the King!” The bar shouted, lifting their drinks in unison. After a moment of deliberation, FP’s eyes locked with his son’s as he lifted the brim of the shot to his lips and tilted his head back.

I pressed my eyes shut, turning to face the table with a sour expression as I lifted my own bottle to my lips and swallowed the remainder of my drink. The mental image of my father jogged briefly through my mind, pulling at the part of me that wanted to turn to a larger bottle, hoping the bottom of it would hold the cure for the momentary heartache that clung to the walls of my chest.

“Allie —” I held up one hand, silencing Sabine before she could start. I knew what she wanted to say. I knew that at that moment, Sabine knew better than anyone how utterly heartbreaking it was watching a man make the wrong decision instead of rising above. That feeling, the sting of not feeling as though I was good enough, returned in a hot wave. I felt
the warmth spread across my chest and travel up my neck, colouring my skin an angry red.

I took a moment to collect myself; hand pressed to my forehead, leaning forward onto the table as a means to steady myself as the room grew thick with heat. I exhaled loudly, lifting my chin so that I was staring at the Wet TShirt Contest poster that was taped to the wall. I felt Sabine press her palm against the small of my back, comfortingly rubbing her thumb in small circles. None of it seemed to help, but I appreciated the effort regardless.

And in the next moment, it felt like everything was crashing down around me — hard. And loud. Deafening, almost. As though bombs had been dropped and what remained was the destructive aftermath of whatever war I was partaking in. What was I doing in a bar? This bar? Full of people that had an unhealthy codependency on liquid courage to fuel their lonely nights? Had I not spent enough of my life already trapped in that vicious cycle? How many times I had fallen asleep wondering if my life could be better than all of this. If there was more for me.

I had meant what I said about being in control of your own destiny. Ite the possibility of a better future for myself. I had plans. I had rules. Good grades. No criminal misconduct. Absolutely no alcohol.

I stared down at the bottle on the table, taking a step back from the wood with my hands braced on my hips. This place had once spelled trouble with a promise, and I had sworn to never step foot in it again. Things had changed, and in that shift, I hadn’t thought anything more of it. It was simply the place I was able to be with Sweet Pea comfortably. The place I didn’t need to hide or worry about my family catching me with him. It had just been a hangout spot, where I picked up extra cash from games and learned to connect with other people for the first time in my life.

When had it turned into a second home? When had that neon sign outside resonated deep enough to pull feelings of loyalty and commitment from within me? When had the people that came in day in and day out become people I looked forward to seeing? When had drinking a beer with dinner become my new norm, and when had I stopped realizing I was losing sight of the person I had planned to become?

Cal was a version of myself that still seemed to exist, just quietly. On the sidelines. More than happy to make room for the woman Sweet Pea had encouraged me to become. It wasn’t his fault. In fact, I was more than certain I had plenty to thank Pea for. But was what he had done enough to excuse the regret that now swallowed me whole?

I believed I hadn’t lost sight of what was still important to me — there were just more things to add to that list. My being in this bar didn’t mean I didn’t love my family or respect them. They would always be my first priority. But I couldn’t stop the guilt that coursed through my veins as I looked around at the hoard of unfamiliar faces. Had I pushed my limit too far?

Suddenly, everything seemed to be an unanswered question. Unable to form my own solid answer, I ran a shaky hand through my hair and wandered forward. My ears, still ringing, closed Sabine’s questions out, ignoring her completely as I lost myself amongst the sea of swaying patrons. Sabine would be okay — adapting was her strong suit. The music had picked up again, encouraging bodies together on the makeshift dance floor as a group of ladies hung around the karaoke machine, looking through the variety of music Betty had compiled together. I had pieced faces together, beelining for the bar as soon as I saw Teddy’s face until I felt the sharp tug on my wrist; I twisted my hand instinctively, holding my arm to my body as I turned to face the perpetrator.

Sweet Pea stood with his brows inclining together, shaking off my sharp movements as he gently regripped my hand and pulled me to him, “Baby,” He said cautiously as my feet carried me to his side, “This is FP — this, my good sir, is Cal.” He turned to the man behind him, smile stretching his lips over his pearly teeth.

FP’s brows rose, rocking back on his heels as he looked down at me, ‘This is your girl?’ He asked dubiously, bringing his eyes up to meet Pea’s. “Well, I’ve heard all about you.” He added shortly after, flashing me a warm smile.

It was better than one my dad ever gave me, I’ll give him that. If FP was an alcoholic, at least he was a functioning one.
“Likewise,” I nodded, shaking his outstretched hand. “Jughead hasn’t shut up about you all week.” I added with a laugh, wrapping my arms around my waist.

The mention of his son threw FP off; he gathered his emotions quickly, forcing a smile, “Cal, was it?”

“Calliope Hobbs,” There it was. That wasn’t the name I had wanted people to call me. All my life, the name left nothing but broken memories in the empty hollow of my chest. Until Sweet Pea. The way it rolled off his tongue, it was as though it belonged to him. The way he whispered it, the way it sounded when he laughed around it — the way it deliciously fell from his lips in between moans — made me feel like it was for his mouth only. “But Cal is fine.” I recovered quickly.

“Hobbs, huh?” He asked, leaning against the side of one of the tables. “Didn’t realize David had a daughter.”

I pressed my lips together, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear, “Not David’s.”

It took FP a moment; his eyes fell on me again, scrutinizing my face before he laughed once, “No shit. Byron had a kid — hey, how’s he doing these days? I haven’t heard from him since ninety-nine.”

I felt Pea’s frame stiffen next to mine. Unable to meet his eyes, I shrugged, deciding to give FP the most generic rundown, “Got married that summer, moved to Pelham. Had me. Got a job as a correctional officer.”

“Good for him,” FP nodded, lifting the bottle in hand back to his mouth. “Wish more of us coulda gotten out of this place. Better one than none, right?”

“Right.” I nodded in agreement. Another hour of conversation flew by before FP excused himself to follow Tall Boy and a few others upstairs, leaving Sweet Pea and I alone by the pool tables. Seeming too distracted by the party around him to bother with conversation, I turned to my boyfriend and shoved my hands into the pockets of my jacket, “I think I’m gonna head out.” I said over the music, leaning close enough so that he could hear me.

Pea quickly dropped his eyes to mine, “Why?” He asked, threatening a laugh. “It’s not even eleven-thirty — go get yourself another drink.”

My lips pressed into a tight line and I shook my head, “I don’t really want one.”

Sweet Pea must have been inebriated, because the next words that left his mouth made my blood run cold, “Take a fuckin’ shot and loosen up. You’re always so stressed, you really just need to take a night,” He lifted the shot glass full of amber liquid to his mouth, tilted his head back and swallowed quickly, “And chill the fuck out. Give yourself a break, Cal, not everything is crazy serious all the time.” He offered the second glass to me, waiting expectantly.

I shook my head, “I said no, Pea.”

“What’s your deal?” He asked, folding his arms across his chest.

“I just don’t want to drink.” I repeated, lowering my eyes from his as he threw back the second shot. Pea didn’t usually drink much; I tried to keep in mind this was a party, and also a Friday night, but couldn’t shake the annoyance that had turned my frame into stone.

His face pinched together momentarily before he exhaled slowly, his feature mimicking my boiling blood, “You drink more than I do, babydoll, we both know you want to. Don’t be a buzzkill.”

“A buzzkill?” I asked, meeting his eyes with a hard glare. “So much for being a sensible boyfriend.”

Pea’s brows raised, but he didn’t say anything. Unsure if it was my absent behaviour that had spurred his frustration, or just the alcohol, I dropped my arms and turned to walk away. “Hey,” He called, reaching for my arm, “Where are you going?”
“Like I said earlier,” I sighed, shrugging out of his grip, “I’m leaving.”

His face fell slightly, chocolate hues scanning the crowd, “Gimmie ten minutes? I’ll walk you home.” I shook my head, moving around a group of teens that gathered around one of the pool tables. “Calliope, wait.” It wasn’t as desperate as it should have sounded. Instead, it leaned more towards a demand than a request.

That only pissed me off more.

I ignored his calls, and he didn’t follow me as I broke away from the crowd, grabbed my bag from Teddy (who held it out as I passed, face grim as he noticed my sour expression) and made off towards the parking lot without so much as a look over my shoulder.
FOURTEEN

For a second time in nearly three weeks, Pop’s Chock’lit Shoppe had been my saving grace. I walked through the door, duffel on my shoulder as I glanced around the restaurant for an available booth. It was surprisingly empty for a Friday night, so I opted for the booth right in front of the cash. I waved to Pop as I passed, dropping the heavy bag into the corner of the booth as I slipped in, sinking back into the cushion with a sigh. I ran a tired hand over my face.

Packing everything into my bag and leaving had been a last minute decision, and it was one I was sure I would regret come the morning. I had resorted to shutting my phone off, hoping that would buy me a few hours to seriously rethink what exactly I was doing. Was I on the right track? There was a part in me, a dominant, eager part of me that just wanted to disappear for a few hours. Nonetheless, I lifted my weary eyes from the smooth table top and leaned my head back against the booth as Pop set a tall glass down in front of me, and smiled, “You look like you could use one of these.”

I looked at the vanilla shake, towering with whip cream and chocolate drizzle (and two extra cherries). “Thanks, Pop.” I smiled, pulling the glass closer as I leaned forward to take the straw between my lips.

He didn’t move back to the cash; instead, he joined me on the opposite side of the booth, “How’re things going with the second job of yours?” He asked, noticing the bag I had shoved into the corner on my side of the table.

“Busy,” I replied, offering a smile. “Good for tips, though. Another few weeks there and I’ll have more than enough for my own car.”

Satisfied to see me clinging to the positive, Pop smiled warmly and folded his hands together on the table, “That’s really great.” His cheeks pulled up high, making his already jolly face appear rounder (and more friendly if that were even possible). “I know a few people in the town looking to sell, and I can get their numbers for you the next time I see them.”

I smiled appreciatively at the offer, “That’d be great, actually, thanks.”

Pop Tate seemed like an honest man, with a kind soul. It made me wonder about his home life. Was he married? Did he have children? I wondered if life had been kind to him, helping him remain so optimistic and then I realized that there were just some people that didn’t let the bad in life bring them down.

If Pop Tate had been dealt a crappy hand in life, he certainly hadn’t let that define him. Which was incredibly refreshing, seeing as I knew about plenty of people who had simply given up hope and accepted what they believed was meant for them.

Fuck that.

“Listen, Callie,” He started, leaning forward onto the table as he dropped his voice to a whisper, “Are you in some sort of trouble?” He asked, glancing quickly at the bag. “I don’t usually like to pry, but this is a safe place. I look after all the children in Riverdale, and that applies to you.” He reminded me encouragingly.

My eyes followed down at the faded red of the duffle, picking at the ripped handle with a petulant sigh. I normally didn’t like sharing personal information — at least not anything unnecessary. But Pop waited with a patient smile, surely hoping I would take and find some comfort in the olive branch he was extending. “I was staying with a friend.” That wasn’t technically a lie, but also still not the answer I’m sure he was looking for.

Not wanting to push, Pop allowed it and lifted his eyes to the door, “Oh good, I think your ride is here, then.” Confused, I looked over my shoulder towards the door, body visibly relaxing when I noticed the familiar jean jacket and compressed scowl. Pop had slipped away from the booth, leaving the space free and available for the customer that had just walked through his doors; I turned in my seat, shoving the duffle quickly to the floor before Don could see.

“Long time no see.” He murmured as he slid into the booth across from me. “What’re you doing here?” He asked, pulling
a menu from the table top. I rolled my eyes — yet he always ordered the same thing.

I lifted my eyes to him, squinting ever so slightly, “Could ask you the same thing.”

“Enough with the third degree, Cal.” Don’s eyes, tired but still ever-so-pretty, rolled as he leaned forward onto the table. “How are you? Still eating, living, breathing?”

“Fuck off.” I grumbled, folding my arms over one another. “I’m fine.” Neither of us moved or spoke for a few moments; his eyes remained locked on my face, unmoving and unblinking as he waited patiently. “Do you think I made the wrong choice?” I asked as I clasped my hands around my milkshake, “With Sweet Pea, I mean.”

“How do you mean?” He asked, plucking one of the cherries from the top of the whipped cream.

I shrugged, using the straw to mix the blend all together, “He embodies everything that I’m trying to get away from.” I admitted sheepishly, eyes glued to the speckled table top. “They come from the same place, from the same gang. And when I’m with him, I feel like no one else exists. I’d rather they didn’t.” I sighed, pulling my knees up to my chest. “It’s consuming. That’s sort of terrifying.”

Don laughed once, sinking back into the cushion as Pop came by with his curly fries the fact Pop knew what he was here for piqued my curiosity. “Isn’t that sorta the point?” He asked, brows raised as though he expected an answer, chewing around a mouthful. “Look, Cal, I don’t get it, but I know he’s taking care of you, and I’d like to believe any person selfless enough to do that is a pretty decent person. What sprung this on?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, lifting my eyes to meet his, “There was just this thing with FP.” I mumbled, leaning forward to rest my chin in my hand. “Reminded me of dad. Had a panic attack — I think.” I pulled my brows together in uncertainty, frowning as I leaned forward to take another pull from the milkshake.

“The bastard’s dead, and you’re still giving him power over you?” Don asked, brow quirked as his face shifted into a dubious expression, “Sweet Pea wouldn’t intentionally do something to hurt you, Cal.”

I shook my head, wrapped my arms around my knee, “You don’t know that.”

“I do,” He argued, straightening his posture, “Fucker’s not stupid enough to pull that kinda shit. He’s also not that kinda guy — a complete asswipe, sure, but he’s not a piece of shit.”

I considered his words. I hadn’t told Sweets the whole truth about my dad. The picture I had painted for him was all a lie, and I wasn’t sure how he would feel now knowing I had felt the need to keep something like that from him. Do I tell him? How do I even start that conversation? Sorry about fucking off last night; my father was a raging alcoholic, and I’m still suffering from living a life feeling as though I was the root problem for all of his misery. Part of why I didn’t want to tell him was because I didn’t want him feeling sorrier for me than he already did. I didn’t want to give him a reason to think I wasn’t right for him, or lead him on to think I was (more) fucked up than I already was. While Byron had done what he could to ensure I had (at the very least) a roof over my head and food in my stomach, he failed to recognize that I had also needed an actual parent. That I needed guidance, and structure.

Thinking about all of the nights he sat up in his bed, unshed tears in his eyes, telling me how he would make everything right, how he still had the chance to make it right. “I’m so sorry. Please. I love you so much, please .. I’ll do better.” I promise should have followed that sentence, but it never did. I hugged him anyway, and told him I forgave him.

That day I sat at the side of his hospital bed, waiting for him to come to, that was the day everything fell to shit around me. It was about him, and about what he didn’t do that he was supposed to. It was about what I did. And I did a great job, and did it all no thanks to him because he wasn’t there.

Statistically speaking, children that grew up with alcoholism are more likely to have common symptoms such as low self-esteem, loneliness, guilt, feelings of helplessness, fears of abandonment, and chronic depression. There was always the fear I would end up just like my father if I allowed myself to get too closely attached to one person.
Being with Sweet Pea made me feel like everything was falling into place one second and then burning down in flames around me the next. It could go either way at any moment. We were still new, and still getting to know each other but it frightened me how certain I was he was made for me.

He was going to be an important part of my life — what kind of lesson he would be was a mystery to me. I wanted to believe that I would have the luxury of loving him for the rest of my life, but there was a part of me that already knew he would never leave this place. I would have to leave without him, and that would be on me. I would be the reason for my own misery, and I already resented myself for the inevitable heartache that would come.

“Do you love him?” He asked quietly, licking the salt from his fingertips. His face was so calm and collected; I was almost afraid to answer. Donovan waited patiently, seeming open to discussing the topic.

Feeling confident I could trust him, I shrugged once, “What he and I have …” I trailed off. Forming words to describe it seemed nearly impossible. “He’s my Natasha.” I mused, staring intently at the chip on the tabletop. Explaining Sweet Pea’s importance by having him fill mom’s shoes while I filled my dad’s only made me all the more nervous about our relationship. “It’s like I’m scared I’m gonna turn into Byron if he decides to leave me. And this will have all been for what?” I asked, glaring up at the ceiling as I sunk into the seat. “For shits and giggles?”

Don’s brows lifted in surprise as he leaned back, “That intense, huh?”

“Everything is all fucked up.” I replied, pushing the empty milkshake away from me. “When it’s just us in that trailer, and we’re high — fuck, everything feels like it’s so cut and dry. I can see our whole lives together.” Everywhere I went, he followed, and vice versa. We didn’t sleep very well without each other; we didn’t eat unless the other was home. It didn’t matter if I was working until after nine, Sweet Pea would wait. It was beginning to frustrate me how often I waited on him without an answer or explanation. As much as I respected that there were parts of his life he had to keep from me, I found it hard to believe he didn’t trust me enough to at least be honest with me when I asked if it was Serpent business. Especially now. “I catch myself falling into a new routine with him like I’ve already accepted that I’m doomed to be stuck in this town with him forever, and that frustrates me.” I growled, leaning my head back.

Don leaned across the table to take my wrist and squeeze my hand comfortingly, “Don’t think too much about it right now.” He encouraged, “I know Dean is pessimistic about the whole thing, and is completely biased, but I like knowing that you’re safe.” He admitted with a nod.

I sighed, sitting upright in my seat as I leaned forward onto the table to steal a small piece of a remaining curly fry. “Does Danny know you’re eating extra cheat meals?” I asked prodingly, waving the last remaining fry between us with a coy smile.

“All he wants is sweets.” He grumbled, “Candy and fucking chocolate — he can’t crave normal shit like carbs. Sono,” Don leaned forward, narrowing his eyes at me while his lips threatened a smile, “I didn’t tell Danny. I haven’t told Danny all week. And we’re not going to tell Danny because I like eating my curly fries in fucking peace and quiet.”

I leaned back, “Are you really sneaking out at midnight every night to get curly fries?”

Don pointed a finger at me, “Don’t judge me.” I lifted my hands up in surrender, then dropped a twenty on the table as my cousin watched me, lips breaking into a fond smile.

“What?” I asked, panic already rising as I looked down at my shirt, checking for any milkshake spills or ketchup stains.

“I always wanted a sister.” Don said quietly after a few moments, “Wished for one every time I saw a shooting star, or got the bigger half of the wishbone. I think it’s safe to assume I used all of my wishes the second you walked through our front door.”

I laughed once and kept the smile on my face, unsure of what to say. It was nice to think about the boys in that light — as my brothers, instead of just my family. They had already done so much for me. It wasn’t just about taking me in and
giving me a home, food and a bed. It was that they bought a purple duvet because they figured I’d like purple, and hung up lanterns because (as Danny had once put it) it reminded them of some room you’d see on Tumblr. My grade eight graduation photo hung on the wall next to Don’s, and last year’s report card (that had been mailed here shortly after I moved to Riverdale) was stuck to the fridge. “You just hate being the smallest and the baby.” I retorted, pinching his palm. He hissed in pain, snatching his hand away from mine with a warning glare. “You trust them? To take care of me?”

“Cal,” He sighed, placing his hands flat on the table as though he was concluding the conversation, “You’re not going to turn into your dad. C’mon, I’ll drive you back to Sunnyside.” He offered, holding up the keys to his truck.

I sat on the doorstep, bag shoved around my frame and resting on the step above me. The moon had started to disappear behind the tall, towering trees, meaning the sun would rise from the opposite side over the mountains within the next five, maybe six hours. I shivered in my leather, regretting my decision to wear a dress this late into the cold November month. Sweet Pea’s trailer remained pitch black, grass untouched with tire marks. He hadn’t come home yet, so I wrung my hands together anxiously. Unsure of what else to do, I had swallowed my pride and perched myself on Jughead’s front steps, waiting for his return home.

I had spent a lot of time thinking about whether or not I was going to approach him with the subject. It wasn’t exactly like we were friends, and it was uncharacteristically like me. Extending an olive branch. We shared next to nothing in common, and yet there was a small part of me that just wanted to have someone to talk to that might understand how isolated I felt.

So when he came around the back, I jumped a little when he said my name. Turning, I looked over my shoulder and smiled, “Hey.” I smiled, hands still shoved into the pockets of my jacket.

“White Rabbit,” He greeted, coming to stand in front of me. “To what do I owe the pleasure? Where’s Sweet Pea?”

I paused, air caught in my lungs as I struggled to pull the words together. I inhaled deeply, moving my eyes from his as I stared past his frame towards the other properties. “It’s uh … Just me. I wanted to see how you were doing.” I mused gently, knocking my knees together as I suppressed a shiver. “With your dad being back and all.”

Jughead leaned against the side of the trailer, bringing his hand up to fiddle with his bottom lip briefly before he shrugged and dropped his arm, shoving his fist deep into the pocket of his jeans, “It’s fine.”

“Really?” I asked, squinting my eyes.

“I guess,” He added quietly, looking up towards the phone lines that crossed over the lots. “Though the night could’ve ended on a lighter note.”

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I almost asked him about Betty, but the bitter expression that contorted his features convinced me that keeping my mouth shut about that particular topic was probably for the best. Instead, I folded my arms over one another and cleared my throat, “How long?” I asked quietly, grimace on my features as he looked down at me with a long face. “How long has he been drinking?”

There seemed to be this sort of uncertainty in his features, this want and need to deny what I was asking. And then in the next moment, I watched his features relax, eyes weary as he shrugged, joining me on the steps, “As long as I can remember.” Jughead admitted. I nodded to myself, staring down at my heels as I leaned forward onto my elbows. That seemed to be everyone’s answer. As long as I can remember. The words were bitter and empty, leaving the pair of us to sit next to each other in silence for a few brief moments before Jughead cleared his throat and continued, “Can’t really say I’m surprised, but it was nice to believe he had the right head on his shoulders.” He was trying to laugh it off, pretending like it didn’t really bother him.

I thought back to FP. I thought about the tension between him and his son just before he swallowed his first shot. I thought about the years of heartache Jughead must have carried with him, much in the same way I carried mine. It was safe to say
I understood why Jughead Jones preferred to keep to himself. Jughead may not have been in and out of the foster system, but he never had the security I had. And over the period of the last few weeks, Jughead had definitely grown into his leather skin; he wore it proudly now.

But I had also considered Teddy’s words, thinking about David and Dean. I wouldn’t have been surprised if FP was beside himself seeing his son representing everything that had gotten him into the hole he was in now. And I wondered if he would go to the extremes David had, to keep his son from this life.

I glanced nervously at Jughead, linking my arm under and around his to pull our frames closer together, partly because of the cold, partly because I wasn’t sure what to say. “Yeah,” I managed finally, and although it was sad, it did stir fonder early memories of my father before he had completely fallen off the wagon. “Dunno about you, but living everyday like a pessimist really does have its benefits.” I teased. Knowing that my dad was going to get worse because he never bothered to get better meant I stopped believing we’d ever be okay. I never bothered to let people too close in fear I might actually like being in the company of others.

Solitude had been my home for many years, with the exception of Sabine. She was the one piece of me I didn’t realize I had been missing. I had someone I could look to in my times of need that didn’t think differently of me. Despite her very modern-American-family with their three family cars and a timeshare in Mexico, she didn’t fit the stereotypical rich girl. Her heart was big and was in the right place. I was proud of her for that. Even after all these years.

Jughead quirked a brow, side-eyeing me with a playful, “Does it?”

“Usually.” I nodded, “Never having to be worried about being disappointed, never have to rely on anyone else, never having to be unsure — it’s not so terrible.”

He rested his elbows on his knees and knocked his knee into mine, “But?” He encouraged.

“Funny how we still manage to be disappointed even though we know better.” I chuckled, tapping my heels against the wood. “Thinking you have everything figured out, you’ve got this clear picture in your head of how everything’s supposed to go and how it’s gonna be better this time.” Coming home, seeing him nursing an empty bottle. Seeing the lines blur in his eyes, hearing her name slip past his lips in a whimper. Natasha. As much as I envied the life he had knowing her, I hated that name. Natasha. I hated how every time he failed to notice the difference between her and I, I felt weak and caved to him because of how hard he was on himself. How many times had he apologized to her while looking at me, how many nights he cried in my arms thinking she was consoling him, forgiving him, all because he was ashamed of the man he had become.

How he was most sorry for knowing he couldn’t stop himself. How poorly he thought of himself. How he really believed I was better off alone in this world than with him holding me back.

Jughead nodded slowly in agreement, “He says I broke his heart.” He muttered quietly, staring down at his hands. I watched him from my peripheral vision, noting the way he tugged on his fingers and pressed his thumbs into his palms. “As if I had a choice — I needed to do something. To help him, to get him out. I can’t just sit around and wait for someone else to get his life together. He’s sure as hell not gonna do it.” He spat bitterly, rubbing his forehead with his beanie before he fixed it over his raven hair and laughed, “And my mom? Isn’t even interested in seeing me. And I’ve got a sister who’s growing into this really cool person with emotions and opinions, and I get to talk to her once a month, if I’m lucky.”

I licked my lips, rubbing my palms over my thighs, “Do you want a pity party?” I asked.

Jughead’s face broke into a smile as he sneered, shoving my shoulder with his, “Yeah, right.” He laughed, standing on his feet. “C’mon — my dad won’t be coming home anytime soon. You can crash on the couch.”

I looked to where he held the door open, then peered back to Sweet Pea’s empty trailer. I pressed my lips together in a tight line, inhaling deeply as I nodded, accepting his offer. Better his couch than a park bench, I thought wearily to
myself. I kicked my boots off once I was inside the door, and settled into the cushions once Jughead had provided me with a deflated pillow and blanket. When all the lights had been shut out, and I was left with the gentle melody of the crickets outside, I lay awake on my back.

Judging by the sound of his periodic sighs, I assumed Jughead didn’t get much sleep, either.

“Open the fucking door, Jones!”

My body jolted awake, nerves instantly buzzing with anxiety as heavy fists pounded relentlessly against the door of the trailer. It was silent for a moment; I looked up to where Jughead stood in his bedroom doorway, eyes tired and annoyed as he glared towards the front door. We both remained frozen in place, neither of us wanting to move.

“C’mon, man, I’m not fucking around.” Sweet Pea’s voice sounded desperate and hoarse, as though he had been up screaming for the last several hours. I fixed the bottom of my dress securely around my thighs, as I kicked my bag under the couch and then darted past the door; Jughead grabbed my arm tightly when I tried to slip past him.

“Please.” I whispered desperately, slowly inching my way into the bathroom. The fists on the door grew louder, more anxious. “I can’t. Not yet.” We locked eyes for a few moments before he reluctantly let me go. I shut the door quietly behind me, flipping the lock as I backed away from the door and pressed a hand over my mouth as I heard the deadbolt on the trailer door unhitch.

“It’s six am, for christs sake, some people are sleep —”

There was a loud thud, followed by Jughead’s cough and Pea’s heavy boots that stomped into the trailer, voice loud and demanding, “Where is she?” He asked, his steps trailing towards the bedroom.

“Who?” I heard the breath knock from Jughead’s chest, chair scuffling as Jughead continued, “What thehell, man, what’s going on?”

“Calliope left.” He growled venomously. There was a loud bang, followed by the sound of Sweet Pea’s feet carrying him towards the living room. “And I can’t get through to her cell; she left Sabine at the Wyrm, so Fangs is housing her until further notice.”

“So you think she came here?” Jughead asked.

“How the fuck should I know where she went, Jug?” Pea asked desperately, sounding frustrated with himself. “It’s not like she went to Dean’s, and even if she did, it’s not exactly like I can bust down his fucking door. She doesn’t have many friends —” He paused, breathing becoming more audible with each passing second. I could almost picture him, hand braced on the knob, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose as he forced his breathing to even out. It was a while before his voice picked up again, and this time it was barely above a whisper, “If you see her, or hear from her, can you please just tell her to come home?”

I pressed my back to the wall, waiting in silence as the pair outside exchanged parting words before the door to the trailer slammed shut and Jughead’s sigh drifted into the bathroom through the crack between the baseboards and the bottom the door. His knuckles hit the door lightly, “You can come out.” He said quietly; when I pulled the door open, he stood leaning against the wall on the opposite side, arms folded and brows raised.

“What?” I asked timidly, wrapping my arms around my waist.

“You left Sweet Pea?”

“Oh my god,” I groaned, shoving past his frame into the living room. Jughead’s trailer resembled much of Sweet Pea’s, although Pea’s bedroom was slightly larger and offered more walking space than the walk-in closet Jughead lived in. “I didn’t leave him.”
“He thinks you did.”

I rolled my eyes, plopping back onto the sofa, pulling the heavy blanket around my legs. “He didn’t say that.” I argued.

The raven-haired boy folded his arms, leaning against the door of the trailer with a look full of contempt; when I finally fixed my eyes on him, I sighed. “You didn’t see him, Cal.” He said slowly, chin dipping into his chest as he looked down at me.

I turned away from him, begrudgingly cocooning myself in the blanket, “I’ll go home .. I just ..” I sighed, throwing my arm over my eyes, “I don’t know. Need a nap. And some room to just .. breathe. And think.”

Jughead collapsed into the chair across from me, unrolling a bag of chips as he hooked his legs over the arm of the chair and settled back into its tweed cushion, “Sweet Pea makes your brain melt? Unsurprising.” He laughed, chewing loudly around a handful of the cheesy Doritos as I tossed my pillow towards him in spite, shooting him a glare in warning. “Look, I know Sweet Pea about as well as you do.” He admitted, sucking the dust off his fingers, “He’s not afraid of a damn thing — but I can tell you right now, the look he had in his eyes?” The silence lingered between us, his pause only adding emphasis to the severity of the situation. “He’s terrified, Cal.”

I sunk into the couch, pulling the blanket up over my eyes as Jughead reached for the remote and flipped the television on. “You’ll wake me if he comes back, right?” I asked, peeking my head out of the covers. Jughead nodded once, eyes fixed on the bright images flashing on the muted screen; I rolled onto my side and pressed my eyes shut, determined to get at least an hours’ worth of sleep before I either turned on my phone or went home to Sweet Pea.

As consciousness began to drift in and out of focus, my mind reared back through all of the shit I had dealt with when I had lived with Byron like a goddamn nightmare.

His words let my chest feeling empty and hollow; I swallowed thickly, wondering what good was I doing by putting him first and making sure he came home. “Do you care? About anything?” I was half expecting him to say he cared about me out of obligation, but even then, that would’ve been a lie.

“I chose booze. A really long time ago. You don’t like what you see, Calliope?” I was taken aback by how spiteful he sounded, how every syllable of my name dripped from his tongue like it was laced with venom and left behind an awful taste. “Then don’t look.”
** FIFTEEN **

Chapter Summary

** TRIGGER WARNING: NSFW, sexually explicit content **

I waited until the sun had set before I left Jughead’s; the bitter air invited my breath to dance in white clouds as I hugged Jughead’s jacket tighter around me. He had insisted that despite it being a short two-minute walk back over to Sweet Pea’s trailer, that I take it so that Sweet Pea couldn’t be mad for sending me home in (what he referred to as) my knock-off leather. If Pea was going to lose his shit on Jug for lying about where I had been, he didn’t need to give him the impression he had been anything other than hospitable. After a day of peacefully coexisting in our own miserable worlds, I reluctantly shrugged into his jacket, remembering the last time I had branded the logo, and grimaced.

“A Serpent’s family is always looked after.” He had reminded me. I tried not to let the sentiment behind that statement mean anything more than it should. He was referring to Sweet Pea, not Byron. He wouldn’t have power over me here. What I came home to wasn’t what I had expected, honestly.

I stood in the middle of the mess, looking around at the disarray of furniture. The couch had been flipped back and now leaned against the wall, and one of the kitchen chairs lay broken in the center of the room. The papers that had been tacked to the fridge now laid all over the kitchen floor, the assortment of glass bottle pieces littered the space between the bedroom and kitchen. I allowed the door to slam shut, dropping my boots and bag to the ground. “Jesus Christ .. what —”

“Sweetness?” I turned to look up to where Sweet Pea stood, arm braced on the threshold of his room with his face contorted in a mixture of relief and regret. He hadn’t slept, that much I could tell. It didn’t look like Sweet Pea had done much of anything except worry.

My chest fell heavy with guilt.

“Sweet Pea?” I worked my eyes over his body hastily, looking for any noticeable damage to his frame as I tightened the leather around from my body and stepped around the mess to walk towards him, “Are you okay? What happened?”

“You don’t know how to answer your fucking phone?” He asked, tone laced with venom as the sadness melted from his eyes and was quickly replaced with anger, “I’ve been up all fucking night, all over the fucking town looking for you! I had to ask Fangs to keep your friend entertained. Couldn’t you have just sent a fucking text and said you’re okay? What the fuck, Cal?”

“I needed space.”

Pea deadpanned, blankly looking at me before he straightened his posture, “So you say you need space.” He replied, voice calmer. “You don’t fuck off with your shit and let me assume the worst. You know, I thought I lost you.” He brought his hands up into his hair as he examined the mess in the living room. His face began to redden, and eyes seemed to gloss over as he brought his gaze back to mine, “I lost it, Calliope.” His arms were suddenly constricted tightly around my frame, hoisting me off the floor as he squished me into his body. My initial reaction was to melt into the embrace, nostrils already filled with the scent of cigarettes and mint. My eyes fluttered shut, fingers gripping onto the collar of his flannel. “I thought you left me.” His voice shook with each word.

“Wait —” I held up a hand between our bodies, pushing away from him as my face twisted into surprise, “You did this?” I stared around at the mess on the floor in shock, bringing a hand up to pull my bangs out of my face as he reluctantly
released me.

I looked around at the mess again, only this time, I envisioned the moment when Sweets couldn’t contain his grief and instead took it out on the rest of his trailer. Wondered if he had been crying, or if it was out of pure anger.

He paused and fell silent for a few seconds, noting the expression on my face. His eyes then shifted to the jacket and narrowed, recognizing the material for the first time “Where’d you get that?”

“Jughead.” I replied quietly, hoping he wouldn’t storm out of the trailer in another hissy fit.

“Jughead? Why are you even wearing that?” He asked quieter, stepping forward with a hard face, “I don’t want you wearing that shit anymore.”

“What shit?” I took a step back, lifting my chin as he got closer, “Your shit?”

“The fucking logo, Cal.” My expression shifted; seeming to notice my sudden change in mood, he continued, “What’re you doing wearing Jug’s jacket?”

Knowing it was better if I just came clean, I looked down at my feet. “I needed somewhere to go. FP didn’t come home, so Jughead let me crash on the couch.” I turned, peeling the leather away from my skin. I uprighted the chair, and threw the jacket over the back, turning to Sweet Pea as I adjusted his red flannel around my frame, “Don’t be petty, Pea, he was just doing me a favour.”

“That doesn’t comfort me. He lied to me.” He spat, folding his arms, “Does Betty know you stayed the night?”

I laughed once, wagging my finger in the air between us as I cut my into his, “You don’t get to say her name ever again.”

“Why?” He asked, brows pinching together.

“Because of last night.”

Confused, he continued, “Because she decided to do a stupid dance for her boyfriend?”

“First of all, that wasn’t dancing.” My voice was harsh, words leaving my lips quickly, “That was stripping. Secondly, you were watching her and enjoying it.” I seethed through a clenched jaw.

“Now who’s jealous?” Pea spat with a quirked brow, a smug smile coming into play shortly after. I wanted to smack it off him, and because of that fleeting thought, I had to lock my hands behind my back and take a deep breath in. Noticing the change in my stature, he reevaluated his tone and began again, “Toni said Betty had asked about it earlier in the week, I didn’t think she actually had the guts to go through with it. It wasn’t like that at all, Cal, I promise.”

“Oh, come on.” I growled, pushing past his frame into the dimly lit bedroom. I kicked off my heels and into the corner, then brought my hands to my ears to undo my earrings, “What’s not to like about her, honestly?” I asked, staring at his reflection in the mirror. The red light behind him made it difficult to read his face, but it wouldn’t take my eyes long to adjust to the lighting. Sabine’s bag still sat in the corner of his room, but it looked emptier than usual. She must still be at Fangs, then.

Sweet Pea paused again, brows coming together in confusion, “What’s this about?” He asked suddenly, observing me carefully as he took a step towards me.

“You have no reason to ever worry about Jughead.” I mumbled, avoiding his gaze.

“You think you have to worry about Betty?” He asked, trying to hide his smile. I kept my eyes glued on myself in the mirror, folding my arms across my chest. “Wait — you’re actually worried about Betty?”

“Betty … girls in general.” I admitted quietly, wiping my tired eyes. We stared at each other in silence, each of us unable
to say anything for a short while. I took that time to run my fingers through my hair, clearing any knots that had gathered from the turning I had suffered the night before. I fixed my eyes, removing as much of the smudged eyeliner as I could before I lifted my vision to look at Pea’s reflection again; he was watching me, eyes full of sadness and longing.

“What?” I asked.

“Look at me.” He demanded, stepping forward to pull my shoulder so that I would turn to face him. “Are you suggesting that you’re less attractive than Betty Cooper? Or that I like her?” He murmured, leaning into my ear as he brought his hands to my waist to run over the polyester of the cream dress. “Why would you think something like that?”

“Why wouldn’t I? I think last night says plenty enough — ” I had to cut myself off with a shrug, then allowed him to pull me closer to his frame, “Everyone gets sick of me at some point . . . just preparing for the inevitable.”

Seeing I didn’t want to press further on that topic, Pea grimaced, letting his hands wander from my waist to my hips, and then around to my ass. My skin lit on fire, the warmth following his moving palms, as though he were memorizing each curve for later. “Do you remember the laws?” He asked, bringing one hand up to caress my face and tilt my head back so that I was staring at him, “Can you tell me what the first and fifth are?”

“No Serpent stands alone, and a Serpent never betrays their own, right?” I asked, confused as to why this mattered.

Sweet Pea pulled my hands to his chest, squeezing them tightly in his fists, “You may not be an official Serpent, but you’re my own. All the vows I gave to them, I give to you, Calliope, I promise.” He swore desperately, snaking his hands down my arms towards my shoulders, “You’ll never be alone again. No woman is gonna change that, baby, you have my word.”

“Things change.” I reasoned, relaxing into the warmth of his large palms as they finally caressed my face, thumbs gently smoothing over my cheeks. My own fingers gripped onto the fabric of his shirt, keeping him close. What was that saying? Something this wrong never felt so right. “I’m not as great as you make me out to be.”

Sweet Pea’s expression morphed into horror, “I tore this place apart thinking you left me. I’d lose my mind without you, Calliope.” His lips may have been the first to steal a kiss, but I was the one who held him in place. Our mouths moved together; desperate, eager and impatient. As though we were filling what craving we had both needed and wanted for so long, as though we were insatiable. I understood what it meant now, the comparison of people to narcotics. Sweet Pea was my drug of choice, and this was my high. It was the only high I wanted to feel for the rest of my life, and I couldn’t imagine anything better.

Hand entwining into my long strands, Sweet Pea (nearly) whined into my mouth, his body towering over me as his desperation fed mine. My hands shook, fingers hastily ripping open the buttons on his shirt as we moved towards the bed. My small thighs hit the bed as I backed up slowly, enraptured by the powerful eyes burrowing into my own. My hands gripped the hem of Pea’s shirt as I was pushed onto the bed gently, but with a certain ferocity I had become familiar with.

Sweet Pea wasted no time in lifting my slender legs into the air, pushing up the bottom of the dress that covered my thighs. A chaste kiss was placed on one smooth ankle, Pea’s mahogany eyes never leaving the mesmerized blue of mine. These were the eyes that saw into my soul. And the hands that were now removing the tight plaid shirt from his muscled body, those were the hands that rescued me from a life of loneliness.

Pea reached out and danced his fingers teasingly along the expanse of my milky white thighs, noting the change in breathing that occurred as a result. "Does this feel good, baby?" Sweet Pea murmured pleasantly with all the aesthetics a Serpent should have as he leaned forward to press kisses to the inside of my knee. I couldn’t justify his question with an answer, even though the subtle pink dusting my cheeks served as answer enough. Slender fingers trailed their way up past curved kneecaps and lightly developed thigh muscles, stopping at sharp hip bones and kneading them gently. "And this? How does this feel?"

A sharp gasp followed by a reprimand was quickly issued, "Are you going to keep treating me like some fucking china
doll? I’m not delicate — ” My irate tirade was promptly cut off by a calloused hand grasping my chin and directing it up to meet his lips.

I moaned quietly against the warm mouth, snaking my fingers into his raven strands to keep him close as I was unwilling to let him go. Determined to finish what he had started, Sweet Pea’s fingers moved to pull the zipper on my dress, slipping the material from my shoulders as he pulled it down my body slowly. He removed himself from the bed, pleased when my body twisted and arched so he could pull the cream material away from my frame, leaving me naked and exposed on the mattress.

Sweet Pea took his time; his hands pulled my legs back into the air, gripping my ankles tightly. Each inhale I drew encouraged my body to relax; not too long after, the warm hands returned to my thighs, gliding along the soft skin the quivered under his touch. Seeming to notice my apprehension, his lips drew back in a knowing smile before pressing his wet lips against my leg in his slow settlement onto his knees.

My fingers gripped the sheets tightly, letting my knees pull further back in anticipation. The longer he prolonged giving me what I wanted, the more nervous my stomach became. I drew my bottom lip between my teeth and tilted my head back with a growl in frustration. His wet, warm lips traveled painfully slow across my hips, hands running along my thighs. My body squirmed eagerly beneath his, ensuring the last kiss he placed on my thigh was with a smile; he lifted his warm hues, watching me intently (adoringly) which prompted my chest and cheeks to erupt with heat.

"Calliope," He purred; I allowed my guard to drop, arms above my head and legs falling limp around his shoulders. He smiled into the sensitive skin, chuckle vibrating his lips as his hands came around under my legs to haul me closer to the edge. "How you ever believed that you were incapable of being seen as incredibly sexy is a damn shame," his lips continued working their way towards my aching cunt, "Because seeing you like this drives me fucking crazy."

"Pea." I breathed, feeling his fingertips press tightly around my hips.

"Sweetness, the things I wanna do to you .." He trailed off, eyes lustfully drinking my naked body in, causing another wave of confidence to crash over my frame. I let the corner of my mouth lift in a half smile and wiggled my hips playfully towards his face. Ever so carefully, he descended his mouth over my throbbing clit, encouraging a pleased moan from me. My eyes fluttered shut, relishing in the warmth that erupted throughout my veins, igniting my body with a white-hot fire. My limp arms slowly travelled down the length of my body, then tightly gripped into his hair.

Between a series of long lick and short, quick circles, my folds numbed and then became overly sensitive; as though it were clockwork (knowing I was eager for more), Sweet Pea slowly inserted one long digit into me, not stopping until his knuckle pressed firmly into me. My mouth fell open, arching my back off the mattress as he worked it slowly, drawing out short gasps, building the moan that erupted past my lips when he sucked gently on the bundles of nerves. My fingers let go of his raven strands, satisfied with the slight look of disapproval he shot up to me.

His tongue pressed more firmly against my dripping cunt. “Fuck,” I sighed shakily, gripping his hand tightly in my own as he held me to him, unwilling to let me go. I lifted myself onto my elbows, watching as he hungrily worked his tongue between the slick folds; he lifted his darkened eyes to mine once more, inserting a second finger, promptly pulling a well-deserved moan from me.

The outside world no longer seemed to exist as my head began to swim; my heart beat erratically against my chest, my breathing shallowed and I was left a writhing mess beneath his teasing mouth and strong arms. It was a similar feeling to intoxication. My body felt lighter, my head spun, and everything had been heightened.

“Feel good, baby?” He asked, voice husky and thick with arousal as his warm breath saturated the sensitive flesh. I nodded hastily, noting the way Sweet Pea’s face pulled into a smirk as his ego lifted. “Wanna taste?” His tongue darted out to wet his lips, making the offer nearly irresistible.

Eagerly, I sat upright, taking his face between my hands to pull him to me; I slammed my mouth against his hungrily, moaning at the first taste of myself against his swollen lips. His tongue danced with mine, hands moving to grip my
shoulders tightly and then he dragged his nails down my back, earning a throaty whine in response.

With my arms draped around his shoulders, I smiled when his lips traveled to my neck, tilting it back just enough to allow him to abuse the limited space he was allotted. My fingers moved to pull his black tee over his shoulders, tossing it across the room before I snaked a hand down his chest and abdomen, ghosting over the contained hardened length beneath his jeans.

Sweet Pea moaned into my neck, teeth grazing along the flesh as he pressed his hips forward against my hand; I chuckled, combing my fingers through his hair as I continued to palm him overtop of the denim, “Pea.” I mused gently, lips kissing the shell of his ear.

“Hmm?” He hummed into my neck as he sucked on another piece of bruised flesh.

“I want to taste.” I said slowly, squeezing my fingers around his length. Instantly, Sweet Pea pulled away from my neck. Lips parted, and cheeks flushed as he heaved, Pea examined my face with wonder and excitement.

He then wrapped his arms around my waist and lifted me, pulling us both into a standing position. Once I was set on my feet, I took my time kissing down his abdomen, fingers already working to pull his belt undone, popping the button open on his jeans before I yanked the zipper down with my teeth. I lifted my eyes to meet his, drinking in the impatient anticipation in his eyes.

I pulled the fabric of his jeans down to his knees, eyes glued to the thick angry pink member that sprung free. Sweet Pea braced a hand on the wall next to him, bringing his free hand down to tug gently on his length as I opened my mouth. He pressed the head to my flat tongue, bottom lip pulling between his teeth as he pushed himself inside my mouth; when I felt he had gone too far, I brought a hand up to press firmly on his hip to stop him, and slowly withdrew myself.

He worked slowly, allowing me the time necessary to ensure I had an ample amount of lubrication and confidence that I wouldn’t accidentally drag my teeth along his throbbing cock. Once I was more sure of what I was doing, I gripped the base of his shaft in one hand and swirled my tongue around the head once, savouring the delicious moan that trickled past his lips.

“God damn, sweetness.” He breathed, pink cheeks making his face appear more youthful than usual, “So beautiful.” He growled, snaking his fingers through my hair to grip a large portion. He guided himself back through my lips, not stopping until he hit the back of my throat and earned a suffocated choke; he then eased his grip and allowed me to pull back to catch my breath.

I took my time, ensuring no part of him went untouched. I sucked gently on his balls, made good use of my hands and my mouth to draw him closer to his finish multiple times before I would return to slowly stroking him while placing kisses along his waist. Each time this happened, an animalistic growl would erupt from his throat, and his eyes would press shut firmly, pinching the space between his brows together.

“You’re a goddamn tease, y’know that?” His forehead was pressed to his arm leaning against the wall, eyes watching my every move. I removed my mouth, surprised by his lack of protest and slowly stood, snaking my arms up his torso and around his neck, reaching as far as I could on my tiptoes.

After receiving the sweet smile I had been hoping for, I allowed my hands to travel from behind his neck down his shoulders and back to his chest, “Only for you.” I mused quietly, glancing up briefly to meet his intense gaze. His palms gently glided down my sides, then reached around to slap them down on my skin, where he then roughly cupped and squeezed my ass.

I squealed into his neck as his arms pulled me up, locking my legs around his waist. I tried not to react to the gentle brushes of his cock against my bottom and inner thigh. Instead, I smiled, tangling my fingers in his hair, enjoying the hum that ripped across his vocal chords. “Promise?” He asked; despite hoping it came across as smooth, he definitely sounded optimistic.
“I can’t imagine it gets any better than this, Pea.” I said, encouraging the part of him that almost seemed to want to have a moment. To be vulnerable, and open. His lips met mine with enthusiasm and force, dipping to the right to deepen the kiss, “And I want you. In every way possible.” I murmured around breathless gasps, fighting for air to fill my lungs.

His forehead pressed to mine, eyes shut firmly as he repeated, “You want me?”

I nodded, hands moving to rest on his neck. “In every way,” I repeated so quietly it was barely louder than an actual spoken word. To add emphasis, I rolled my hips forward and against his pelvis and took his bottom lip between my teeth playfully.

“Are you sure?” Pea asked, pulling his head back to assess my features.

My hands cupped his jaw, tilting his face to look directly into his eyes. “Sweet Pea, what I have with you, I don’t want with anyone else.” And although my eyes were heavy with lust and desire, there was no mistaking the firm conviction in my voice, the total determination behind my tone. I meant business. In the time we had been dating, he’d been tortuously mindful of the fact that I was still a virgin and had been so damn insistent that they move at my pace. Sweet Pea had been quite happy enough where we were in our relationship — our ‘sex’ life mainly included a lot of oral sex, sexting, dry humping, and handjobs.

If I was going to love him unconditionally, if I was going to ruin myself to keep him with me, I wanted Sweet Pea and only Sweet Pea in every humanly way possible.

His lips crashed into mine as he stepped out of his jeans and back towards the bed; my body immediately registered the actions and prepared itself, my mouth breaking into a triumphant smile. Gently lowering our bodies to the mattress, Pea used his arm to hover over me, lips at my ear with a quick, “Be loud.” Before his fingers slipped between my thighs, through my slick folds and into me at full, causing my back to arch off the mattress and a cry slip past my lips.

He worked his fingers into me with more purpose than before; now he knowingly circled his thumb with the movements of his fingers. I moaned at the sensation, pulling my knees back, “Shit, baby.”

Clearly pleased by my willingness, he tilted his head to the side and smiled, “Already so wet for me.” Feeling my eyes roll underneath my closed lids, I melted into the mattress, unforgiving with the increasing volume of my pleasured cries due to the slow burn ripping through my stomach. I tried to not think about how many other girls had witnessed the same intensity I had. The way his eyes lit my body on fire, the way his voice had deepened into this husky growl. How pleased he sounded, how sexy he made me feel — how could they not have loved every moment of this? Enjoyed how his muscles flexed with every careful movement, the way his hair fell forward around his eyes, the pink in his chest and neck.

In the very next moment, I was absolutely certain that I hadn’t wanted anything more in my life than I wanted Sweet Pea. In every way I could have him. I wanted to be selfish, to take the man that had stupidly managed to fall for me and claim him as my own.

He belonged to me.

Eager for more, I hooked one knee around his hip, pulling his body towards me. He willingly complied, his fingers slowing their pace so he could alternate arms to hold himself up, relaxing onto his elbow and dipping down to press a greedy kiss to my lips as I rocked my hips up into him. Sweet Pea growled at the contact, mimicking my actions, bodies grinding against each other in need.

It wasn’t too long after that when Pea snapped into action; he pushed back into a kneel and leaned over his bed to pull open the drawer of his bedside table and look around for the condoms he’d stashed there some time ago. Sweets closed his fingers around one foil-wrapped package.

“Can I?” I asked softly, gesturing towards the little silver packet. Wordlessly, he passed it to me and watched with wide eyes as I tore it open and picked out the latex. I reached a hand between our bodies to press the tip of his throbbing cock
against my ready and waiting cunt teasingly before I met his gaze again, slender fingers unrolling the rubber down his length.

I parted my legs wide, and he groaned at the sight of me spread out before him. Pea stroked his long length, squeezing so hard it looked painful, but he only growled out in pleasure and lined himself up with my body. I felt my lips split apart around his thick shaft. His heat was so concentrated within his cock that I could feel the searing burn creep up my walls as he inched his way inside of me. For such a burly, hot-headed man, he was always careful not to hurt me. There was nothing to be done about the initial burning sensations from his cock, but it was something I’d come to expect, and I craved the flames with every fiber of my being. I arched my back to take him in deeper.

Finally, I felt the coarse hairs at his root brush against my hypersensitive folds, and I knew he was all the way home. It took me a moment to adjust to the sudden fullness, feeling myself clench around his cock eagerly. Sweet Pea breathed heavily against my cheek, collecting himself, and I turned my face, capturing his lips with mine. My tongue sliding against his was all the encouragement he needed, and he began to set a steady rhythm, making the soft bed sheets rub against my back and ass in the most enticing way. My head fell back, brows pulling together at the pinching within my lower abdomen when he began to pull out; I returned my eyes to where we met, worriedly watching my entrance stretch around his length.

The skin was stained in red — I looked up, anxiety perfectly clear as Sweet Pea shook his head and kissed me in some form of reassurance, “Won’t happen again after tonight.” He murmured gently against my lips. Realizing my hymen had broken, I was both surprised and pleased. I nodded, breathing deeply as I brought my hands to wrap around the wooden pillars of his headboard. Pea repeated his actions, body pressed tightly to mine, hips thrusting evenly. His lips worked against my neck, teeth pulling at the already-purple flesh roughly.

“Harder.” I had returned to my previous state of intoxication; my head swam, body overwhelmed with the sensations that washed over me.

Each sharp thrust sent another painful jolt through my body, and each felt more euphoric than the last. I moaned into his mouth, releasing one hand to lock into his hair. He pressed himself up, gripping onto the headboard with one hand as the other moved down my body to gently circle over my clit and I nearly screamed.

“Oh fuck!” In the red hue of the room, his body held more contrast, deepening the hills of his muscles. His eyes appeared black, as though his desire had surpassed its patience and he was now swimming in sin. He wanted to do bad things to me, and I wanted to let him.

His entire body moved with each powerful stroke; I bucked my hips and met every deep hard thrust. The sound of our bodies colliding was almost deafening. “You hear that? You’re so wet for me.” A stream of sweet nothings and encouragements whispered into my ear, lips pressing chaste kisses to my lips every so often. Each new wave of pain only encouraged the want for more, pleasure quickly taking its place. “You’re doing so good, sweetness.” He encouraged with a breathless whisper, dropping his lips to my neck to nibble on the bruised skin, “So good.” I let my hands run from his neck to his sides, gripping onto his hips tightly. Our bodies rocked together, the room increasing with heat as a thin layer of sweat began to form over our flesh.

My hands switched again, only this time my hips worked with his, and I could feel that slow burn return. One fist gripped the sheet tightly, and the other latched its nails into the skin on his shoulder. I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth, encouraging a loud grunt from Sweet Pea. The excitement in his eyes had returned when he realized what my actions meant; desperate to cum and equally as eager to hear me explode around him, his thumb ventured down to my swollen nerves.

The heat slowly increased, setting my body aflame as my vision faded into a black and the sounds of the headboard against the wall (and his moans) became background noise to the muffled ringing in my ears. As the final euphoric wave crashed over my frame, my hands pulled down instantaneously — ripping the corner of the sheet off of his bed as my opposite hand ripped down the flesh of his arm. Sweet Pea growled loudly in reaction as my body erupted with such intensity, I feared I’d never come down.
I hoped I wouldn’t.

Pea remained still in awe, eyes watching my body twitch and convulse in euphoric pleasure, proudly smiling, watching the intensity of the feeling completely pull the air from me. When we finally melted into the mattress, his arms shook nearly as much as my legs did, and we both laughed. Content and unwilling to move, we remained in that position for several minutes before Pea slowly pulled his frame upright, lips blindly searching for mine in the dark coloured lighting.

“You’re fucking incredible.” He growled against my mouth, and I felt my lips threaten a smile. Our bodies slowly detached from each other; soon enough I was laying on the pillows with my legs draped lazily over his, taking another pull from the joint passing between our fingers. Sweet Pea dragged his finger lightly across my naked thigh absently, lips moving along to the music that gently filled the room now that we had the time to wind down. “I’m yours.” I was pulled from my post-sex daze, cutting my eyes to Sweet Pea’s. His eyes were already heavily focused on my frame, brows pulled together in deep thought, almost appearing angry, “You know that, right? I belong to you.”

We didn’t speak much after that, and it wasn’t until his wandering lips found their way between my thighs again that I realized I was still hungry for more, and wondered if that hunger would ever stop. I melted into the mattress as my legs spread again and the sounds of my moans filled the trailer.

Sweet Pea really was made for me.
Gentle fingers crossed along my spine, ripping away the last remaining edges of whatever dream I had conjured up. I whimpered into the warmth of Sweet Pea’s chest, face hidden in the crook of his arm and side. “Calliope…” He sang sweetly, quietly, followed by his tongue tracing the outer shell of my ear, “Sweetness.” He tried again with a purr when I stirred, lips pressing to the edge of my jaw. There was a part of me that felt awful for not waking up right then and there, but the exhaustion from the previous night’s activities was still taking a toll on my body.

Vivid memories still burned freshly in my mind, an eruption of visual and phantom physical feeling chilling along my limbs. The thought of his lips against my neck and his rough hands along my thighs and curves pulled a quiet hum from me. I then thought of how close he held me, like he did now. About how intently and longingly he had watched me as I writhed beneath him. Like he was peeling away every layer and wall; that emotion that lingered from his earlier vows still echoed through my mind, and it intensified. He was in this with me. There was absolutely no denying that now. I was his exception, and as much as I had tried to fight it, he was mine.

“No.” I responded with a sigh. Most mornings I had to be the one to wake Sweet Pea, which always proved to be an impossible task. It seemed as though it never mattered how much sleep he had gotten the night before; he would wake up grumpy and tired all the same. I had learned what worked best for him; sunlight blocked out of the room, kettle boiling for the instant coffee and me. By me, I mean me rubbing his shoulders and kissing his hair until the need to urinate overpowered his want to lay in bed.

It didn’t matter if I told him that he needed to be up and ready five minutes ago, Sweet Pea wasn’t leaving the solitude and warmth of his bed until absolutely necessary.

He chuckled, the sound weaving through my tangled blonde hair and into my ear like honey, thick and sweet. We remained like that for a while, blissfully basking in the morning glow after a tiresome (yet equally satisfying) night. I drifted in and out of unconsciousness for a while, being pulled back to reality each time Sweets ran a warm hand over my naked flesh. I felt the tender press of his lips against my shoulder, followed by another, and another — I then proceeded to squeal as Sweet Pea’s hand moved to maneuver me beneath him.

When my eyes opened, he was holding himself up above me. His raven hair fell forward into his eyes; lips pulled back into a delightful smile (such a rarity for this early in the morning) as our bodies were hidden beneath the thin white sheet he had pulled over our heads. Sweets paused for a brief moment, mahogany hues piercing through my own as though he could see into my soul. I took my time running my fingertips along the purpling bruises, admiring the puncture wounds my teeth had left in place. Surely they would heal, but it was still incredibly sexy to think that he proudly bore the marks.

Without a second thought, I gripped onto the metal tags that swung in the free air between us and gently pulled him down, swollen lips searching blindly for his. More than pleased with my eagerness, he lowered his body until it was pressed against mine, cupping his hand under my left knee to haul the leg up over his hip. “Still not tired?” I mumbled against into his mouth, fingers already slipping through his long strands.

Pea hummed quietly, shaking his head once prior to his lips seeking refuge elsewhere on my body. My eyes rolled back into my head, annoyed when my already aching cunt throbbed longingly for the thick member that pushed into my thigh. Not wanting to waste any time, my limbs moved quickly (despite their protesting screams) to flip him back onto the mattress; I straddled his waist, palms resting on his chest, jutting my chin towards the nightstand, “You gonna keep me waiting?” I asked coyly, shaking my hair over my shoulders to leave me exposed in the early morning sunlight.

The warmth in his eyes dissolved into a dark lust, hand fumbling with the drawer to pull it open, “Never.” He growled hungrily as his arms came to lock around me, holding me steady against him as his teeth latched onto my neck and I hummed with delight.
Sometime later that day, fatigued lids fought against the glaring sunlight through the bedroom window; my aching limbs screamed in protest when I moved my hand to cover my eyes. I rolled over (reluctantly), fingers desperately in search of his spine and his comfort. I was disappointed to find an empty bed in his place; the pillow was cool, meaning he hadn’t been in bed for quite some time. *How had he managed to slip out of the bed without waking me? What time was it? Had I been sleeping all day?*

Confused, I forced my overworked muscles to push my body into a seated position; my eyes wandered around the room, settling on the five ripped condom wrappers that littered the floor, along with various clothing articles. In my scan around the room, the closet mirror was the last place I rested my gaze. I was pleased to see the reflection of a girl that radiated utter satisfaction. Her blonde hair wildly framed her face, accentuating the dusty rose that seemed to glow from her cheeks and the way her swollen lips pouted. Her neck and chest were littered with purpling bruises—I brought my hand up to my neck and ran it gently over the marks with a wince.

My fingers held the blanket up to my chest, eyes glued to the door as I croaked, “Sweet Pea?”

After several minutes of waiting and no response, I felt my entire body scream silent profanities as I forced myself out of the bed and onto my feet. My nimble fingers swept his sweater from the foot of the bed and pulled it over my small frame. Satisfied that it covered most of the remainder of my naked body, I raked my fingers through my tangled strands and looked out into the kitchen, “Pea?” I called again, noting that the mess of broken glass had been cleaned. I half expected it to be empty, given that he hadn’t responded to my earlier call, but was surprised to find him leaning against the stove.

Sweet Pea’s eyes were unfocused on the floor in front of him; hands gripped tightly onto the edges of the metal as his fingers twisted the eagle ring on his right middle finger. I reached out, gently placing my hand over his to pull his attention from the floor to me before our fingers slipped together in a tight grip, “Hey,” He smiled, voice hushed. “You’re awake.”

“I am.” I nodded, hugging myself to his side. “You cleaned.” I noted, peering around at what mess remained. It was no longer in shambles; apart from the glass that had been swept up, the couch and chairs had been returned to their rightful positions. The garbage bag had been pulled from the bin and now rested against the wall, showcasing the ripped papers and broken bottle shards that once littered the floor we stood on.

“I did.” Sweets responded. We remained like that, wrapped up in each other, enjoying that the trailer was silent for the first time since I had arrived. There was no obscene music, no nosy guests, no need for conversation. It was nice. “So.” He mumbled, pulling me closer into his frame, lacing his long fingers into my hair, “About last night.”

I laughed, wrapping my arms around his midsection, “It was …” Genuinely at a loss for words, I brought my hands up to grip his face and pull him down so I could press my lips to his. “Words don’t do justice.” I breathed, intently watching the way his eyes lit with delight.

“You’re not in any pain?” He asked quietly, hands moving to lift the hem of his sweater to examine my hip bruises, tenderly touching the sensitive flesh.

I shrugged, “Sore mostly, but no. Not in any pain.” I smiled, leaning into the warmth of his palm when he cupped my face.

“I got a little carried away.” He admitted sheepishly, thumb forcing my chin up so that more of the bruising on my neck was exposed. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t.” I shook my head, placing my hand over his reassuringly, “Don’t apologize.”

I helped him with the rest of the trailer, only just noticing for the first time the hole that had been punched into the bathroom wall and after another two hours, most of the trailer had returned to normal. Sweet Pea made us lunch and then blushed over having asked if he could wash my hair when I mentioned needing a shower.
Shower sex with Sweet Pea sounded like a great idea at the time until his enormous frame cornered me and hogged all of the hot water. He noticed eventually, and tilted the showerhead so that I wouldn’t be left shivering behind his massive height.

Fangs brought Sabine back to the trailer shortly after we got finished washing up and had managed to pry our bodies apart long enough to pull clothing on over our naked limbs; Fogarty had his arms folded across his chest in feigned anger as he glared between the two of us. He muttered something about girl drama, followed by something in a language I couldn’t quite understand — Spanish, maybe?

Sabine settled onto the couch next to me, waiting until the boys became preoccupied in their own world in the kitchen before she began to speak. After gently touching all of the visible bruises with raised brows, “Are those teeth marks?” She hissed, examining them again, “Does this boy know nothing — no teeth!” She chided. I waved her away in dismissal; her motherly tone evaporated into regret as she leaned into my ear, quietly whispering apologies for not coming to find me with Sweet Pea. I had spent the next few days following this conversation trying to console her, and offer her some comfort, but the efforts were futile. I knew she felt terrible about what had happened, but in all honesty, I’m happier she gave me space.

Our first night together alone in the trailer meant we could finally get into the nitty, gritty details of what had happened earlier in the week; Sabine nearly fell over and choked on air when I mentioned having lost my virginity to Pea. Her seafoam hues widened briefly before she dropped her mouth open slowly and bounced excitedly from her side of the table, “Oh my god, oh my god!”

“I know!” I sang between giggles, meeting her high pitch with one of my own.

Sabine reached her hands forward, fingers skimming along my milky flesh, admiring the bruises (again) with fresh eyes and a new found appreciation. “I thought you’d die a virgin, Allie, I really did.” She said after several moments, voice sincere but eyes alight with excitement.

As much as the words sounded teasing, I knew there was some truth behind them. We sat across from each other, empty Chinese containers littering the new oak coffee table Pea had delivered to the trailer earlier that afternoon before he disappeared with Fangs to the Wyrm. “Yeah, me too.” I admittedly quietly, staring down at the loose string on my shirt. Without really realizing, I started word vomiting and going over everything in my head, hoping she might be able to help me sort Byron away from everything else.

So I told her everything. About Byron and his affiliation with the Serpents. About Teddy and Dean, about what David had done to Dean and how that affected me now. I watched her mind reel through all of the new information, piecing it together with what she already knew about my relationship with my father, and what it meant for me here.

“I know you’re used to assuming the worst is going to happen, and I know you do it out of habit, but maybe Chachi doesn’t ruin you. Maybe he saves you.” She shrugged. “It is possible to have a happy, healthy relationship despite what you’re thinking, Allie.”

My eyes rolled, fingers breaking apart my cookie and ripping out the piece of paper. “You are one of those people who ‘goes places in life.’” I read aloud, shooting a look at my best friend from my seat on the couch while my fingers flipped the paper and I read over the lucky numbers.

A few days later, Sab slammed the trunk closed on her friend’s car as she prepared for her departure. I watched her arms settle around Fogarty’s frame; he held her tightly and even leaned down to press a quick kiss to her temple. Sab promised to visit again in the summer, got into the car with a final wave, and texted me the moment she got back into Pelham two hours later.

With school out for the winter break, I was able to keep myself preoccupied with finishing assignments I knew no one else would hand in and picking up extra shifts. I was slightly taken aback when I walked into Pop’s one Saturday morning and saw FP standing behind the counter in uniform, but decided against asking Pop (or FP for that matter) why. He made light
conversation; we talked about Teddy and Sweets, he asked about how often I worked at the Wyrm and even suggested I join him later that night with Sweet Pea for a couple of games of pool.

I had agreed, but that was mainly to be polite.

Just before the Christmas holidays, Sweet Pea disappeared once more, and then never again after that. He spent the following few days after on edge, the tension building in his shoulders and neck until Christmas Eve; when he went down with a migraine and laid in the dark all day. Something I hadn’t previously known about Sweet Pea was that he preferred to be alone when he was in pain (I had learned this the hard way, unfortunately). We agreed to Christmas with Fangs and his mother, and an invitation had been extended to Toni, but she had mentioned she would be spending Christmas with her family this year.

Pea had gotten me a few sketchbooks; only these were bigger than my others, and also gifted me a proper art set. It had rows on rows of pretty oils and chalks. We spent several hours lounging in the trailer, and Sweets had been more than willing to sit still while I sketched him over and over, roach passing between our fingers.

I didn’t have to work New Year’s at Pop’s or the Wyrm, so I spent the night disdainfully looking around at the falling confetti that littered the bar floor and billiard tables. Sweet Pea had insisted I dance with him all night, and despite hating most of what was played, I’m almost certain he had a good time. When the countdown began, and the ball started to descend, his fingers threaded their way into my hair, finger tilting my chin upwards so that he could press our lips together once the crowd exploded around us.

Dean had arranged for a family dinner the following day at Pop’s to exchange gifts. He had agreed to let Sweet Pea come, but hadn’t seemed very interested in making conversation with him. Thankfully, Pea respected that and engaged in conversation with Don instead. It was nice, pretending everything was normal. That I was a girl who brought a boy home, who’s family reacted like any family should and not the way mine had.

I appreciated the time with them, though. It had been the first meal we had shared together since the pizza we that had been ordered the night Dean kicked me out (I still hadn’t really touched pizza since); I was over the moon with how it seemed to move along with no issues. I was able to enjoy the company of all the men important to me in my life, at the same time, in the same vicinity, and that was more than enough of a gift for me.

Though, that hadn’t stopped the boys from placing their tokens on the table with proud smiles. Danny had gifted me a few of his flannels that no longer fit him, but he refused to throw away. Despite the fact that they were hand-me-downs, I was thankful for the gesture.

Dean’s gift was less of a physical gift so much as it was a promise. I was confused when I pulled a license plate that read ‘CALLIXPE’ out of the pretty gift bag he had set on the table. Dean explained that he would match whatever amount of money I put forward towards my first car and that the plate was legally customized for this purpose.

Don had gone out of his way to save his money and purchase a camera for me, but not just any camera. It was one of those Polaroid cameras that was constantly advertised on television. Don and I had been sitting in the living room one Sunday morning when the commercial played, and I had mentioned in passing that I wished I could capture more imperfect moments. The idea of taking a picture a hundred times until you got it right felt like it was defeating the purpose of taking the picture; Don seemed to agree.

Dean had mentioned that I’d be able to move home soon; the final house inspection would be happening later in the week and once approved, I could move back home. I had been slightly taken aback by the sudden progress of my case, but was excited nonetheless. Of course, Sweet Pea had kept quiet about the topic until we got home later that evening, choosing to wait until we were in the privacy of his trailer before he turned to me with pouty lips and puppy dog eyes.

“This was temporary, remember?” I cooed, unable to keep the amusement from my features when his bottom lip jutted out in protest, and he curled into my side, resting his chin on my chest. “Normal sixteen-year olds live at home, Sweets.” I reminded him, running my fingers through his soft tresses absently.
He snorted, resting his head in the crook of my neck as he settled in for the night, “We’re the exception, sweetness.”

Admittedly, I had to agree with him.

A few days later, I moved back to Mooregate, and I found myself hating all of the empty space in my room. Hated the bright lights and empty walls, missing the sketches and polaroids we had tacked to Sweet Pea’s walls to bring his room to life. I hadn’t been home a full twenty-four hours before Sweet Pea knocked on my window sporting a devious smile and I felt complete relief wash over me.

Things had finally started to wind down and settle; Dean made it a habit of waiting at the door when Sweet Pea picked me up in the mornings for school, and stayed up until I got in after a shift at Pop’s or the Wyrm. A week into the last month of the semester, Southside High had been deemed unfit and hazardous due to the methamphetamine lab in the basement — we all knew it was bullshit, but it still hadn’t made the reality any less bitter.

We were all transferring schools. Thankfully, the majority of us were heading to Riverdale High.

The morning of our first day, Dean stood in the living room with his coffee, peering out to the street between the closed curtains with a disgruntled expression, “Does he have to wait at the end of the driveway?” He asked when I reached the foot of the stairs, arms folded neatly over each other. My boyfriend’s reluctance to leave me to find my own way to school made my eldest cousin uneasy, and he had already commented (twice) on what he thought was Sweet Pea’s codependency on me.

“Would you prefer he waited inside?” I retorted rhetorically, knowing that his face had twisted into a scowl. I looked over my shoulder from the kitchen table, unsurprised when his brows had knotted together in the center, and his lip was curled back over his teeth. “He’s respecting boundaries.” I reminded him, leaning over the back of the couch to press a quick kiss to his cheek as I passed.

“He could respect them from the end of the block.” Dean muttered quietly, returning his eyes to the slit in the curtains. I couldn’t be bothered to reply; I waved to him over my shoulder and shut the door behind me to join Sweet Pea at the end of the driveway.

He greeted me, in the same manner, he had every other morning, lips lingering against mine two seconds too long — I placed a fist against his chest and pushed, meeting his confused gaze with annoyance, “What?” He asked, handing me the silver helmet.

“It’s a constant pissing match between the two of you; you know that?” I grumbled as I straddled the seat behind him, fixing my hair into a bun before I shoved the helmet down over it, “It’s ridiculous.” Dean still stood at the front window, green eyes piercing into the back of Sweet Pea’s skull as the bike roared to life beneath me.

I caught sight of Sweet Pea’s satisfied smile in the circular mirror attached to the handle, “Am I winning?”

I squeezed his sides, “Wipe the goddamn grin off your face, Sweets.”

Danny and Don were exiting the house and heading towards Danny’s Dodge Intrepid (a new addition to the driveway) as Pea began to roll the bike forward. He toyed with the throttle a few moments, waiting until the road cleared — I wiggled my fingers towards the boys, slamming the visor down on the helmet as the bike roared forward and we were off.

Sweet Pea weaved his way in and out of traffic, looping around to Fogarty’s house where we had all agreed to meet each morning before school for the last few weeks. Jughead and Toni were already waiting patiently outside on the curb, facing the house so that their logo wasn’t facing the door. Once the bike had come to a complete halt and the engine cut, I lifted the blackened visor and relaxed in my seat.

“Morning White Rabbit,” Jughead nodded, sweeping his eyes over my outfit, “Back to skirts and turtlenecks, I see.”

I glanced down, fixing the hem of the skirt that had ridden up during our ride over, “First impressions matter, Jones.” I
grimaced, fixing the zipper on my jacket. The creak of the front door sounded, and was followed by Fangs sprinting out of his house, waving over his shoulder to his mom with his jacket draped over his arm.

I guess he still hadn’t told her.

“Mijo!” She yelled from the doorway, her cobalt blazer standing out in contrast to the remainder of the white house around her. “Did you remember your lunch? Your books?”

“Jesus Christ,” Fangs grumbled as he kicked up the stand on his bike and threw his leg over, ‘Si, mi’ama, I have ‘em!’ He yelled back, trying to keep the annoyance out of his tone. He neglected to meet our eyes as he slid his helmet down onto his hair.

“Sweet Pea!” I looked over to where Gabriela stood again, amused when Fogarty involuntarily flinched in my peripheral vision. Elated, Sweets stood and dismounted the bike, shedding his leather into my lap before his long strides carried him towards the porch. She wrapped her arms around him tightly, too short too fully secure them, and dropped her voice as she whispered into his ear.

Fogarty whipped his helmet off, glaring at the pair, “Ma! We gotta go, we’re gonna be late!” The rest of us lowered our chins when our snickers pulled his attention away from his mother and best friend.

“Hey, Calliope! Make sure my boy goes to class, okay?” She yelled to me, folding her arms across her chest to shield herself from the bitter wind. Apart from Sweet Pea, Gabriela was the only one I really felt comfortable hearing say my full name. She was a sweet woman, with an incredible amount of patience for her son that was constantly sneaking out in the middle of the night, and I had grown quite fond of her.

I smiled and offered her a thumbs up; it didn’t take much longer before we were off again, this time racing over the tracks towards the Northside of town. I had only been past Pop’s twice. Once when I went grocery shopping with Don and again when I joined Sweet Pea on our second unofficial double date with Fangs and Kabrina. The route was unfamiliar but easy enough to memorize, and no more than fifteen minutes later the others were parking in the back corner of the lot with the remainder of the gang that transferred while Sweet Pea dropped me off near the front entrance.

“What are you doing?” I asked, taking the helmet off so I could hear him over the engine.

“You’re wearing a skirt,” He reminded me, glancing down to the bare leg that held vice grip around him. “And it’s cold as balls out here. Besides, Don’s inside waiting.”

I glanced over my shoulder to where Don and Danny stood just on the other side of the doors and sighed, “Meet you inside, okay? Don’t start any fights.” I pleaded as I dismounted the bike and held the helmet out to him. “We’re rising above, remember?”

Sweet Pea rolled his eyes and released the clutch, blowing a kiss just before he accelerated forward, leaving me on the sidewalk. The bitter air encouraged me to take longer strides, shuddering happily once I was safely encased in the warmth of the school and joined my cousins up the stairs, “Did Josh say if he was getting transferred here?” I asked Don once we joined the line at registration.

Danny shrugged, peering overtop of students heads, “Haven’t heard from him since winter break — hey, is that weird of him?” He asked Don, dropping his voice, “He never spaces out, right?”

“Joshua?” Don asked, shaking his head while his hands shoved into his pockets, “If there’s one thing I’ve learned about that kid it’s that he loves to be the center of attention.”

“So definitely weird.”

“Yeah.” Don nodded, brows furrowing together.
I grimaced, stepping forward to the table, “He’s probably fine.” I offered, turning to the girl on the opposite side. I recognized her almost instantly — she was one of Jughead’s guests from FP’s party. I had bumped into her in the bathroom.

“Welcome to Riverdale High!” She beamed, clapping her hands together once with a wide smile. “I’m Veronica, and this is Archie.” She gestured to the red-haired boy beside her. So this was Archie Andrews — I couldn’t help but feel slightly impressed. For someone so small, he sure did have a solid swing. “We’re two members of the student support team here at Riverdale. If you ever have any questions or just need a friend, you can just come find one of us, and we’ll be more than happy to help.”

I lifted my brows as I glanced down at the paper she had handed me listing all of the groups and clubs within the school; I noticed Kevin was among the group beside her. We exchanged smiles. “I’m Danny Hobbs,” I stumbled into the table as Danny shoved his arm past me to shake her hand, “This is my brother Don, and this Cal.”

“Cal?” Veronica repeated, shifting her curious eyes to me expectantly.

Reluctantly, I corrected my cousin, shifting on my feet, “Calliope.” I nodded.

“Oh.” She smiled knowingly, bending over to shift through the list of names for my registry package and locker assignment. “Like the poetic muse, right? My father has a fascination with all things Greek and poetry, so the name is familiar.”

“Yeah.” I nodded as I took the paper she extended towards me. I waited until Don had retrieved his package before we moved out of the way for the next students in line, stopping to join the rest of Danny’s friends.

The crowd in the hallway continuously moved around us; most of the remaining students were Riverdale students, but their stares never lingered longer than a few moments. Odd, but comforting. Don tilted his schedule towards me the same moment I flipped mine to him. “Remember when dad said he’d get his shit together and move us up North so we could go here?” Danny muttered to Don as he looked around at the emblems on the walls and floor.

“Remember when we believed him?” Don replied absently as he assessed my sheet — we shared second and last together. Obviously satisfied, Don smiled triumphantly.

“It’s gonna be like eighth grade all over again — hey, are you still into that Midge chick?”

Don rolled his eyes, looking down at me with a face full of contempt before his eyes darted to the main stairwell behind me; I glanced over my shoulder, instantly locking in on Sweet Pea’s tall frame as the group wandered over to where Veronica and Archie stood waiting. Pea glanced down at the table, and then the couple behind it with his eyes narrowed in annoyance.

Veronica looked up just as Jughead stopped on the opposite side, lips playing at a smirk, “Friends.” She said humbly, giving them her full attention. “On behalf of the students and faculty here at Riverdale High, welcome to your new school. To ease this transition, I’ve set up a registration desk where you can get your locker assignments, schedules and a list of sports and extracurriculars.” Most of the group behind my friends had lost interest in Veronica’s words, focusing their attention on the students that now stopped to watch them all closely, instead of minding their own business like they had with my cousins and I before. “We encourage each and every one of you to drink deeply from the cup that is fair Riverdale.”

“Stand down, Eva Peron.” I twisted to look past Don’s shoulder, watching the group of students dressed in uniforms and varsity jackets follow along behind a couple that paraded their way down the staircase. I noticed the way the redhead’s eyes narrowed too scornfully on Jughead’s frame, and knotted my brows together.

“There’s the school spirit I so fondly remember.” Jughead quipped, almost appearing amused as the group passed to stop a few feet away from the registration desk.
Unliked Jughead, Veronica folded her arms over her chest, clearly unimpressed, “Cheryl, no one invited Fascist Barbie to
the party.”

“Wrong, Veronica. No one invited Southside scum to our school.” Cheryl responded; my arms dropped and fists clenched.

“Cal.” Don warned quietly from behind me. In an effort to remain calm, I inhaled deeply but locked my glare on the back
of Cheryl’s head.

“Listen up, ragamuffins. I will not allow Riverdale High’s above average GPA to suffer because of classrooms that are
overcrowded with underachievers. So, please, do us all a favour and find some other school to debase with your
hardscrabble ways.”

Toni responded immediately, the filter between her brain and mouth obsolete as she stepped forward, poison on the tip of
her tongue, “Why don’t you come over here and say that to my face?” The group shifted around her; Sweet Pea now
moved to stand behind her, dark eyes focused on Cheryl.

“Happily, Queen of the Buskers.” Cheryl drawled, taking the same step forward, enjoying the response she was receiving
from the Serpent in front of her.

This time Danny blocked my path while Don gripped onto my arms tightly when I started to move forward, vision so
intensely focused on Cheryl that all I could see was red, and all I could feel was heat, a clear indication of my resentment.

“Okay, guys. Everyone.” I pulled my eyes from Don’s long enough to watch Archie move to stand in between Cheryl and
Toni. “Can we just put our Northside-Southside differences apart and start over? A new slate?”

The male counterpart to the walking flame that had so rudely interrupted the warm welcome my friends were receiving
made a noise and shook his head, “You don’t speak for the Bulldogs, Andrews. And need I remind you, these greaser-
snakes showed up at your place tryna kick your ass.”

Sweet Pea shoved his way past Toni (who still had her cold eyes locked on Cheryl) and smiled, “Happy to finished what
we started.” Jughead grimaced, arms quickly stopping the angry beanstalk before he ventured any closer to Archie and his
friend.

Veronica stepped forward, “Oh my god — I am so over the toxic masculinity in this hallway right now.”

“All right, enough pomp and circumstance.” A loud, strong voice boomed into the hallway, capturing the students’
attention. The remainder of the students turned their eyes to face the tall man by the stairwell, all except for Sweet Pea, Toni and Fogarty. “Everyone, let’s get to class. Now.”

I ripped my arms from Don’s halting grip as Sweet Pea was shoved forward and past Jughead’s Northside friends; the group reluctantly made their way down the hall towards me, eyes sullen. Sweet Pea’s brows were pulled together, left hand shoved into his pocket as his right came up to wrap his free arm around my neck. “She’s coming with me.”

He obviously had no intentions on stopping, so I moved with him.

“Can you get his schedule?” I called to Don pleadingly over my shoulder, willingly following along Pea’s side as he guided the rest of us deeper into the school and through the halls. “Pea,” I grumbled, legs moving nearly twice as fast just to keep up with his long strides. I noticed Toni was struggling, too. “Tiny people speed, please.”

He let me go long enough to wiggle the knobs on some of the doors we passed, peeking in through the windows. Once one clicked and twisted open, Sweet Pea placed his hand on my back and pushed me into the room as the others followed; students that were sitting against their lockers at the end of the hall watched us curiously.

I stumbled into the classroom, dropping my bag onto one of the desks as I turned to face the group, noticing that Toni’s nostrils were still flared in rage, “You okay?” I asked, looking over her frame. The group dispersed once concealed in the privacy of the room, leaving Sweet Pea to rest against the door. He leaned all of his weight against it before his head fell back and he closed his eyes; I noticed that his breathing had changed, and his neck had flushed deliciously in a deep red.

“Who the fuck was that?” Toni demanded, turning to Jughead with venom laced with her words.

“Cool it, Topaz.” Fangs barked, folding his arms over his chest. “It’s the first day — this’ll blow over, ‘kay?”


“Are any of them?” Sweet Pea growled from the door, daggers narrowed on the back of Jughead’s skull.

I watched Jughead adjust his beanie, shoulders dropping with his sigh, “I know it doesn’t look that way, okay. Gonna be honest here, I’m not exactly Ice Woman’s favourite person.”

“Don’t you have friends here?” Fogarty asked, plopping into one of the desks.

Jughead paused to consider his next words, “Define ‘friends’. ” I watched the remaining three Serpents drop their positions instantaneously, disappointed overtaking their already distressed faces. I wanted to offer talking to Kevin, but I was sure if Kevin was closely knit to Archie and friends, then I really didn’t have any ground to dig into.

So I sat back on the large wooden oak desk while Toni’s patience snapped, staring out the large windows to where students wandered around the well kept school grounds; between couples pressed against the sides of buildings and girlfriends with linked arms, it was easy to spot those of us that travelled in from the Southside of town. I was so deeply invested in watching students trail into the building that I almost hadn’t heard Sweet Pea when he cut into Jughead’s counter.

“I wanna fuckin’ hit something.” He muttered angrily, still unable to open his eyes. All eyes cautiously darted to his towering figure, bodies bracing instinctively. “So fuckin’ bad.” He chuckled, tongue darting out from between his lips. After a few deep breaths, Pea pushed off the door and pulled it open, holding it open as he gestured for his friends to leave. Fogarty looked to me worriedly, provoking Sweet Pea to direct his anger towards his friend as he leaned forward the slap him across the back of the head, “Not her, you dipshit — get out!”

I watched Toni storm from the room, her heels clicking against the linoleum as she shouldered past Pea’s frame; once the door had been shut, my eyes settled on Pea’s tired frame. “I can’t do this.” He mumbled miserably, almost in a whine as
he leaned his hips forward into the desk and pressed his lips to my forehead once.

“Do what?” I asked quietly, hoping that my calmer tone would ease the visible tension that had built in his shoulders.

“Be here.” He stated, looking down at his hands that played with the hem of my skirt. “Play nice with them.” He continued, brows knotting together.

I tugged on the lapels of his jacket, pulling myself up to meet his eyes, “Hey,” I murmured lightly, snaking my hands into the warmth under his leather to hug myself to him, “You can do this.” I pressed as my chin rested on his chest, hoping my smile served as enough encouragement.

Sweet Pea grimaced, head dropping back as he kissed his teeth. “You give me way more credit than you should.” He still sounded annoyed, his words were still laced with contempt, but his face had relaxed and he slumped forward, brushing his nose along mine. “I don’t want to take advantage of that.”

“Then make good on your word.” I countered with a smile, letting my eyes fall shut as his long fingers tangled into my hair, “No fighting, okay? No matter what they do or say to provoke you, you have to rise above.”

He seemed to be unhappy with that thought. Like he didn’t believe he had it in him to keep his hands to himself, or keep the sharpness from his tongue. It was so unlike him. And I knew how much this transition bothered him; as excited as we all were for a better education and more learning opportunities, Sweet Pea wasn’t settling too well with the thought that he would be climbing down the social ladder.

It wasn’t his school anymore — it wasn’t any of ours. We were the outsiders.

"Baby," I chided playfully, leaning up to capture his pouted bottom lip between my teeth. Thankful for the momentary distraction, Sweet Pea smiled down at me and chased, lips seeking mine hungrily as his fingers tightened their grips on my curled strands.

My legs lifted to wrap around his waist, holding him close; the door to the room burst open moments later, the voices of students echoing from the outside hall. "Hey — this isn’t Slutside, take it elsewhere, snakes!" A voice roared.

Sweet Pea’s hand reached for the stapler on the desk next to my hip, whipping it towards the intruders head faster than I could react to try to stop him, "Pea!” I yelled angrily, pulling his arm down as I peered around his body. The male had retreated, muttering ‘psycho’ under his breath as the door slammed shut. We shared a look, and while I wanted to be disappointed in his lack of control, I felt awful about the discrimination he and his friends were going to endure over the next several months.

Sure, they would be getting the education they deserved. But at what cost?
I stared at the posters hung around the waiting area, bold letters offering words of guidance and encouragement. Students sat on the chairs and benches that lined the walls, waiting for their turns to be called in by their counselors for course changes. “Hey,” I looked up to where Kevin slid onto the bench next to me, his brown hues warm and inviting. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you. How’re you settling in?”

I shrugged, studying the other students; less obnoxious chewing, more colour in their wardrobes. It was definitely refreshing. “Better than my boyfriend, I’m sure.” I replied cautiously, meeting his gaze with a grim smile.

Kevin hesitated, slowly inhaling as he contemplated his reply and then exhaled in a sigh, “Cheryl is .. insufferable, I’ll admit.” He nodded sympathetically, grimacing as he replayed the scenario in his mind. “She’s got a lot going on, things are sort of falling apart around her, and I think this school is really the most consistency she has right now —”

“So they have to deal because she’s having a midlife crisis at age sixteen?” I muttered under my breath quietly, avoiding his eyes (mainly out of spite).

Kevin paused; I risked a peek from my peripheral vision. His features had hardened, “Look, we’ve all got a bit of diva in us, Cal.” I snapped my eyes to the ceiling, taking point of the tone his voice had dropped into, “I know people like your boyfriend.”

“People like my boyfriend? What’s that supposed to mean.”

“They’d be just as defensive over their turf, and you know it.” He was trying to soften his tone, but I could tell he was fully prepared to protect his friend at all costs. That sense of loyalty I understood well, so I relaxed in my seat. “We’ve all got something we’re fighting for.”

I let the reminder resonate for a moment, thinking about the upcoming meeting with my support worker. I wasn’t quite sure what I was expecting, or what I was supposed to say. But I knew one thing — all that everybody wanted to know was what my plans for the future were. It was always the same response, most people already aware that I had been considered bright for my age for many, many years.

I suppose the absence of a real parent might have had some help with that.

“It was still uncalled for.” I frowned, letting the binder in my arms fall onto my lap. “They’re entitled to the same education.” Not seeming to want to argue with that, Kevin nodded sympathetically and squeezed my hand in reassurance.

I was late for second period; the class looked up as the door shut behind me, their eyes watching me for only a few moments before they returned to their textbooks and phones. Robinson (the department lead for History) peered at me from over the top of his paper, crinkled eyes disapproving as he let his legs fall from his oak desk, “You’re late.” He announced as he took the folded slip I handed him.

“I’m one of the new transfers,” I explained, keeping my voice three octaves lower than his to not draw any more attention, “Kittlesen wanted to meet with me.” That was partially true; I had gone after first to get my courses switched around, but she had been rather pleased to see a Southside transfer in so early on the first day. Our meeting had run a little late, and she hadn’t been able to make the switch then. I had to go back at the start of lunch.

“I see.” He sighed as he read over the paper. He signed it with a quick scribble and handed it back. “Take a seat; homework is on the board.” He dismissed, returning to his article with his glasses perched on the tip of his nose.

I turned to examine the remaining open seats. Don sat in the back row, pulling his bag off an empty desk next to him as I approached. I slipped into the chair, leaning back against the armrest with a petulant sigh. Perhaps I’d have a harder time fitting in than I thought; when we were still Northside and Southside on our respective turfs, being friends with Kevin
seemed natural. Now things were complicated with the divide between the two, knowing he would side with his Northside friends first. I believed he wanted everyone to get along as much as I did, but I knew his loyalty to them was as crucial as the Serpents were to me.

It was still painful, though. I walked the halls of a school where part of the student body was maliciously intent on eradicating the Southside from their turf.

The reality was that living in poverty, and having a low GPA average wasn’t just a Serpent problem. It was a Southside problem. While pointedly aimed at the Serpents, all of the remarks and all of the talk in the halls stung every last one of us.

Realistically, we were a family of four living in a single (technically) income home; Dean was considered the legal guardian of the household, and therefore was considered the breadwinner. While Danny and I also had jobs, Dean had made it abundantly clear that he should be entirely responsible for ensuring that we have the bare minimum. Lately, that meant he worked longer days, putting in the overtime to bring home enough to cover rent and bills.

The boys and I chipped in when we could; any extra winnings I received from Pea’s games went straight into the grocery jar, but it always seemed to dwindle faster than we could fill it up.

Admittedly, it was hard. Harder than I anticipated. I only imagined the rest of the families on the Southside struggled in a similar manner.

“Where were you?” Don hissed as he twisted in his seat to face me.

I pulled my notebook from my bag, “Changed econ to art,” I explained quietly, chancing a peek at his expression. His mouth hung open, brows pulled together in disbelief, “I’m sorry. I suck at economics, and you need to focus and —” I stopped once I realized his face had contorted into doubt.

He wasn’t buying my shit.

“You wanted to take art.”

“I wanted to take art.” I nodded with an impish smile, turning my attention up to the row of students. I hadn’t realized until that moment that most of the Southside transfers clung to the far side of the room, huddled in one respective group while the Northsiders sat a little more comfortably on the other. Those of us that weren’t directly affiliated with the Serpents, but were still Southside, sat in the middle, creating a barrier between the two. Confused, I returned my attention to my cousin, “What the fuck?” I mouthed silently, pointing up the row towards Don’s friends.

He grimaced, eyes following my finger. “Tony and Jinj had some kind of revelation in the locker room after PE.” He started, leaning forward so I could hear him clearly, “Some ‘Southside sticking together’ kinda crap.”

I blinked, face pulling into a tight scrunch for a moment before I shook my head, “Southside sticking together? Since when?” I snorted, returning my attention to the front of the room to jot down the pages and textbook questions.

“Danny doesn’t think it’s a bad idea.” Don admitted grimly.

I laughed once, “What happened to ‘this is their war, not ours’?”

Don shrugged, returning his attention to his phone as it vibrated in his hand; he tilted the screen towards me, revealing a photo that had been sent in a group chat he belonged to with Danny and their friends, “Consider it personal.”

The image was of a car (so noticeably worn down it could only have come in from the Southside) in the Riverdale High student parking lot; the mirrors had been broken off, there was a noticeable dent on one of the doors, and the door had been tagged ‘SCUMSIDE’ in a navy blue paint. I propped my elbows on the desk, the heels of my palms pressing into my forehead as I let out a long petulant sigh. It was incredibly frustrating how narrowly minded some people were.
Is it without reason? I asked myself, thinking back to the night Sweet Pea had been waiting behind Pop’s for me, sporting a nasty shiner. How he had crossed the tracks with the intent of seeking out Archie, thinking he deserved some kind of Southside beat-down for hurting his masculinity. For tagging the side of Bo’s (in what Pea had called Archie’s psychotic break) during his search for the Black Hood.

Maybe that’s really all this was: a pissing match. Except, our turf was being cut out from under us, and we all knew the time would come where we’d have to assimilate and adapt.

I flipped my textbook open, pen poised and ready to begin writing as I tucked one earbud in and pressed SHUFFLE.

I started thinking about what the next few months would be like — not just with this school, but with Sweet Pea in general. I wanted to believe that we could overcome obstacles together, wanted to believe that now I had claimed him as my very own he wouldn’t go anywhere. Sweet Pea and I hadn’t spoken much about the romantic feelings we shared with each other, but I was certain what I felt for him was love.

I wanted to believe he loved me, too.

Of course, this relationship of ours would always pose as a difficult one. With Dean fixed in his ways, with his opinions as abrasive as they were, it would be hard to win him over when it came to Sweet Pea being a part of my life. I had tried several different approaches, hoping one day he would (out of his love for me) learn to tolerate Pea with more hospitality. Allow him to join us for dinner or let him inside to study.

To keep the peace, Pea had learned what Dean’s boundaries were, and tried to respect them.

I say tried because he always finds an excuse to bring me to the door instead of leaving me at the end of the driveway. Or he sneaks in through my bedroom window after Dean’s been particularly salty towards him. The boys knew Sweet Pea was a frequent late night visitor — to spare my dignity, most of these nights were PG-13.

Confident that I would be able to finish the remainder of the questions for homework, I closed my textbook and reached under my seat for my sketchbook. I hadn’t really been drawing much of any one particular person lately — instead, I had pages on pages of flowers and geometric shapes. My middle finger was in the process of smudging away the harsh lines of my pencil when I felt a sharp and sudden stab against my temple.

I looked down to where a paper airplane landed on my desk, nose crumpled from when it had hit me. I raised my eyes, looking up to where Don sat, earbuds pushed into their rightful places as he pointed to the seat next to him: I looked over his shoulder. Reggie Mantle sat on the opposite side, watching me expectantly.

“What?” I mouthed in annoyance.

He pointed to my desk.

Reluctantly, I dropped my pencil and opened the folded edges of the airplane; hidden in along a crease was the question: “Can I get your number?” I rolled my eyes as I took the thick piece of black chalk out of the Ziploc I had in my bag. I scribbled my response down, turned in my seat and held it up over my head, satisfied with the snickers that sounded from the Serpents beside me.

“I have a boyfriend.”

I watched Don’s face light up with amusement as his blue hues scanned the reply. He pressed his fist into his mouth, stifling his laugh as Reggie shrugged, turning to face me as he waited. Unsurprised by his response, I crumpled the paper and dropped in onto the floor, returning my attention to my sketchbook. I couldn’t tell what I was more annoyed with: the Northside kids giving us an unnecessarily hard time or the fact that boys like Reggie really thought they stood a chance with a guy like Sweet Pea in the picture.

I really pity the fool that pushes Pea’s limits too far.
Five minutes later, I could see Don shuffle in my peripheral vision. Despite the music playing through my earphones, I could faintly hear voices arguing back and forth. “Do it!” One voice hissed; a defeated sigh followed it. I glanced up from the paper, noticing that Don was slowly inching an iPhone onto my closed textbook, his eyes cautiously watching me as I picked it up. The leather case around the outer layer was massive in my palm, and the screen was open to input a new contact. I hit the lock button and leaned over to drop it onto Don’s desk, shooting him a warning glare as I pulled away.

I wasn’t bothered for the remainder of the period. My body relaxed as the bell sounded and Reggie stood from his seat without another look back in my direction; Don waited at the door for me as I collected my belongings and followed him out into the hall. “Am I gonna have to beat the crap outta creeps all the time?” He asked, feigning annoyance.

I sighed indignantly, “I’ll be fine, I’m sure.” I dismissed, linking my arm through his. Danny pushed off the wall he had been waiting against as we approached, face sullen and shoulders tense. “What’s up with you?”

He shook his head, not entirely ready to talk about it, “Missing hell, that’s all.”

Hell. The place where one-third of the student population was behind bars. Where one of our teachers (one of the best teachers, may I remind you) was arrested for drug trafficking (then later killed) — I was finding it hard to believe his words.

Deciding not to pry on what spurred that kind of statement (given that two weeks ago, Danny would’ve happily burned Southside High to the ground), I changed the subject, “So what’s this I hear about Tony extending an olive branch?”

Danny was quick to shoot Don a glare over the top of my head, mouth pressing into a scowl as I nudged his hip with my own, “Thought you were fine being a wallflower, Danny-boy.”

“I am.” He reassured me, “It’s just .. we grew up with these people.” Danny sighed, slowing his pace as he scanned the crowded hall. “And after high school started, they became entitled, self-absorbed scumbags.”

“So your solution was a revolution? What are you gonna do, Danny? Challenge them?” I countered, hoping I sounded more sarcastic than genuinely annoyed. It was only two periods into the first day, and already my cousins had jumped ship. My previous anger began to resurface thinking about how unfairly the rest of them had been treated, how this place was a safe space for those that belonged here. “But you’re both okay, right? No one’s giving you a hard time?”

Don shook his head, “Just doing our part to keep the peace.”

I squeezed Danny’s hand comfortingly, slipping my arm from Don’s as Sweet Pea came into view once we reached the third floor. “I’ll catch up with you after school,” I said, giving Danny a pointed look, “Try to keep the revolution quiet, would ya?”

They waited until I joined Pea’s side before they carried on down the hall towards their third periods. His longer fingers plucked the textbook from my arm as we silently made our way through the unfamiliar halls towards our new Biology class. People still stared as we passed, but less at Sweet Pea and more at our hands linked together. “How’s Toni?” I asked once we settled into our seats, thankful there was more than enough distance between us and the group of Southside students that claimed the front portion of our row.

“Better.” He admitted, leaning forward onto the desk, “Jones got her to cool her off a bit, but I think she’s still pretty pissed.”

I nodded in agreement, unlocking my phone to show him the photo that had been forwarded to me. His mahogany hues studied the image, irritation growing in the divot between his brows, “My boys are playing nice with your boys.

Sweet Pea cringed, searching for some sign on my face that would indicate I was kidding. Realizing he wouldn’t find anything, he gaped, “That’s weird.”

“Tell me about it.” I snickered, turning my attention to my phone that had vibrated. It was a friend request from Reggie, along with one unread message. I turned it upside down, returning my attention to Pea. “Think I should bring it up to
“Dean?” I asked, leaning back in my seat as he slung his arm over my shoulder.

“Dan’s not gonna?” He inquired, propping his textbook up on his lap, “You think that’s a good idea?”

“No, but I’d rather I didn’t get pulled into the middle of that shit when it blows up later. He deserves to know.” I countered, rubbing my palms against the bare tops of my thighs, “This is temporary, anyway. Once this whole Northside Supremacy bullshit blows over, things will go back to normal.”

“You think so?” He asked, glancing down at me with slight amusement pulling his lips up.

“You don’t?” I countered.

Sweet Pea shrugged, knocking his knuckles against the wood of my chair, “Once you get past the jackets and tattoos, we’re all the same. We’ve all got skeletons in our closets, Cal.”

I rolled my eyes, “So, what? We all hang at the Wyrm, we all eat lunch together?”

“You’re missing the very real possibility that Don and Danny might actually enjoy the company of some members. I don’t mind Don, really,” He admitted quietly, voice dropping once the teacher entered and dropped her bag onto her desk with a tight smile. “I wouldn’t hate seeing him in the group more.

I pulled my brows together, mulling over the fact that this was an actual conversation I was having. I hadn’t expected Sweet Pea to grow fond of any of the members of my family — especially one he had previously disliked. Thoroughly.

“When did that happen?”

Pea lifted his free hand in a sign of indifference, eyes locked on the board at the front of the room while Peterson began her lecture; knowing I could copy his notes later, I shoved my headphones in and pulled out my sketchbook to finish the flowers from second period.

The seventy-five minutes passed quicker than I had anticipated. By the end of the period, Pea was hunched over his notebook, scribbling formulas down, obviously too confident in his answers to bother checking them over after he slammed the textbook shut. He had shed his leather and draped it over his chair, and his hair had been pulled from his face while he sucked on the sour cherries I kept in my bag. When the bell dismissed the class, he patiently waited while I shoved all of our belongings into my bag.

“I’ll meet you in the student lounge — I gotta go to my locker.” I spoke quickly as we moved to the stairs; Sweet Pea appeared reluctant, but nodded and released my hand. I weaved my way through the students as they collected for lunch, avoiding tripping over legs that now stretched over the floors.

I could see Kevin’s face towering above the remaining crowd; I waved as I approached, smiling as he pulled the lock open and held it open for me, “Hey stranger.” I beamed, dumping the heavy books into the bottom of the locker with a sigh; thankfully my last three periods didn’t require textbooks.

Kevin held out a container filled with a thick, creamy substance. “Peace offering for earlier?” I leaned forward to take the straw between my lips and pulled, humming instantly when the sweet deliciousness hit my tongue.

“Forgiven.” I mused, taking the drink from his hand.

“I hear everyone’s meeting in the lounge for lunch .. mind if I join you?”

I peered up at him, shaking my head as I took another sip from the milkshake. “Be my guest.” I swooped, shutting the locker with my boot.

“I expect a formal introduction of Sweet Pea, by the way.” I inhaled slowly, imagining the slight embarrassment I could cause if I handled that situation the right way. I could pinch his cheeks, and run my hands down his chest. I could call him
by his pet name and feign innocence.

I entered the room behind Kevin, taking note to the group of friends that had already gathered around in the student lounge. Sweet Pea was comfortably seated on a red couch, one of his long legs propped up on the shelf of the table. I leaned over the back and snaked my hands along his shoulders and then down onto his chest, kissing his cheek quickly with a quiet, “Hey, baby.” As I teasingly wiggled the milkshake in his vision.

“Okay, sweetness, how did you get a milkshake from Pop’s in two minutes?”

I stuck the straw between my lips and swallowed a mouthful, “I told you I was a witch.” I taunted.

“Did you catch up with Dan?” He asked suddenly as I leaned over the back of the couch. “He was looking for you after third.”

“Who?” Kevin asked, peering at me curiously over his shoulder.

“My cousin,” I explained quickly, returning to my attention to Sweet Pea. Danny didn’t typically go out of his way to make conversation with Sweet Pea unless necessary — the last time had been when I was serving at Pop’s, and Pea came by to drop off leftovers courtesy of Gabriela. “I went to guidance this morning, by the way. Had some courses switched.” The look I received from Pea prompted me to continue in reassurance, “Not any of ours, relax.”

I heard Kevin cough expectantly, turning slightly in his seat as he watched us.

I laughed once, standing upright as I moved my hand to squeeze Pea’s shoulder, “Sweet Pea, this is Kevin. He walked me home from Pop’s that night Sab popped into town.” Sweets was already analyzing Kevin carefully, scrutinizing his attire and shoes; seeming satisfied with the lack of threat the Northsider posed, he relaxed and smiled. “Kevin, this my Serpent, Sweet Pea.” I mused fondly, raking my fingers through the hair at the back of his skull.

Pea glanced up at me curiously; I winked flirtatiously.

“I have been so intrigued to meet you ever since Callie mentioned your name.” He admitted sheepishly, cutting into the brief moment, reaching forward to shake hands with my boyfriend. “Is that your real name? Legally?”

Sweet Pea averted his eyes towards the apple in his hands, sucking in a deep breath when the sound of heels clicking loudly against the linoleum tiles.

“Wanna taste?” I asked quickly, offering the straw towards Sweet Pea.

Sweet Pea grinned, leaning forward to capture my lips in a swift, wet kiss. He hummed in delight, lips playfully pulling into a smirk, “Tastes pretty good.”

“My god,” Kevin sighed longingly, “You guys are so hot — ”

“Kevin!” Veronica called as she entered the room; I stood up and took a step back from the couch, noticing Toni and Fangs cease their conversation as Veronica, and her friend approached. She glanced around at the faces, seeming unsure of where to start now that she had arrived. She turned to Toni, “I don’t think we’ve properly met: Veronica Lodge.” She extended her hand to Toni, who looked at the outstretched hand apprehensively.

“Toni,” She started, shaking Veronica’s hand finally, “Topaz.”

“Of the Park Avenue Lodges.” Jughead added, raising his chip with an extended pinky.

“And I’m Josie McCoy, formerly of the Pussycats and now just .. Josie.” My eyes shifted to the girl who spoke, noticing the way she sadly looked over at her friend. “And this is Kevin.” She concluded, gesturing to the boy on my left.
Kevin looked up around the group, focusing his eyes on Fangs, “What’s your name?”

Fangs had previously been focused on Veronica; he snapped his eyes to Kevin’s, Twizzler limp between his fingers. “Fogarty.” He stated (proudly), “But you can call me Fangs. And your last name’s Keller, right?”

Confused, Kevin straightened, “How did you know that?”

“Joaquin and I used to hang out. He talked about you all the time.”

From my previous encounters with Kevin, I knew Joaquin was his Serpent — the one he had been seeing a few months ago. I noticed how Kevin’s shoulders tightened as he nodded, and I felt inclined to reach forward and place a comforting hand to ease the tension.

“You guys!” Our heads turned, looking for the source of the outburst. Weatherbee stood in the entry, pointing an accusing finger at the group, beady eyes locked on our frames. “Yes, you guys. Come with me.” I looked down at Sweet Pea with a quirked brow; he appeared more annoyed than anything. No one made any efforts to move — I assumed this only further pressed on Weatherbee’s annoyance as he clenched his jaw. “Now.” He snapped.

We moved with the demand, ushering towards the entry and into the hall one behind the other. I kept as close to Sweet Pea as I could, fingers looped with his as we followed Fogarty. Just in between the bodies, I could see a group of boys standing, arms folded and faces smug as we joined them. All eyes glanced down, examining the (poorly) painted snake on the school floor. “You’ve gotta be shitting me.” Pea growled under his breath.

“Which one of you defaced our school seal with this ..graffiti.” Weatherbee asked, standing beside a rather cheerful Reggie.

“This is what they do, principal Weatherbee.” He started, pointing down to the serpent smugly, “Theytag their turf.”

The snort that slipped through Veronica’s nostril was quiet, “My god, Reggie, could you be any more transparent?”

Reggie nodded once.

I narrowed my eyes, scanning his tall figure swiftly. Certainly wasn’t all that tall, but he was built broad, so I suppose that worked in his favour. His hair reminded me so much of Sweet Pea’s hair after he had showered the night before, soft and fluffy. Despite how much I typically enjoyed that look and feel, my chest bubbled in hot anger instead. I had been so invested in sizing up the enemy that I hadn’t realized he was looking at me, as well.

I tucked myself into Pea’s side, reluctantly peeling my eyes from Reggie’s as Weatherbee continued.

“Effective immediately, no gang behaviour of any kind will be tolerated in my school.” Collectively, the group rolled their eyes, and angry expressions exchanged behind turned backs as the principal continued, “As of this moment, no more Serpent jackets.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“What?” Sweet Pea’s tone was heavy and deep. Fangs’ and Jughead’s faces mimicking the same sour expression Pea had plastered on his face. I tugged on his hand gently, hoping to keep him from pushing through to the front as their disdain continued.

“No more Serpent jackets!” Weatherbee continued, voice growing louder, more firm, “All tattoos are to be covered. Possession of any gang paraphernalia whatsoever will lead to immediate suspension.”

Sweet Pea had pulled his hand from my grip, looking over to Fogarty with tension in his jaw and disbelief in his eyes. The more the day wore on, the more I was convinced they had no remaining faith that they would be welcomed here. Pea’s fists clenched and unclenched in anger, swaying back and forth from one foot to the other.
I glanced over Kevin’s shoulder, watching as Reggie nodded triumphantly.

“Are we clear?” I could hear the collective sigh of Fogarty and Pea, and that was the most response Weatherbee had drawn. “That’s all.” He finalized, his eyes penetrating from Jughead’s to mine.

Not another word was spoken. After chancing a glance down at me, Sweet Pea was the first to retreat, turning on his heels with a final glare aimed in Reggie’s direction before he disappeared back into the student lounge. Fangs reached out to me instinctively, pulling me into his side as we followed along behind him and returned to pick at our lunches as our appetites had disappeared.

I had gotten through fourth and fifth with minimal issue; I shared PE with Pea and Fogarty, which had resulted in far more running than I anticipated. It also meant that the boys waited on me frequently, and by the end of the period, they had left me outside to finish my lap by myself. I wheezed the entire way up the stairs to the gymnasium, scolding myself for having ever stopped running track.

I didn’t share psychology with a single Serpent, but Neil Banks sat diagonally across from me, and he worked at Pop’s as a dishwasher, so I guess there was one familiar face. Winter was an older gentleman with a square face and patient eyes. In his golden years, I assumed he would have been just as handsome as Pea or Dean, having that particular ruggedness that was earned after years of hard endeavours. I liked him, and I enjoyed his lecture; I had left his class feeling enlightened and refreshed, something that hadn’t happened too often while at Southside High.

My day ended with the art course I had switched into from economics; while I had previously wanted to take a more practical route with my education, I decided that a one year detour wouldn’t hurt. I had an abundance of supplies at home from Christmas I had yet to use; I wanted to learn how to properly utilize them properly. Pea never minded letting me sketch him, so long as I occasionally paraded around in my underwear and wore just his shirts. I figured that was a fair bargain and always happily obliged.

I walked into the last room on the top floor of the school feeling happier than I had when I had originally entered the building five hours earlier. The doorway was wider than the remainder of my classes, and the room was far larger. I noticed it was the same number of students, just more space provided in between workstations. I took perch on a seat near the door along the back of the room, dropping my bag and jacket onto the table next to me.

I examined the rows of students, pleased to find no hostile Northside faces amongst the crowd. It was barren of any Southside students, too, but I could live with that. It was nice to know I had found a place for me where I could simply exist and do something I actually enjoyed doing, away from all of the Northside-Southside crap going on.

Seventy-five minutes of sanctioned and educationally regulated bliss.

My momentary tirade of happiness and highlighting was abruptly interrupted by the sound of laughter outside the door behind me; I turned to look over my shoulder to where Reggie entered the room, fist-bumping his friend as they parted ways. He noticed my staring, fixed his bag on his shoulder and started towards me.

I couldn’t stop the indignant sigh that broke the air between us as he settled into the seat in front of me, hands folded on my desk as I dropped the highlighter from my mouth and shook my head, “Nu-uh,” I growled, snapping the lid on. “You do not get to come in here and make eyes at me after the bullshit you pulled earlier.”

“Feisty.” He nodded in approval, drinking in the snarl at my lips. “Name’s Reggie, but you can call me baby —”

“No thanks.” I sneered, leaning back in my seat to create distance. He appeared to have no intentions of leaving; I hadn’t the slightest idea why people in this school thought I was so damn approachable, and my inadvertent friendliness was suddenly incredibly annoying. “Can I help you with something?”

“What’s a girl like you doing with someone like Sweet Pea, huh?” I almost collapsed in defeat right there, eyes rolling so far into the back of my skull, I merely closed them and shook my head. When he realized I wouldn’t be answering that
question, he continued, “You’re with the Hobbs, right? Don’s sister?”

My eyes flew open in minor confusion, lifting my head enough to look at Reggie head-on. Unsure of how people had come up with that conclusion, I nodded, “Cal.” I replied, crossing my ankles around each other.

“You’re new though, right? Some long-lost sister shit?” He pressed, squirting the water from his bottle into his mouth. “Never seen you before, well I mean,” He shrugged, resting his chin on his knuckles, “Once or twice at Pop’s, but you’re definitely fresh meat.”

Surprised by how talkative he was despite my hostility, I feigned boredom and rested my elbow on the tabletop. “Not as transparent as Veronica paints you.” I noted, returning my attention to my notes.

Reggie wasn’t very subtle at hiding his annoyance, “Ronnie can be a bitch, ‘kay.” He muttered, voice dropping considerably lower as the seats filled with students.

“So what does that make you?” I asked, waiting expectantly as his face dropped. “What happened in the foyer this morning was one thing, that much they expected.” I started, leaning forward with narrowed eyes and poison on the tip of my tongue, “But vandalizing school property? Seriously? ‘*They tag their turf?’* Judging by the sour expression he wore, I assumed I had gotten my point across. “It’s pretty fucking sad when Don and his friends have to create a physical barrier between you and the Serpents to keep you guys from tearing each other apart —”

“How is that my problem?”

*Because,* I almost laughed, “The Southside has never been one whole unit. We stick with our own.” I explained quickly, leaning forward with every word, “There were Ghoulies, there were Serpents, and then there was us. *Everything* was divided that way — and now our loyalties lie with each other, at least while we’re in this building. You haven’t really left them with a choice, and it’s *weird* for them.” Seeing the boys mix with the Serpents as one unit was certainly .. odd. There might have been a time when I would have rathered we existed more peacefully with each other, but knowing it was because we were all considered equal threats was unfair. I didn’t care for their prejudice — neither did anyone else, apparently. “When you talk down on the Southside, you’re talking down on us all. So yeah,” I shrugged, tossing my blonde waves over my shoulder, “Consider it your problem.”

He didn’t say anything, tongue caught behind his teeth as his jaw clenched and worked under his toned skin. Our eyes didn’t drift apart, we only remained still and focused, too caught up in the tension we had started in a place we both had come to find peace in. All day it seemed as though everyone had been divided, and I had just wanted to play nice. Knowing that would likely be impossible for some of the Southsiders, I figured it couldn’t hurt to have one more of us on their good side.

Sweet Pea saw it as kissing ass, I saw it as covering all of my bases.

I was the first to break, having felt slightly horrible for being as abrasive as I had been and not wanting to rock the boat. No sense of pride hung in his features now; and while his regret wasn’t evident, I could see his resolve had vanished, and his shoulders had begun to fall in defeat. I kicked his shin under the table, “I hope you’re here to improve your artistic skill.” I started, pulling my sketchbook from my bag.

“Now you’re knockin’ my art?”

“A four-year-old could’ve drawn that snake better, Reg.” I teased, looking up at him from under my lashes.

He feigned his hurt, placing his hand just above his heart as he pouted his lip, “Listen, Cal, not all diamonds are made under pressure.”

I snorted, turning my sketchbook so a fresh page was open and a single piece of chalk was sitting on top, “No pressure, then.” I encouraged, gesturing to the book expectantly. We spent the period like that; in between reviewing theories and colour palettes, every snake Reggie drew, I would overdrow and add to turn his below average serpents into intricate
designs with haunting eyes.

By the time the bell had rung, he was seven snakes down and more frustrated with me than before. “How’d you get so good?” He asked as I packed the chalk away, “Did you take lessons as a kid or something?”

Trying not to allow myself to be too overly boosted by his genuine compliment, I shook my head, “Just something I liked doing to keep me busy.” I shrugged, following him out into the hall as students gathered their belongings from their lockers before leaving for the day. I glanced around anxiously for Sweet Pea, wondering if he had been able to make it up here in time after class let out. While there didn’t appear to be any sign of him, I didn’t want to chance any confrontation by sticking around, “I’m gonna get going.” I began retreating, offering Reggie an impish smile.

“How’d you get so good?”

I rolled my eyes, stopping long enough to look him as I spoke, “If my boyfriend sees me with you, it’s not me he going to be pissed at.” I reminded him, holding my arms up in an innocent shrug as I backed away and turned on my heels. I tried not to think about how quickly Reggie’s resolve had extinguished my flame. And I didn’t want to dwell on the why for too long, knowing I would only overthink the whole situation and read too much into it. Pea could always tell when something was off, and I hated lying to him.

“So when he appeared around the corner, a smile gracing his lips for the first time since he had entered the school doors this morning, I quickly pulled myself together and pressed up on my tiptoes to catch his mouth in a wet kiss. “Hey, baby.” I hummed, ignoring the snickers of his friends behind him.

“Ready to go?” He asked against my lips, straightening up when I nodded. He fixed his jacket, bumped fists with Rex and Holly before he threw his arm over my shoulders and led me towards the parking lot where the gang had parked their bikes. The air was still bitter and chilly; Pea refused to stick around and wait for Fogarty and Toni, expressing that he wanted to get me back to Southside as fast as humanly possible and that the others would catch up with us later. Seeing no reason to argue, I shoved the helmet down over my hair and straddled the back of his bike eagerly, wrapping my arms around his midsection while my feet dangled just off the pavement.

Sweet Pea and I had become one unit while on the bike. When we turned corners, we would lean our bodies into it now that I was no longer worried about losing the skin on my legs in an accident. I had gotten over my initial fear of the two-wheeled death machine fairly quickly once I realized how practical it was, and had even considered getting one of my own (only briefly — Don reminded me that I would need an actual car come graduation). Once crossed over the tracks, he disregarded the suggested speed limit and ripped down the main street towards Sunnyside.

In slight celebration for having not punched anyone (Jinj in the locker room didn’t count, technically), we attempted to recreate an online recipe Pea wanted to try and then spent the remainder of the evening rolling around in his sheets. In the days that followed, things didn’t progress as well as I had hoped; it wasn’t too long after the boys and Toni had landed themselves with detention, and only days later the Serpents were walking around Riverdale High’s halls in tacky uniforms. Sweet Pea had ditched the scarves and opted for a turtleneck I had gifted him over the holiday as a substitute. He absolutely hated that he was being forced to shed the things about him that made him who he was and made him feel safe. I reminded him that turtlenecks hid more than just tattoos, and soft hair meant more head scratches during class.

Sweet Pea was quick to jump ship — we spent hours trying to talk Fogarty to at least come out of his room wearing the uniform. I spent a solid twenty minutes sitting by the door trying to talk him down from whatever irate tirade he had wound himself into. He refused to wear the uniform. Gabriela wasn’t impressed with her son’s stubbornness, and after another ten minutes of listening to her scold him through the locked door, Toni, Pea and I snuck out the kitchen door.

As another day was coming to an end, I stood with a block of marble cheese in my right hand and a grater in the other. Danny was currently preoccupying the section of the already tiny counter I needed; I wasn’t entirely sure what he was doing — it wasn’t exactly like I could see much around his massive frame. Don leaned against the cool side of the stove carefully, licking his fingers as he smiled contently, “Tastes good.” He hummed in delight, reaching forward to lift the spoon to his mouth again.
Dean slapped his chest with the towel in his hands, his scowl disapproving, “Get your dirty sausages outta my sauce, boy.”

The sound of loud hissing interrupted Don’s retaliation, drawing our attention towards the rising steam behind his stature. “Noodles are done!” Danny and Don yelled in unison, Don moving to shut the stovetop off as the water boiled over.

I took another step back, hands perched on my hips impatiently while Dean and Don stepped around each other, trying to avoid second-degree burns from the hot pot distended in the air between them. “Dinner’s served, boys!” Don sang happily, leaning his face away from the steam as he drained the water from the pot. “Where’s the bread?”

“Not done.” I replied between gritted teeth, drilling my eyes into the back of Danny’s skull. Danny was big on inhaling all of the delicious food we made but rarely participated in the actual preparation of it. To say that his presence in the kitchen rather than on his throne in the living room was incredibly annoying would be an understatement. “Big head here won’t move his ass outta my way.”

“Language.” Dean scolded.

“Sorry.” I huffed; Dean had briefly gone on a tangent about being more mindful of our words. For the sake of keeping the peace (whilst already walking on a thin, thin line), I tried my best to respect that by making an effort. Easier said than done — I hadn’t realized how influential Sweet Pea and his vulgar vocabulary really had become on me. “Danny, you gentle giant, move out of my way.” I smiled sweetly, leaning around his arm to look up at him, “Now.”

I slipped into the bend of the counter as he departed with his hands raised and leaned forward comfortably; I worked as quickly as I could without accidentally nicking my fingers, and baked the bread a few degrees higher in hopes to speed the process.

Whether it was gourmet five-star cheesy garlic bread or warmed bread with garlic butter and semi-melted cheese, the vultures would surely eat every last bite. With all of the overtime Dean had been putting it, we ate out of cans and ordered take-out more often than we cared to admit — it was nice to be able to sit down together for more than just five minutes in the morning.

I was shovelling another bite into my mouth when Danny had set his fork down long enough to speak, “So, Don and I wanted to talk to you about something.” He started, turning to face Dean.

Don and I looked up quickly, frozen in place. “Shut the fuck up.” Don hissed around a mouthful of bread, slapping his brother’s arm.

“Language.” Dean growled.

“Bite me.” Don retaliated with an angry bite of his bread, rolling his eyes over to meet mine as we slumped back into our seats.

Danny wiped his mouth and continued, “We all knew this whole merger wasn’t going to end well — not for us, anyway.” Dean nodded, carefully assessing Don and I as he listened. “And in the sole interest self-preservation, we’ve kind of merged .. with the Serpents.”

Half expecting anger, half expecting silence, I braced myself for the response that built as he shifted in my peripheral vision. It was silent two heartbeats longer than I had grown accustomed to, and I peeked up at him through my hair curiously.

Dean leaned against the table, chin perched in his hand while appearing to be pulled into careful thought.

Unsure of what to do, the boys and I shared confused looks before returning our attention to Dean once more.

“Probably your smartest move,” He said finally, picking up another forkful of the cheesy pasta, “It’ll do for now. Scratch my back; I’ll scratch yours, right?”
I sat upright slowly, exchanging quick glances with the boys again prior to leaning forward on the table, “Sorta, yeah.”

Don nodded, reaching for another slice of garlic bread.

“This just needed to happen, okay?” Danny said, tossing his napkin onto the remainder of his food. “It isn’t how it used to be. It’s not black and white — it’s grey. Nobody gives a shit if you’re in a gang anymore, Dean, they aren’t any different from us.”

A lie entirely, and an unconvincing one at that.

Dean leaned back in his seat and rolled his eyes, “It’s more than just leather jackets and brotherhood, Daniel.” My eyes snapped up to Danny as he stood from the table, chair screeching against the linoleum, “Sit down, asshole, I didn’t say I didn’t agree with you.”

Danny hesitated for a moment, bright hues surveying his brothers face prior to sinking back into his chair. “What are you saying?”

“Okay, what’s said at this table, stays at this table, alright?” He looked around expectantly at us; we nodded in affirmation. I watched the eldest member of our family rub his eyes tiredly; Pea and I had still been awake when Dean finally got home from the office last night, and he had been gone before my alarm went off this morning. I hadn’t been keeping count of how often he came home after midnight, but it happened more often than any of us bothered to admit.

“I’ve been reassigned to work with Davies, and I was going through some of the paperwork for the most recent purchases to update the spreadsheet and came to find that Southside High was purchased by Hiram Lodge.”

“So?” Don asked around another mouthful of pasta.

“Davies was telling me that Hiram had expressed interest in the purchase of several pieces of land in the Southside.”

Still unsure of what that had to do with our previous topic of conversation, the boys leaned forward and narrowed their eyes, “Is there supposed to be some kind of point to this story?” Danny asked in a half-joking manner.

“I can’t … get into the details, but if what Davies said is true, and Lodge Industries goes forward with the other purchases, it could mean a lot of trouble for us — having the Serpent’s as allies wouldn’t be the worst thing.”

“Wait, so you actually think befriending the snakes is a good idea?”

“Just the teenage ones,” Dean continued quickly, clearly unsettled with the idea but nodded in agreement nonetheless. “I won’t sit here and deny that they’re good on their word — that gang is probably the most closely knitted group in Riverdale, and that’s one of the only reasons why people fear them. But don’t underestimate them. At the end of the day, there’s strength in numbers, and it’s better to have them with you than against you.”

I sat back in my chair as I pulled one knee up to my chest and rolled my eyes in annoyance, “So when I decided to extend an olive branch, we had problems, but now that there’s some bullshit divide between the two classes, everything’s fine?”

Dean swallowed another sip of his beer, playing with the label on the bottle, “I’ve repeated myself nearly a thousand times to you, but I’ll say it again.” He sighed, finishing the remainder of his drink before he set the empty bottle back onto the table and folded his hands. “The gang life isn’t all that Sweet Pea and his friends make it out to be. It’s way more than just some title, okay? Or a ‘family.’ It’s a lifestyle.” Unsure of why he felt it necessary to re-explain something I already knew, I prompted him to continue with a raise of my brows. “I get that every Southside kid grew up thinking their life is going to go one of two ways, that we’re all destined to experience that lifestyle or be apart of it. We have worked way too hard to let the slums bring us down. We’re better than that — you’re better than that.”

The four of us sat in silence for a few moments, allowing Dean’s words to really stick. Danny — while not entirely selfless or mindful of others — had an incredible knack for science and technology and had applied to four Ivy League
universities for the fall. I had my eyes set on York, and had very little intentions on that changing, and Don — well, Don didn’t really have everything figured out yet. I had learned very quickly that he was quite an intelligent sixteen year old with a craving to push his limits.

Admittedly, we were all a little competitive. None of us took very kindly to the words “You can’t do it,” and often went out of our way to prove a point that we could. We knew success didn’t come without hard work and failure, and Dean didn’t seem to mind how we pushed each other to be better.

It wasn’t exactly the kind of encouragement I had expected, but having your younger cousin taunt you over a paper he received a two percent higher of a grade on for three weeks really gave me the drive to outdo him on the next one.

Just to shut him and his smug ass up.

“This whole ‘Southside sticking together’ facade is perfectly fine. I don’t really care if you wanna play nice and pretend with the others to save your asses from getting beat on, but don’t let it go past that. I trust that you all have your heads screwed on tight enough not to come home bruised, bloodied or tattooed, and I’d prefer to keep it that way.”

“Does this mean Sweet Pea can come over?” I tested carefully, chancing a look in this direction.

“Baby steps.” Dean warned as he stood with his empty plate. Well, it technically wasn’t a no.
Thursday’s always seemed to drag on longer than usual; especially if it were the Thursday before a long weekend and a
Thursday where it rained. The thunder had rolled in early in the morning, waking Pea and I just before the sun had risen.
We were slow to rise, and while I was less than pleased about only getting three hours of sleep, I couldn’t feel guilty about
the extra cuddling and warmth he shared as the rain trickled against the window. He was the one that had to walk home in
it, after all.

Days like this worked in our favour in terms of our compliance with the bus route the school had set in place for the
Southside kids. After the vehicle tagging on our first day, Weatherbee and the Major concluded it was better if we came in
by bus to avoid any future implications. Instead of resolving the issue and punishing the asshole, they resorted to
cramming every Southside student into one bus.

There weren’t enough seats, and the front window didn’t close properly, so for the time being it was an icebox on the
inside. Sweet Pea was the most vocal with his dissatisfaction about having to bus; that was next to Fangs and his
overdramatic tirades every morning, lunch hour, and ride home. I was convinced they would be forever spiteful about the
situation and probably wouldn’t drop it until Weatherbee allowed Southside kids their mobile freedom again.

I perched on the top of the bleachers, water bottle in hand as I watched the boys run back and forth, the dribbling of the
ball and the screech of sneakers echoing in the large gymnasium. The girls had resorted to gossiping together a few rows
down from me, whispering into each other’s ears as they observed. Flirtatious smiles were exchanged as they wiggled
their fingers towards the boys.

I, on the other hand, was content watching Sweet Pea in an element outside of the Wyrm where he looked completely at
ease (I was also pretty content looking at his bare arms). He and Fogarty moved in synchronization, having played
basketball together for years, and were carrying their team to victory against Reggie, Archie, and their friends.

From what I could make out, Reggie didn’t seem to be having as much fun, and it was easy to see his patience was
wearing thin.

The whistle blew, the ball was tossed into the air; Sweet Pea and Moose jumped simultaneously, arms reaching up to
knock the ball back. Pea’s hand was triumphant, the tip of his finger giving him the leverage to toss it back towards Fangs.
The game continued, the boys moving strategically to keep the ball from Reggie — I watched Pea look up and around,
unable to pass without an interception, so he charged forward, shoulder first into Reggie’s chest which caused the teen to
stumble backwards and fall to the ground.

Sweet Pea didn’t stop until the basket had been sunk; Reggie looked up, face torn between disbelief and frustration. The
boys (and girls) cheered as the buzzer rang, signaling the end of their intramural game — Sweet Pea evaded the group
and jogged over to me as I packed my belongings and met him at the bottom of the bleachers. His grin was smug and
wide, his satisfaction obvious.

“That’s how us Southside boys do it!” He hollered, earning several calls back in agreement.

“You can’t play so rough up here.” I chided, unable to stop myself from smiling. “You’re gonna get in trouble.”

“Nah.” Pea shook his head, looking at Reggie over his shoulder, “Mantle’s a big boy, he can handle a little contact, I’m
sure.”

“That was a little contact?” I asked dubiously, peering around his frame over to where Reggie stood, angrily glaring in our
direction.

Pea snorted in amusement, “I didn’t hear a whistle.”
I watched as his hands pulled the bottom of his shirt up to wipe his face, leaving his lower abdomen bare for the Peeping Toms seated just behind us. Annoyed with his persistence to hold his grudge and the flock of vultures undressing him, I changed the topic. “I hope you shower.” I said as the air moved and his sweat became more noticeably pungent. “I’m not sitting on your lap on the way home if you stink.”

“I stink?”

I grimaced, face tightly scrunching as I leaned forward, “It’s bad, babe.”

“Oh, now you’re gettin’ it.” He growled as he wrapped his arms around me, pinning my arms to my sides effortlessly and then shoved my face into his chest, cheek pressed against the sweat-soaked cotton.

“Ew!” I screeched, desperately trying to escape from his grasp, “You’re disgusting, Pea, get off of me!” I whined, now worried about a remaining stench that couldn’t easily be covered with a few spritzes of the body mist in my bag.

Sweet Pea let me go with a laugh, teasing glimmer in his eyes evident as he lowered his face to mine and captured my lips in a swift kiss. “But you love me.” He stated, brow raised as though he dared I argued otherwise.

Bet.

“Debatable.” I teased as he leered over me, bending back as I wrapped my arms around his middle. “I’m seriously gonna be pissed if I smell like an ogre for the rest of the day, though.” I added quickly, peering up at his scowl. “The last thing I need is Kevin going off about me smelling like the inside of the boys’ locker room.”

We stayed like that for a moment, arms wrapped around each other comfortably as we swayed. He was the first to break the silence, pushing my bangs behind my ear, “Wanna go to the quarry tonight?” He asked, surveying my face hopefully, “Greg the Serpent is hosting a long overdue bonfire.” Greg the Serpent?

I shrugged, “Why not. I’m working till nine; we can go after.” I was sure spending my night in a forest with a group of underage teens drinking wasn’t going to be the highlight of my day, but Pea had sacrificed several prime quarry bonfires to spend time with me instead. I knew it was never before he felt he wasn’t allowed to spend time with them, he just always seems to prefer if it were just us two genuinely.

Sweet Pea smiled again, covering my face with kisses prior to latching onto mine; my fingers wove into his hair, body held up by my toes. The sounds of males whistling from the other side of the gym pulled us apart, my face turning to hide the flush that coated my cheeks and neck. “I’ll catch you later, ‘kay?” He whispered, lips pressing a parting kiss to the crown of my head. I watched him jog off towards Fogarty, the heavy blue door belonging to the boys’ locker room slamming shut and concealing their loud banter.

Reggie didn’t talk much during last period, which was a surprising change compared to the usual teasing and titillating comments that usually filled the silence. He asked if I had any plans for the long weekend; I told him there was a get together later tonight, and that I was working at Pop’s Sunday morning.

Reg had made it a habit of coming to visit during my shifts for pie and idle chit-chat, quickly catching onto Pea’s pick up and drop off routines. They never bumped into each other, and I was thankful for that mainly because as much as my boyfriend despised most of the Northsiders with nearly every nerve in his body, Reggie might have hated the Southsiders more.

If there was one thing I had learned about Reginald Mantle, it was that he wasn’t shy about his feelings and opinions. Most of the time he spoke without a filter, and while this proved to be problematic on several occasions between the two of us, I admired his honesty.

“Have fun tonight, Barbie.” Reggie called over his shoulder when the bell dismissed us for the weekend, disappearing into the stairwell with his bag in hand. I wandered through the halls towards Pea’s locker, narrowly missing the hoards of students as they pushed past me to the exits; Jughead sat on the floor in front of his several doors down from Sweet Pea’s,
staring at the folder in his hands.

“What’s that?” I asked as I joined him, legs folding beneath me as I plucked it from his fingertips and sifted through the various papers. My eyes scanned through the words, zeroing in on the end of his third paragraph — “Topaz? Like Toni’s dad?”

“Grandfather,” Jughead corrected grimly, “If I get a quote from Hiram, Betty will publish it.”

“The Uktena?” I asked, rereading over the words more carefully. “Does this tribe include Pea?”

He shrugged, “Not all of us have the ancestry, but that’d be my best guess.”

“Huh.” I puffed, skimming the rest of the article. There had been ongoing presentations in every history class courtesy of Cheryl Blossom. I hadn’t been paying close enough attention to it, too preoccupied with my sketchbook to be bothered to digest her words.

“You guys going to the quarry tonight?”

I nodded at Jughead’s question, “Yeah, I think we’re going with Fangs.”

“Greg the Serpent is apparently notorious for his parties, so I’m going to be thoroughly disappointed if —”

“Okay, hold on.” I interrupted, holding a finger up, “Why are you calling him that? Sweets said the same thing. Who even is this guy?”

“It’s a thing.” He shook his head, shoulders already raised in indifference, “He’s that full of himself really. Supposedly used to have a major crush on Toni and she hated it. Total hardass, but not in a douchey way.”

“Speak of — where’s Pea?” I asked absently after a few moments, looking down at the watch on my wrist.

“Detention.”

I looked up at him in confusion, “I thought that finished yesterday.”

Jughead shifted, resting his head against the locker behind him, “Got extended for tardiness yesterday — Fangs took the bus home, he’s gonna come back with his mom’s car to grab us.”

I pulled my brows together, “Why are you still here?”

“Sweets asked me to stay and keep you company since Don’s got that interview.” He explained nonchalantly, stretching his long legs out as the hallway emptied. The annoyance I felt was very short-lived, quickly replaced with a familiar warmth. It was endearing to think he didn’t like having me wait alone for him. “You seem surprised.”

I shrugged, “Full disclosure? I’d appreciate if what was said was kept between us.”

Jughead cocked his head to the side, upper body moving slightly to face me, “What’re you hiding, Hobbs?” He questioned, blue orbs narrowed accusingly.

I waved him away, “Just promise me, okay?” He was already nodding in agreement, face breaking into a grin at my relentlessness. “I guess I’m still working through the idea that someone actually gives a fuck about me.” I admitted.

“It’s been three months, Cal,” Jughead reminded me, “Are you still having doubts?”

I pondered on the thought, knowing I had already decided back in December that everything was bound to end in flames. Without Sweet Pea, I was certain I would quickly succumb to my father’s ways, more so given the environment I lived in. “They’re not so much doubts as they are fears. Don’t get me wrong; everything’s .. perfect.” I nodded; well, nearly
perfect, but that was the truth. Aside from some slight miscommunication, my relationship with Pea had progressed far better than I had originally anticipated. Obviously, I felt awful for having assumed that it wouldn’t work. “Some days I’m almost positive we’re going to make it to graduation together.”

“So,” Jughead pressed, “What’s the problem?”

“What if we don’t?” I still had this idea that Sweet Pea would get sick of me, that he would leave. That someone better would come along, or he would wake up one morning and no longer feel the way he once did. I had only ever felt heartbreak once before and vowed never to experience that kind of emotional exhaustion and torment again. “Look, when I’m with Sweet Pea, and it’s good, things are great … but when it’s bad …” I trailed off, dropping his folder between our seated frames.

When I looked up, I was met with curiosity and softness, “What are you afraid of?” Jughead asked quietly.

I inhaled deeply, having already decided that this was a topic of conversation I felt more comfortable discussing with him over someone like Toni or Kevin. I pulled my knees into my chest, arms locking around my legs to keep them steady, “I was only two when Byron lost my mom, so I don’t remember much of what he was like when she was still around. It wasn’t until I was seven that I realized the way my dad acted wasn’t normal.” I explained, words falling seamlessly from my mouth as I recited the words. “Always breaking the promise he would wait until the weekend, never wanting to go anywhere unless there’d be a stiff drink. Watching him go from making a forty last a week to barely getting two days out of a bottle.”

“Increased breathing, sweats, shakes, anxiety —”

“Depression.” I added. The silence that hung between us was filled with mutual understanding and empathy. I just didn't want that to be me.

Jughead reached out to squeeze my hand comfortingly. “For argument’s sake, let’s say it works out. Are you happy?”

“No.” I confessed, gnawing on the inside of my cheek. “If we make it that far, I'll end up stuck here, and I don’t want that. He knows that — he doesn’t like it, but he knows.”

Jughead now faced me entirely, legs folded underneath, “Bring him with you.”

“Pea’s not leaving Riverdale.” I stated confidently with an amused shake of my head. “I wouldn’t ask him to, anyway, he’s got too much holding him here.”

“You don’t?”

I rolled my eyes, “It’s one guy, Jug. I’m not gonna give up York for a guy.”

“Six guys,” He corrected, voice harder than before, brows pulled together as he held up his hand to count, “Sweet Pea, Don, Danny, Dean, Fogarty and myself — plus Toni, so don’t try to sell me that crap. It’s more than just one guy, and two years is a lot of time. Things can change.”

I dropped my head between my legs, “I’m aware, Jones.” I grumbled tiredly, “That’s the point I’m trying to make. I don’t want to be held here because I don’t want to be here.” Jughead didn’t respond, and I took it upon myself to peep through my bangs to see if he were still seated next to me.

He was, however, his face was sullen as he mulled over the information. I knew he understood that my reservations about the relationship were fair and justified — he might not have agreed with them, but he understood.

My phone vibrated in my rear pocket; Fogarty had arrived and wanted us to wait outside with him. Our limbs didn’t move quickly; instead, we took our time gathering our belongings. We stopped by my locker so I could grab my jacket, the empty halls echoing our footsteps.
Once outside, the only car idling in the student parking lot was the tan 2004 Honda Accord that belonged to Gabriela. Fangs sat in the driver’s seat, heavy bass blaring through the speakers as I yanked the backseat door open, crawling in next to Jughead. It was another forty-five minutes before Sweet Pea’s tall frame exited the school, making his way to the empty passenger seat with a scowl. The ride home was mostly silent; the boys in the front spoke quietly back and forth, but never loud enough for Jughead and I to make out what they were saying.

Unsure of what else to do, I rested my head against the window, counting the potholes in the streets on our way back down the Southside.

After weeks of pouting and sighing deeply in feigned boredom, Teddy finally agreed to let me create an updated playlist for the Wyrm. I had handed the USB over a week ago and was surprised to hear the familiar rift of a 2011 rap song reverberate through the speakers as I handed FP another coke.

“I just wanna chill and twist a lot, catch suns in my 7-45,” I sang quietly to myself, tray hugged to my hip as I set the glass on the table and plucked his empty plate from the other side. I had half expected it to be busier than usual with the long weekend in effect, but much of the younger-gen Serpents were barren from the Wyrm for the night. I assumed the party at the quarry might have had something to do with that.

“So you’re responsible for all of the 50 Cent I’ve listened to today, huh.” FP accused as he lifted the glass to his lips to take a sip, eyes glaring over the brim of the glass at me.

“I am.” I sang smugly.

“I like this song much better than Candy Shop.”

“Oh, no way, Jones,” I mused lightly as I pulled empties off the table next to his, “You actually listen to shit other than Guns and Roses and Pink Floyd?” I teased with a tight-lipped smile, casting my eyes over to where he watched me with an amused smirk. “Shocking.” I added.

“Hey, don’t mock me,” He shot back in defense, leaning back on the hind legs of his seat. “I’m hip with it.”

I rose my brows, hoping to hide the laugh behind a cough, “The fact you think so doesn’t really vouch for truth.” I reminded him, thinking back to several days prior he had informed me he was updated on the new ‘vocab’ kids were using these days. “It’s good music.” I argued.

“Is that so?” FP shook his head, leaning forward onto his elbows as he pointed behind me, “Let’s see how your man likes this one.” He suggested challengingly, confident that his protege would surely agree with his taste in music and back him up on this one.

Much to my surprise, Sweet Pea came up behind me, cold hands snaking under the hem of my top to press his fingertips into my hips, “I’m staring at ya’ trying to figure how you got in them jeans.” The tray was pulled from my hand, and his hips pressed forward into me as he encouraged them to sway together to the beat. Fogarty moved around our entwined frames, joining FP at his table as Sweet Pea’s lips travelled to my ear, “Ready to go?”

I gestured to the tray full of empty dishes, “Almost.”

“You guys going to the bonfire too?” FP asked as Pea laced his fingers with mine and spun me so that I was facing him; he wore his green bomber jacket over my dad’s flannel, black jeans ripped at the knee and cuffed at the ankle above his tall boots. I was surprised to see him so dressed down, half expecting to see him come through the door in his signature leather jacket.

He had been judging my outfit, too, pleased to see I had taken his casual dress code seriously. “We are.” I nodded, leaning around his frame to sweep the tray off the table. I retreated to the back bar, dropping the empty plates into the soapy water, as I brought the glasses around front to unload for the last round of stragglers.
Within half an hour after leaving the Wyrm, our bags were slung over our shoulders as we trudged through the underbrush towards the quarry. I could hear the echo of laughter and music, the familiar scent of burning wood filling my lungs. When we came to the break in the trees, several semi-new and broken in couches circled the deep pit in the center of the clearing, flames angrily roaring from inside. The flames shadows danced against the tagged brick wall, my eyes already recognizing some of the work as Toni’s, and some as Sweet Pea’s.

Jughead had his back turned to us; leather washed out by the orange flame as he leaned over to poke the burning wood with his stick. Toni perched on a nearby log, the red cup in her hand tilted back as she drank the contents while wrapped up in a thick blanket. “Little thirsty, aren’t ya?” Fogarty teased as he sat next to her.

I dropped my bag at their feet, bending down to grab one of the tall cans of cider when my phone vibrated in my rear pocket; I pulled it out, unlocking the screen to view the snapchat Reggie sent. He appeared to be sitting in a basement of some sort, Moose’s face barely recognizable in the darkness as they held up their beer cans. I held the phone up, aiming it towards Sweet Pea as he joined Jughead by the pit, their faces illuminated by the flames as Pea threw in another dry log.

The snapchat was viewed almost immediately, but Reggie never responded. I texted Dean to remind him that I was staying at Pea’s for the night and wouldn’t be home until after my shift at Pop’s the following evening. I tucked the device into the pocket of my leather jacket, lifting the cold can to my lips to swallow a mouthful of the bitter cider.

Groups of teens all dressed in leathers and dark jeans gathered in pairings. Some danced, some sat and talked amongst themselves loudly. I was almost surprised I hadn’t heard all of the noise earlier — this worked in our benefit, I guessed.

I joined Toni and Fangs on the fallen log, shoving my free hand into the pocket of my sweater, “So this is the quarry, huh?” I asked, looking around at the natural bend in the trees to create the circular cut out that Serpents frequently utilized as a safe-zone. The edge of the river wasn’t too far away in the distance, and if it weren’t for the drunken slurs and vulgarity of the party-goers, this place might’ve actually been completely tolerable despite the litter and damp couches.

“Ye ol’ stomping ground.” Sweet Pea joked as he cracked his beer open, catching the froth with his mouth quickly before it spilled over onto the dampened soil.

“I can’t believe Pea’s never invited you here before,” Toni added in genuine surprise, linking her arm through mine after she placed one of the blankets over my legs. Her grin was relaxed, and her usually wild hair was pulled back into a high ponytail; she looked rather comfortable in her oversized pink pullover and ripped jeans. “Everybody brings their boo-thangs out here to makeout.”

“Everybody that still lives at home,” Pea corrected smugly, reminding his friend that he didn’t have to worry about nosy mothers or siblings barging in on us. “Besides, I haven’t really had a need come out here since .. what, October?”

“I’m guessing she would be the reason to blame for that.” I cut my attention to the deep voice that joined the conversation, and a finger pointed towards me. The male that approached was roughly six feet and easy on the eyes; his dirty blonde hair styled upwards, and his face shadowed with day-old scruff.

Sweet Pea’s arm came up to embrace his fellow brother, their reunition cut short as Jughead yanked on Pea’s jacket to keep him from stepping backwards into the pit, “Long time no see, man!” Sweets bellowed as he lifted his can to his lips again, “When’d you get back?”

I zoned out of the conversation, turning my head to the left, “Who’s that?” I hissed quietly to Toni who was guzzling back another beer. “I’ve never seen him before.”

Toni wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her hoodie, “That’s Greg the Serpent. After he graduated he traded in his Harley for a Charger, now he drives up over the border to visit some girl he met at a New Year’s party last year.”

I returned my eyes to the male, examining the way he used his hands to elaborate his words as he spoke. Fifteen minutes passed, Greg the Serpent was still talking, only now it was to a much larger group (that still included my boyfriend). Pea seemed absolutely smitten with the older Serpent, hanging onto his every word like an eager puppy. I then felt guilty for
preoccupying so much of Sweet Pea’s free time when I knew fully well he had a life outside of me, and that life included these people. He had friends before I came along, and just because I didn’t prefer to spend my weekends getting drunk near the river’s edge didn’t mean he couldn’t.

Another hour passed; by this time I had finished three of my ciders and taken one of the Corona’s Jughead had offered me from the cooler on the other side of the opening. More bodies began to fill the empty space, and soon every couch and fallen log was occupied by groups of teens. The music had been boosted louder as more speakers were connected, and the fire had nearly doubled its size from when we had arrived. Periodically, I would let my eyes wander the crowd to see where Sweet Pea had gone. He currently stood with Fangs, the pair of them breaking the bottom of the aluminum with their keys as they pulled the tabs and shotgunned their beers, Fogarty’s empty can dropping to the ground first in a sign of victory.

The temperature outside had dropped significantly. But I remained warm with every sip of rum I took from the Sailor Jerry’s passing back and forth between Toni and I. My previous annoyance with the wet grass and mud had been replaced with contentment, as I hugged the blanket closer to my shivering frame and inhaled the thick scent of the earth. The clock on the screen of my phone switched to 11:34 PM; I hadn’t heard from anyone for several hours, and my stomach was beginning to swirling uneasily.

Sweet Pea was several beers deep, now perched in the middle of a group across from us. His laugh louder than all the others and his smile wider than I had seen it in weeks. He and his friends sat in their circle, rapping the lyrics to Country Grammar at the top of their lungs.

Our eyes met over the crackling embers that floated in the sky. His mouth morphed from his boyish grin into a snarl, jaw clenched tightly under the skin as he focused his eyes behind me and stood on his feet with his eyes narrowed into dark slits, drawing the attention of everyone around him.

“‘Sup, Barbie?” All of the heat in my veins disappeared instantly, body freezing at the sound of the familiar voice that had interrupted the party. I turned to look over my shoulder, startled to find not only Reggie, but Moose, Midge and Kevin entering the quarry behind him.

Their faces appeared grim as they glanced around at the crowd, all shifting nervously as the Serpent’s attention was focused on them. Perhaps they felt an inch of what we had felt in the last week during our transition into the Northside.

“Reggie,” I hissed, pushing the blanket into Toni’s lap hastily. “You need to go.”

“Why would I do that?”

“This is a bad idea.” I warned quietly, hoping the desperation was as evident in my voice as it was my eyes.

“You’re a long way from the tracks, Bulldog,” Sweet Pea announced, “This is Southside Serpent territory.”

Reggie came to a complete halt in front of me, head cocked to the left in slight mock as his lips jutted out, “Hey, Sweetie Pie.” He taunted, eyes flickering to the approaching steps of Sweet Pea and his friends behind me, “Can’t say I’m impressed with the location, but I couldn’t turn down an invite to a Southside party.”

“What invite?” Jughead asked as his eyes narrowed accusingly.

Reggie jerked his thumb in my direction, several pairs of eyes following; I could only feel Sweet Pea’s glare burning holes into the back of my skull. “Got her snap an hour ago, rallied the troop and here we are.”

Astonished that Reginald Mantle had the balls to not only show up in Serpent country, but also broadcast a fictitious invitation that gave everyone the wrong impression. I brought my hands up into my hair and shook my head. “You’ve gotta be shitting me.” I whispered to myself as I turned back to Toni.

“Her snap?” I peered over to where Pea stood, staggering back on his heels as he focused his gaze on my face. That
information seemed to hit a nerve that didn’t settle well with him. Instantly, his brows furrowed together, mouth dropped into a tight line, and his hands closed into fists as he took a step towards Reggie.

“Woah, Woah!” Kevin shouted as he intercepted quickly, holding his hands up in peace, “Calm down, ponyboy. They have last period together.” He explained quickly (and quietly), trying to reason with Sweet Pea before he lost his temper.

It wasn’t that I had been trying to keep that information from Sweet Pea as much as it was I just didn’t feel it was necessary to tell him, however, at that moment it felt like I had been caught red-handed in a lie. What made it worse was that I felt guilty about it, and a guilty face certainly wasn’t helping my situation.

I need another drink. I thought wearily to myself as I retreated.

“Midge wanted to see Toni; I came to see Cal, Moose — well, he’s not exactly someone I’d classify as a threat and Reg...” Kevin trailed off, turning to look at his friend over his shoulder. Reggie smiled. “He will be on his best behaviour. Just one night of unsolicited fun, no drama.”

Most of the Serpents waited on alpha-male Sweet Pea, their eyes unblinking but intently focused as he surveyed the group of Northsiders. His nose was scrunched at the bridge and lifted in the air as he looked down at Kevin; the teen was trying his best to hold his ground, but I could see that Kevin’s confidence was shaking. “Fine.” Pea barked bitterly, already retreating to his side of the fire, “Any bullshit and you’re all out.”

My arms came up to wrap around my stomach, patiently waiting for Kevin to slowly make his way to where I stood before I led him over to Toni. She held up my cider, lips attached to the brim of the Sailor Jerry’s as she swallowed another mouthful, “Well that was dramatic.” Toni murmured quietly.

“I think that was the point.” I grumbled in annoyance as I cut my eyes over my shoulder to where Reggie and Moose mosied their way towards us. I returned my attention to the drink in my hand, reclaiming my seat next to Toni; Jughead perched next to me, facing backwards so he could engage in conversation with Kevin (he was more interested in checking up on Betty, honestly). Determined to avoid any and all contact with Reggie for the rest of the night, I kept myself preoccupied with Toni.

I didn’t know when she had started drinking, but in the time we had been at the quarry she had finished off her Coors Light, half of Jughead’s six-pack, and half the mickey of rum. Her usual laid-back personality was buried deep beneath a bubbly exterior, becoming more vocal with her opinions and louder as the time passed. Once she had opened her mouth to contribute to the conversation, it never stopped moving.

Not that I minded — I hadn’t heard more than a handful of words out of Toni’s mouth at a time, noticing that much like myself she preferred to keep to herself, too. With her right hand perched on her hip and her left hand pointing an accusing finger towards Moose, the group laughed as her merciless honesty began to shine through.

It was well past midnight; most of the town was soundly sleeping while the party continued on. I’d have to hand it to Greg the Serpent; he knew how to host. Despite their differences, he had extended an olive branch to Kevin. I wasn’t too sure how Sweet Pea felt seeing a friend flip on everything they were (primarily) programmed to feel. The more I allowed my mind to wander, the more evident it became. Sweet Pea had never been shy about his general disliking of the Northside — actually, he was quite vocal about it. But that hatred never seemed real to me. We lived on the Southside. We worked on the Southside. Until recently, we went to school on the Southside, too.

When push came to shove, most of us were on the same page. Adapt or die. People like Sweet Pea, Jughead, Danny and Don held onto their morals and loyalties with fierce grips and determination. While it was refreshing to see the boys passionate about something, I was beside myself. Because when push comes to shove, do I do what is right or do I do what I should?

I lifted the can to my lips again, mouth filling with the bitter cider. My current dissatisfaction with the night’s progression willed me to swallow, again and again, until the contents had been emptied. I looked over to where Sweet Pea sat perched
on a fallen log by himself, angrily staring into the flames that Jughead tended to. Far enough away to not provoke the already grizzled bear, Reggie, Moose and Midge sat with Fangs and Toni.

Any annoyance the group had felt about Reginald and his friends crashing the party had vanished as the music willed better memories and dancing. Everybody seemed relatively happy and exuberant, and I couldn’t help but wonder why Pea and I were still here when the both of us were so miserable.

I pulled the last drink I had from my bag, wondering where the remaining five had gone. The Sailor Jerry’s was long finished, and the dizziness I felt now as I leaned against the tree was a silent reminder to thank myself in the morning for chugging the remainder of the bottle.

Once the world had stopped spinning long enough for my stomach to settle, I reopened my eyes and focused on the figure that approached me. My arms folded over the top of my chest in defense, reluctant to acknowledge Reggie’s presence as he came to stand next to me with a plastic bag in his hands, “What’re you doing over here by yourself?”

I took another sip of my drink, eyes locked onto the fire pit.

“Moose brought marshmallows — I don’t know if you’re into that sorta thing, but he’s always eating so.” He held the bag out in a peace offering.

I shook my head once.

“C’mon, you’re really pissed at me?”

I didn’t want to answer him. I wanted to hold my ground. I wanted to prove a point. Maybe it was my fault for keeping him from Sweet Pea, for giving Pea a reason to think I needed to have to hide my blossoming (friendship) tolerance with the Northsiders. Kevin was one thing, but Reggie was an entirely different story. I had treated him like he was supposed to be a secret, and maybe he was, but it was only because of who he was and what he did. He was public enemy number one.

“Oh, I’m not pissed at you,” I barked, finally cutting my eyes up to his. “I’m so far passed pissed, Reginald. What I feel for you right now very much resembles hate.” There was no smugness in his features now; his previous cocky demeanour had completely vanished. Instead, he appeared guilty, almost apologetic. “You have got some fucking nerve coming down here and saying the shit you did.”

“I know,” He agreed quickly, reaching out to touch my arm — I slapped his hand away. “I’m sorry, okay?” Reggie’s hands came up in defense, “Why would you talk to me if you knew he was gonna have a problem with it?”

I rolled my eyes, “Because he isn’t the boss of who I can and can’t be friends with?”

Reggie folded his arms, brow raised as his eyes darted over to where Sweet Pea sat, noticing that he already had his eyes carefully locked on my frame. “Are you trying to convince me or yourself?”

I snapped my head to the left and away from him, eyes set into a glare, “Fuck you.”

“Seriously, Cal,” He smacked my arm playfully with the bag of marshmallows while popping one into his mouth. “Why?”

I sighed, pushing myself off of the tree so that I could take a step closer to him, “Because I wanted to believe that you weren’t a horrible person, Reg. And for a while there, you really had me fooled.” I tried not to sound too disappointed with that statement, taking his silence as my exit. With my arms wrapped my frame, I wandered back over to where Toni danced, her hips shaking to the heavy bass that reverberated off the stone wall and trees.

“Calliope,” Reggie called from behind me, tone sounding almost defeated. “Cal, c’mon!”

Ignoring his pleas as my hips swayed to the beat, Toni’s loud giggles encouraged my unusually playful nature. My veins hummed in delight as I let everything fall loose, bending over to with a twirl of my hips to shimmy backwards into Toni.
Much to my surprise, other members around the fire joined those of us already swaying along to the beat. The more I danced, the less bitter everything tasted. My anxiety about Sweet Pea alleviated, my anger towards Reggie momentarily on pause as I leaned against Kevin’s built frame to keep myself upright.

The bottle from Fogarty’s hand was passed off to me; I now stood double fisting drinks in the center of the chaos as I tilted my head back to take a long swig of the cheap vodka and chased it with the cider. The taste was vomit worthy, stomach angrily lurching in protest as I shoved the bottle into Toni’s hand; I held my fist to my mouth, focusing on the stable ground beneath me as I breathed deeply.

*Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exha—*

The bile rose up my esophagus, nose burning as I turned to shove past Fogarty’s frame towards the trees. Once behind a bush, I knelt to the wet ground and expelled the contents of my stomach in three disgusting, aching heaves. My hand gripped the tree to keep myself from falling forward in exhaustion, arm shaking as I wiped my mouth with the sleeve of my sweater. *No more mixing dumbass.* I was slow to stand on my feet, thankful that my hair had been pulled back during my momentary weakness, limbs too weak to properly keep myself upright.

My return to the fire pit was slow, dragging my eyes across the intoxicated crowd in search of my boyfriend. There were no looming figures amongst this crowd anymore, and most of his friend’s had disappeared. Anxiously, I made my way back towards the group I knew, reaching out for Kevin’s arm.

“Woah, are you okay?” He asked, gesturing to my shaking hand. I dismissed his worry, taking a moment to rescan the remaining teens, positive I had just missed him. Though all dressed in black, it would’ve been easy to spot him in the crowd.

“Have you seen my boyfriend?” I asked slowly, carefully sounding out each word as I offered the cider in my hand to my friend.

Kevin watched me for a few moments before his lips broke into a smile, “Are you drunk?” He asked quietly, mildly amused.

“Fuck off.” I grumbled with a glare as I stood on my own two feet, wrapping my arms around my body. So long as I stay firmly planted, the world stopped spinning long enough for me to steady myself and feel *somewhat* normal. “He’s pissed at me.”

“Did he say he was pissed at you?” Kevin asked, linking his arm through mine despite my previous retraction.

I shook my head, resting it on his arm tiredly, “No, but I know he is.”

“Because of Reggie?”

I contemplated my response carefully; realistically, it was Northsiders in general, but Reggie showing up being the pompous prick he is definitely added salt to the wound. Jealousy had never been an issue with us before, mostly because guys on the Southside weren’t stupid enough to bother looking at me, let alone speak to me.

Reggie’s comments during class didn’t have any sort of actual interest or suggestion behind them, and merely served as witty comebacks more often than anything. I hadn’t wanted to give Sweet Pea a reason to hate him any more than he already did, and maybe it was selfish of me to keep something like that from him. “Yup.”

Kevin stared into the flames, brows pulled together in confusion, “It’s weird to think about someone like Sweet Pea having insecurities.” I nodded in agreement, chewing absentlly on my bottom lip.

Sweet Pea was a cocky bitch, and there was absolutely no denying that. He wasn’t blind to his good looks, and there was certainly a swagger to him that screamed sex-on-legs. It was definitely odd thinking about Pea having any self-doubts, especially when it came to me. He had me, he knew that, and that wouldn’t change — and definitely not because of
Reginald Mantle.

My teeth were numb, and my mouth felt fuzzy as I tilted my head back to swallow another mouthful of my lukewarm beverage when the can was plucked from my hand and tossed into the fire; I glared up at Sweet Pea in annoyance, lip curling over my teeth, “What the fuck?” I growled angrily as I surveyed the liquid that stained the front of my sweater.

“You’re cut off.” His voice was hard and body stoic, arms folding across his chest as though he were putting his foot down. There wasn’t any indication that he was joking. I looked up at Kevin, noting that he appeared as baffled as I felt, and slowly brought my gaze back up to Sweet Pea’s with a venomous glare.

“Cut off?” I spat in disbelief, searching Pea’s face for a few moments before I shook my head and retreated, “I’m fine.” I tried (unsuccessfully) to walk around his frame. Sweet Pea rolled his eyes, hand grabbing hold of my arm tightly as he pulled me away from the fire pit, leaving Kevin behind. “Ow — hey! Let go of me!” I whined as he pushed me back further into the underbrush. “What is your problem?” I hissed when he finally released me, massaging the tender skin he had pinched.

“My problem? What the fuck is your problem? Inviting Northsiders? Getting shitfaced?” He was searching for some kind of explanation — truthfully, I didn’t have one. I was overwhelmed and cold, the more alcohol I drank, the better I felt overall. I didn’t see any issues with it, but obviously, Sweet Pea did.

“I’m drinking at a party,” I reminded him slowly, wrapping my arms around my exposed midsection. “That’s normal.”

His dark hues surveyed me briefly, mind reeling as he thought through his response carefully. We had both been drinking, and were both familiar with each other’s short fuses — admittedly, this was a delicate situation that neither of us wanted to cause too much of a mess of.

But it was so hard. Keeping your mouth shut when you had this sudden confidence and courage to be honest about how you were feeling — maybe part of why I had been searching for the bottom of every ‘bottle’ was simply because the worst had yet to come and I wasn’t emotionally prepared to deal with that argument sober. As awful as it sounded, as guilty as I felt and as much as I know I deserved his anger, I couldn’t stomach the thought of waking up in the morning and remembering everything he had said.

“You’re drinking by yourself.” He said finally, patience clearly worn out. He watched me for a few moments as I struggled to keep steady and sighed, “And we’re going home.”

“What?” I hissed, grabbing his arm to stop him from retrieving our belongings. “You’re the one that asked me to come out here, why are we leaving?”

“Because you almost fell into the fire pit, you’ve been tripping over your own feet for almost an hour and you threw up.”

I narrowed my eyes, “I did not.”

Sweet Pea glared down at me, having lost all of his patience, “Go get your bag, we’re going home.”

Defiantly, I shook my head and stomped off towards the group. Kevin had managed to square Fangs off on his own, hopefully, to interrogate him about Joaquin since he had been going on so incessantly about it all week. With no other option, I joined Toni’s side, thankful for the bubbling drink she offered despite the swirling in my stomach.

I could hear his footsteps behind me, my body twisting to keep the bottle from his fingertips when he tried to reach forward for it. “Hey!” Toni chided, pulling his arm away, “That one’s mine, hands off.”

“Stop drinking.” He growled at me, brows angrily pulled together with his hard eyes deadlocked on my lips as they met with the brim. The beer was cheap and didn’t taste nearly as good as it looked; I knocked back another mouthful before handing it back to Toni.
It was at this time I realized just how intoxicated Sweet Pea was. In the darkness of the forest, I hadn’t been able to tell how unfocused his eyes were, how the dark circles under had deepened in colour.

When I pulled my gaze from him, I noticed that Toni had her eyes focused on Sweet Pea’s frame cautiously, hand gripping onto my forearm tightly before she leaned closer to me. “What did you do?” She hissed, lifting the bottle to her lips. Sweet Pea remained stoic and pouty; the more I assessed his features, I noticed that the concerned boyfriend act had been ditched and replaced with absolute intolerance and anger.

“Go have fun with your friends, Pea. I’ll sit here with Toni.” I tried to dismiss, annoyed that his persistence was ruining the delightful head buzz I had finally been able to achieve. Now I was left feeling nauseous and irritated, neither of which made being here easy but I was determined to show him he could have both worlds. “Not drinking alone anymore, so stop babysitting me.”

It was Toni that reacted, her body flinching away from mine with a wide expression and a slack jaw. “And if Toni goes home, what am I supposed to do with you?” He asked me expectantly as he placed a hand on his hip and rose his brows.

What was he supposed to do with me? Why did I sound like a chore that needed to be passed off? Why was it beginning to sound like I was ruining his time?

“Like I said,” I pressed, tone laced with venom, “Stop babysitting me.”

Pea rolled his eyes, almost amused as he responded, “What are you gonna do, Cal? Have Mantle keep you company? Because that’s working out so well for you.” It was at this point the buzz I once had could not be recovered, and my patience snapped. Reluctant to reply, or to even acknowledge that this was really something he was trying to bring up — in front of everyone — I turned in search of my belongings.

“Cal?” Kevin asked when I dropped down to grab my bag from behind his feet, “You’re leaving? Already?” His voice sounded panicked, looking up in search of his friends.

“It’s almost two in the morning, and I have a shift tomorrow,” I explained, hoping that neither Kevin or Fogarty overheard Sweet Pea’s comment. “I also worked tonight, so I’m pretty .. tired.” I couldn’t help but sigh. Admitting it out loud had some power over my body, and it was as though all of the late nights were catching up to me. My legs were stiff, and my body was cold. I didn’t feel well, and the anxiety of the situation wasn’t making any of the above any better.

With my bag slung over my shoulder, I pulled my hood tight around my neck, phone in hand as I shouldered past Toni’s frame for the break in the trees. “Where are you going?” Sweet Pea asked.

“I’m leaving.” My feet carried me forward, unwilling to stop when he called for me again. This time, however, there was more anxiety. More worry.

“Now you want to leave?” He asked loudly.

I stopped in my tracks, turning to him with desperation in my eyes and my jaw locked tightly. The attention of the people around him and between us watched curiously, and I couldn’t find the energy in me to fight back. “I’m not making an ass out of myself in front of your friends.” I said simply, continuing to walk forward.

The entire situation was already horrifically embarrassing enough as it was. Sweet Pea was the one person who was supposed to have my back, and instead was giving me a hard time in front of a group of people that already had questioned my presence. My annoyance only grew as the sound of heavy footsteps stomped along behind me; I spun around, nearly smacking into Sweet Pea’s chest in the process and glared up at his towering figure.

“What are you doing?” I inquired with narrowed chest.

Sweets blinked twice, furrowed brows raising as though that answer were already obvious. “Do you not remember what happened the last time I let you walk away from me?”
I was slightly taken aback by his nervousness but nodded. It had been months since that night, but the vivid images of the destroyed trailer were still ingrained in my memory. I still didn’t agree with his actions, I still hadn’t forgiven him for what happened at the party, but had I moved forward. Ultimately, the way I felt about him surpassed all rational thinking I had. It was like the blind leading the blind; neither of us was too sure how to make this work in a way that wouldn’t end in flames, but we couldn’t find it in us to stay apart.

Although he appeared as annoyed as I felt, he walked in front of me silently, with his hands shoved deep into his pockets. Once we made it back to civilization, we walked side by side down the center of the streets, too immersed in our own heads to have anything to say.

The streetlights were a dim yellow, giving us just enough light to make our street names to navigate our way towards the opposite side of town to get to Sunnyside. The only sounds were the crickets in the tall grass, the occasional car driving along one of the streets and our footsteps against the pavement.

In any disagreement we had come into, Sweet Pea had never been one to shut down so quickly. At the very least, I had expected some kind of retaliation, some comment that would surely spark the fire within me. Truthfully, it wouldn’t have been the first screaming match we had gotten into — it was unsettling that he was as quiet as he was.

“Are you really pissed about Reggie?” I asked him softly, hoping he would respond in the same tone.

I was relieved when he did, “I am.” He nodded, his breathing more careful to keep himself calm as he continued. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrugged, “I didn’t think it was important,” I admitted with a frown, realizing that I was wrong in my previous assumption. “It’s art, he just likes to gossip to me since everyone else is sort of .. weird.”

I felt his eyes on me, so I tried my best to keep myself composed. “I don’t like him.” He said after a few silent moments. When I turned my head so that I could look at him, he was watching the ground with his lips pulled into a pout, “He’s a douchebag with an entitlement problem, and I don’t like the way he looks at you.”

I came to a halt, hands ceasing their twisting of the straps of my bag.

He stopped, too, facing me with the streetlight shining just behind him. It was hard to make out his features, but his body language was unmistakable. I thought back to what I had said to Reggie, about how Pea wasn’t that guy. I never would believe he was controlling.

“How does he look at me?” I asked quietly.

Sweet Pea huffed angrily, hands digging into his jacket pockets again as he shook his head and turned, causing his breath to appear in white spirals. “I’m not doing this.”

“How does he look at me?” I repeated, taking a step towards him when he began to walk away, “Talk to me, Sweet Pea, I can’t fucking read your mind!”

“You’re annoying.” He grumbled as I hurried my short legs to keep up with his.

“And you’re jealous — of fucking Reggie Mantle of all people.”

“Why would I be jealous?”

“Because he’s from the Northside.” I tried, keeping distance between us as I continued, “Drives a nice car, is given special privilege,” I listed, walking heel to toe down the strip in the center of the road. “He’s gonna make the team even though he’s not that great at basketball. You won’t.” I reminded him.

Fogarty had reminded him too; the boys had been so eager to be apart of something other than what they had down here.
To have an outlet to put their anger and frustrations into, to have fun. But the reality was that they didn’t have the financial means to be on the team, and whether or not anyone wanted to admit to it, Coach Clayton was prejudiced.

“I’m not jealous of some preppy Northside bitch that gets everything he wants.” Pea spat back.

“Not everything.” I reminded him as I nudged my elbow against his. “You insinuate that Reggie looked at me in a way that gave you the impression you needed to feel worried and threatened.” My arm looped through his, curling into his radiating warmth. “I’m telling you that you have nothing to worry about.”

“For a girl who’s white girl wasted, you sound pretty sober and sure of yourself.”

I rolled my eyes, “Call it a gift.” I dismissed as I tugged on his arm, “You have me, okay?”

Sweet Pea stopped, looking down at me with more softness than before. He seemed genuinely more at ease with that verbal confirmation, “Okay.” He nodded, taking my hand in a gentle squeeze.

I smiled smugly, tilting my head back as I peered up at him, “Now kiss me.”

Sweet Pea pulled his head back, facial expression screaming ‘fuck that’ as his nose wrinkled in disgust, “You puked.”

I shrugged, “You’ve kissed worse.” I wasn’t entirely sure if that was true — I was just assuming.

Unable to remain annoyed, he brought his hands up to caress either side of my face, thumbs gently smoothing over my cheeks as he gave in, “Touché.” I happily met his lips with enthusiasm, fingers gripping the material of his jacket tightly as his worked their way into my hair.

When we were finally able to pull away from each other, he frowned as he took my hands in his, “You’re freezing.” He chided quietly, bringing them to his lips to blow hot air over them.

“It is still winter.” I reminded him as he pulled me forward; we weren’t walking too much longer before Sunnyside came into view. I raced him to the trailer, pushing him over as he muttered under his breath and chased after me.

I held my finger to my lips as Pea fumbled with the keys to the door, the jingling echoing in the dead silence of the night. Once inside and out of the cold, he was quick to evade my advances. One too many times we had walked home from Pop’s, and I had shoved my icy fingers under his shirt and against his warm back. And he hated it. Every time.

I stripped my outer layers, ditching my stained sweater in the living room, and then the shirt that covered my torso, leaving me exposed in my deep green bra. “Stop that.” He whined as he backed into his room, his jacket thrown over the back of a kitchen chair.

“Stop what?” I innocently asked as I brought my fingers to the button on my jeans, following his every step.

“I know what you’re doing.” He replied, trying to hold his ground and hide his smile.

“Baby,” His head fell back momentarily, pulling a groan from the back of his throat, “if you want me to stop then you’ll have to come make me.”

“And risk you sliding your icicles all over me?”

I pushed the denim down my legs, stepping out of them (rather awkwardly, as the tight material clung to my calves). I shook my hair away from my face and over my shoulders, now standing in the center of his bedroom in a matching underwear set and playful eyes.

His resolve vanished quickly, determined to find other ways to warm me up. After nearly forty minutes of teasing each
other back and forth, I had been pinned to the wall (watching his back muscles shift and ass tighten with every thrust in his closet mirror) and was left covered in crescent marks along my chest and thighs. My earlier exhaustion returned as we lay swaddled up together beneath his blanket, legs entwined as he ran his fingers along my back and over my hair.

The cold temperature of the room balanced his warmth, and I happily curled my arm over his abdomen to hug his naked frame tightly. It was well past four in the morning, leaving me with less than five hours to rest before my shift but I wasn’t overly concerned.

I wondered when all of my previous anger disappeared. It was hard to stay upset with him, and I felt much better about the situation now that I thought about it. He knew that I spoke to Reggie (well, had been speaking to Reggie. I hadn’t decided if I was still interested in talking to him), we had worked through our hiccup, and here I was. Contently laying in his arms, sucking up all of his warmth, wondering what I ever did to deserve someone like him. To deserve this.

I nuzzled my face into his chest, smiling to myself as his arms instinctively held me closer, “I love you.” I said softly, fingertips drawing lazy circles on his chest; he lifted his head just enough to peer down at me, brown hues wide with wonder and longing.

Sweet Pea shimmed down the mattress until our eyes were level with each other, lips searching for mind blindly in the dark, tongue demanding dominance. With my fingers locked into his hair, he peppered my face with kisses before he rested his forehead against mine. “I love you.” He whispered, mouth pulled into a smile.

I was sure I had fallen asleep long before he did given that he was still playing with my hair when I had started to drift into slumber safely secure in his arms. For the first time in a long time, I was able to sleep through the night without a single nightmare.
hi guys! quick lil note here - I'm taking some time off to work on some things I'm doing for my blog, and to sort through my muse and figure out the rest of the story. I have decided on where I want to go with the story and the characters, I'm just sitting in a really big slump atm. This isn't goodbye, merely a short hiatus that shouldn't last more than a month.

January 31st, 2018
6:28 PM

“She’s so pretty.” I sighed, leaning forward to look out of the window with my elbow perched on the sill. I could hear the collective snort of the boys in the living room. Feeling their eyes on me again as I turned my attention towards them; Sweet Pea’s controller sat in his lap, looking over at me with an amused (albeit slightly proud) smile as he pulled another long inhale from the cigarette perched between his lips.

“I still feel like she’s too good to be true,” Don grumbled from the recliner, hood pulled up around his hat. “You’re gonna spend more money on fixing her than what she’s worth.”

Danny lifted his shoulders in a shrug, eyes focused on the screen. “I dunno, man,” His head cocked to the side, looking over his shoulder briefly to glance at his brother before he returned his attention to the front as they waited for the screen to load. “I grilled the dude pretty good; engine looks perfect, everything checks out.”

“Lexy isn’t the prettiest girl in the yard anymore, Donny.” I mused smugly, fixing the blanket up to my chin again, “Dixie’s got her beat, easily.”

“Whatever.” He pouted, staring past me out of the window to where his truck was parked, deep cherry red paint shining in the evening sun.

After days of searching and calling around, I had finally found a car I could afford that still left me with some savings. It was an old two-door Wrangler Rubicon, and while it didn’t currently have a hardtop, it did mean I would have constant sunshine in the summer months. There was something I found so incredibly freeing about being on the back of Pea’s bike, and the thought of driving with the doors and top off gave me the same excitement.

Sweet Pea had brought her into Fogarty at the garage and had new tires installed, and even touched up her paint. She went from being an off-white to a pale forest green, and I was currently obsessed with her.

Maybe it was the idea that I was moving forward with my life, and making decisions that would bring me towards the future I pictured for myself. I had a family, I had found (what Toni still claimed to be) the great love of my life, and I had purchased my first vehicle and gained a little more independence.

I twisted, so I was on my back and leaned against Sweet Pea’s arm as he dropped his cigarette into the butt bucket. Jughead’s legs shifted, so they were propped up by the table, happily munching on a bag of Doritos in silence. He mentioned earlier that he had been roped into going to Veronica’s church-family-voodoo thing (as he explained it). He also grumbled about having to wear a suit and protested that he wouldn’t be leaving his beanie at home. I knew some part of him was super excited to have the opportunity to spend some time with Betty, even if it meant it was in the presence of their friends. That would be enough.
But I also knew that he was incredibly bothered by the whole recycled notion that the Serpents were to blame for every single problem this town had — including the beheading of some ancient statue in the dirtiest part in the town (fact, regardless of what anyone wanted to say). I understood his frustration, we all did, but Jughead had an inevitable tendency to be a little theatrical, so this also posed an issue. The boys couldn’t help but keep careful eyes on him, seeing as they had allowed him to dethrone Sweet Pea and take charge.

Still, no anyone was saying anything to stop it.

Teddy’s footsteps boomed from the kitchen as he and Dean carried in several bags of groceries on their arms, “A little help, please.” He called with a grunt, a quiet thud following his sigh as he released his grip and his bags dropped onto the floor. “Fuck, did I have the eggs?” He asked Dean in a panic, disappearing behind the couch as he bent down to examine any damage.

I watched as the boys continued their gameplay, seeming to have not heard Teddy’s request. Out of obligation, I placed my bare feet on the floor and padded into the kitchen, “Don’t worry, I’ve got it.” I grumbled in annoyance as I plucked a bag from the dining room floor and wandered over to the counter with it. “Assholes,” I muttered under my breath.

Dean and I moved quietly, weaving around each other to put the groceries away as quickly as possible prior to settling into our respective seats at the dining room table. We had to acquire a larger table and more chairs to accommodate the guests we entertained regularly. Since the merge of the Southside as one collective unit, Sweet Pea and his boys had warmed up quite nicely to Danny and Don.

I glanced over my shoulder to where Jughead and Sweet Pea sat on the larger of the two couches, entirely at ease in our already too small living room. “Damn boys are eating all our snacks,” Dean grumbled, then taking a sip of his beer. “We can’t afford to feed the neighbourhood.”

“I didn’t invite them.” I defended with a shrug, leaning back in my seat. “Donny hasn’t moved from the recliner since we got home from school.”

“Doesn’t he shower?” Teddy asked quietly, leaning over into Dean’s ear. Dean shrugged with his brows raised.

“He showers,” I reassured him, shooting a quick glare towards Dean. “He’s just in a weird mood. Too lazy for my liking, personally.”

“He has an attitude.” Dean corrected, glancing over to where his brother sat.

The sound of the television paused, Donovan’s head peering over the couch from the recliner with narrowed eyes, “Got something to say?”

“Nobody was talking to you.” Dean retorted as he lifted his drink to his lips again, returning his attention towards his boyfriend. Once the game resumed, he continued talking, “The boys don’t talk to me anymore — even less now that they’re at the Wyrm all the time. The hell are they doing till eleven every night?”

I leaned forward onto the mahogany and rubbed my palms over my bare arms, “Betting, mostly.”

“That wouldn’t explain the ‘tude.” Teddy leaned back with folded arms. “The boys don’t take anyone’s shit.”

“He hasn’t heard from Josh since Southside shut down.” I slipped, carefully watching him in my peripheral vision. “He calls him four times a day, constantly checking his phone —”

“So he misses his boyfriend?” Teddy asked.

“Not his boyfriend.” I corrected with an eye-roll, “Best friend.”

“Joshua grew up down the street, they’ve been partners in crime since they were like .. five.” Dean sighed, looking at the
polished table top. “Josh is as much his brother as I am.”

We sat unspeaking for a few moments while the sounds of gunshots and explosions filled the silence. Joshua had been *(what Don assumed)* bussed out to Seaside with the other half of Southside kids. That didn’t make much sense — if Josh only lived down the street, then what was the boundary for Riverdale High? Sunnyside was easily further out of the way than Ingleside Drive.

I stood from my seat, pushing it in as I wandered into the hallway from the kitchen, then upstairs to my room. I hadn’t planned on starting laundry until later after the boys had gone home, but I was searching for an excuse not to be present with them long enough to venture over to the Dunmel’s home.

I had never met Deborah in person, only ever heard her via speakerphone from Don’s room when she called to check in on Joshua. From my understanding, Deborah and Don didn’t get along well, so he refrained from visiting. I assumed if Donovan had gone in search of his friend, he had only gone once.

So I would go for him.

I trudged past the living room with my basket of laundry perched on my hip, dropping it onto the table next to the washing machine in the sunroom. I started the water, then measured the soap and separated the clothing. I wasn’t entirely sure if Don had gone to see her. To see him. How long would Joshua avoid his calls — had he heard about the merge with the Serpents? Was he angry? The list of possibilities was long and seemingly endless. There could be any number of reasons why he wouldn’t return Donovan’s phone calls or text messages, but it did seem odd for him to just drop off the face of the earth without so much as a parting word.

Once I had dumped the first load into the machine, I slipped on a pair of boots and a sweater, then snuck out of the back door in the kitchen. The boys were too immersed in their video game to notice the creak of the door, or of the wooden whining under my weight.

The weather in Riverdale seemed to fluctuate far too frequently, but the rain from the week prior had stuck around far longer than it was welcome. The soil was so dampened it never had time to recover, leaving large puddles to pool in various spots of our backyard. Carefully avoiding stepping in thick mud and puddles, I marched my way down the streets towards Ingleside, then bounded up the steps of the Dunmel house in no time at all.

I pulled my hood from over my head, knocked twice on the door and shoved my hands into the pockets of my sweater. There was a slight ruffle in the curtains covering the large bay window in the living room, only moments later light footsteps neared the door and the locked unhitched.

The women that answered the door didn’t look anything like the woman I had expected, honestly. She was rather small and appeared nervous. Her auburn hair was pulled back into a high ponytail, slender fingers gripping the wood of the door frame as she apprised me cautiously, “Can I help you?” She asked quietly, the blue of her sweater pulling out the green in her eyes. Deborah Dunmel was gorgeous in every sense of the word, answering the long-overdue wonder of where he had gotten his graciously good looks from. But this woman seemed lost, and sad.

“I’m Callie Hobbs,” I introduced, resorting to using a name she might be more familiar with. Out of all of the variations of my name, Joshua had picked and stuck to the one I liked the least out of spite. “Don’s cousin — I’m a friend of Josh’s, is he home?” I asked with a smile, hoping I appeared harmless and friendly.

Her face pinched together knowingly; Deborah shook her head once, already shoving the door shut when my hand shot out to press against the wood, “What do you think you’re doing —”

“Where is he?” I asked, voice sounding harsher than I intended. So much for harmless and friendly. There was something about the way this woman flinched when I took a step forward that should have bothered me, but I was so focused on trying to help Donovan that I couldn’t be bothered to care.
She hadn’t answered my question, and the longer we stood here the clearer it became: she couldn’t tell me where he was because she didn’t know.

“He hasn’t been home.” I lamented, bringing a hand up to pull my bangs from my face.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She sniffled, straightening her shoulders as she set her eyes into a hard glare. “You think I don’t know where my son is?”

I pulled my hand from the door, “How long has he been missing?” I asked, folding my arms over my chest.

“He isn’t missing,” She hissed, bracing her hand on the knob. “Now, get off my front porch.” The door was slammed in my face, leaving me to standing alone and in silence under the awning of the Dunmel’s front door. I wondered why we hadn’t heard about it, wondered why she wasn’t out looking for him. Why was she sitting at home, very obviously feeling sorry for herself but not making any means to change it?

Reluctantly, I turned and peered out into the street as my hands lifted my hood over my head once more, wondering if Donovan had come to the same conclusions. And if the anxiety of not knowing if his best friend was okay was what had his emotions at the surface. Unsure of what else I could do, I descended the stairs and trudged back through the rain towards Mooregate Crescent feeling utterly defeated and helpless.

**Saturday February 3rd, 2018**

**9:07 PM**

Another day had come and gone at Pop’s; I sat in a booth in the far corner restocking the napkin dispensers when the front bell rung as the door opened; an hour early, as per usual. Sweet Pea in all of his tall, handsome glory wandered through the door, eyes scanning the packed booths until his eyes landed on mine. Lifting his mouth into a lopsided grin, he swaggered over to where I sat and joined me.

“You’re early,” I noted as I lifted my eyes to the clock bolted to the wall above the door.

Sweet Pea shrugged as he leaned forward, resting his leathered arms on top of the table, “I wanted a milkshake.” He disclosed innocently, glancing up at me briefly with another smile before he averted his eyes to the dessert menu tucked behind the salt shaker.

I snorted with a slight shake of my head, “Wouldn’t have anything to do with keeping an eye on me, would it?”

“There was some drama at the Wyrm tonight, and Tall Boy’s leaving .. just some Serpent stuff.” Sweets replied wearily as he unfolded the menu, “Guess I just wanted to see you sooner than ten.” He reminded me with a pointed look.

I pressed my mouth into a firm line, moving the dispensers out of my way so I could lean forward to capture his lips with mine, “You’re sweet.” I murmured, smoothing my thumb across the skin of his cheek, “I’m fine, really. Pop wouldn’t let anyone come in here and badger his waitresses anyway.”

Sweet Pea frowned, taking my hands between his large ones to play with my fingers. “Yeah, that didn’t stop me from having someone sit outside the shop just in case.”

My brows furrowed in confusion, “What?”

He nodded once as he explained, “Jinj sat out there from twelve until three, Rex and Holly covered from then until now.”

“Why?” I pressed.

Sweets lifted his brows in slight amusement, lips returning to their previous grin, “You’re important to me, sweetness. I’m not taking any risks.” The sentiment behind his words was well-intended and incredibly charming, but I couldn’t shake
the idea that perhaps he was keeping close tabs on me because of Reggie.

I dismissed the idea before I could sit on it for too long, choosing to believe that we had moved past that — I had made myself clear, I had made how I felt about him very clear. He had no reason to worry about Reginald Mantle, not now and not ever.

“Always a gentleman,” I replied smoothly, lacing my fingers with his as he leaned forward again to take my bottom lip between his teeth playfully. He helped me finish filling the dispensers as we split a milkshake, listening to my nonstop chatter with the occasional nod; once the dinner rush had started, I had to abandon the booth to tend to customers.

FP walked through the door after some time with a knowing scowl and his hat in hand seeming defeated for the shift he had to work; I let out a tired sigh of relief knowing his arrival meant I would be able to leave shortly. He ventured over to where Sweet Pea sat, their tones hushing into lulled whispers as they leaned towards each other and spoke quietly amongst the conversation of the full restaurant.

As one of the last of tables I had been covering had retreated for the evening, I ripped my apron from my waist and darted into the back of the restaurant in search of my bag. Pea hadn’t said much of our plans for the evening, and I assumed we’d be going to the Wyrm, so I had carried an extra outfit in my overnight bag. I freshened up in the bathroom, fixing smudged makeup and reapplying deodorant prior to changing into the ripped black denim and red checkered flannel.

I clipped my bangs away from my face, throwing my bag over my shoulder with a final nod in approval before I snapped the light off and carefully beelined back into the front of the restaurant. Sweet Pea now stood by the till, two milkshakes in to-go containers along with a few bags of food.

I came around the counter, sniffing the bags with a hungry hum in approval. “Four bags?” I asked cautiously, trying to decipher just how much food he thought he was capable of eating (or myself, for that matter).

“Jughead’s talking to Betty, he’s comin’ to hangout when she goes home.” He explained, taking his change and receipt from FP with a tight-lipped grin.

The elder Serpent nodded, “Kid could use a distraction.”

All too excited to be rid of work for the next forty-eight hours and enjoy my first weekend off in months, I tugged eagerly on Sweet Pea’s arm. With parting nods, Pea grabbed the tray with the milkshakes and used his hip to open the door as we retreated.

The walk over the tracks into the Southside was always my preferred route. I hated crossing the bridge into the Northside, hated how it really felt as though we lived in two completely different worlds. With the tracks, it was just Pop’s and then Southside, and it was just as much our place as it was theirs.

I offered to carry the bags so I could free one of his arms to link mine through; we walked side by side down the sidewalk towards Sunset, exchanging quiet remarks about things we had heard over the day, about Veronica’s confirmation, about Jughead and the need to talk about what had our friend on his mind. I was quick to jump ship, thinking it be better to have him in an element he could relax — eat some burgers, watch some classic’s, spend some time with a few friends.

As soon as we had settled in the trailer, Pea messaged Jughead that the door was open and we would start without him. I showered quickly, soaking in every drop of hot water as I lathered my hair with the coconut scented conditioner Sweet Pea had purchased. Once dressed and dry, I plopped next to Sweet Pea’s frame on the sofa and plucked one of the burgers from the bag, dumping the fries onto my plate.

Pea and his obscenely innate obsession with old-school greasers had corrupted much of his DVD collection. His laptop had cramped out on him sometime back, so we had resorted to going through the box of movies he had established while he was growing up. It was a lot of Jackie Chan and Tom Cruise, but also a lot of classic’s like Footloose and Grease. I only had to take one quick peek at the vibrant colours on the screen to know he had chosen Grease — for the fourth time
“No Jug yet?” I asked as I took a bite of the burger, bringing the straw of my milkshake to my lips.

“Hasn’t even replied,” Pea replied absently as he stared at the screen, elbows rested on his knees as he picked at his fries.

I felt my brows raise as I sat back and hugged the container of fries to my chest. As the movie continued, food slowly disappeared as we talked through the songs and we eventually shifted so that I was resting my head in his lap. The sound of the front door slamming open was alarming given the quiet of the rest of the trailer; I shot upright, hair caught under Pea’s thigh as I looked to where Jughead stood in the doorway, holding up a bag of Cool Ranch chips and his laptop. “What a snoozefest.” He commented teasingly as he examined us on the couch, then shut the door behind him and kicked his boots off.

“We were waiting for you.” I yawned, lifting my arms over my head in a stretch as Jughead wandered over to the microwave to warm his meal.

Sweet Pea paused the movie and excused himself as he retreated to the bathroom. There was nothing but the sound of the microwave circulating to be heard until Jughead came around into the living room to lean against the wall, “So, uh,” He looked down, folding his arms across his chest as he carefully picked through his next words, “Betty and I reconciled tonight.”

I looked up from his laptop, connected the HDMI cable into the back of Pea’s television and smiled over at him, “Is that so?”

He nodded, “Yeah. It’s just... better when we’re together. And we talked, and then there was —” He cut himself off, pulling his lower lip between his teeth as he shook his head.

“It’s okay,” I dismissed with a wave, “I’m shy too, no need for details.”

“This has never happened before, and I’m not sure what I’m supposed to ..” He struggled for a moment, eyes closing in defeat as he turned to press his back against the wall, “Feel.”

I shifted my body, so I was facing him, propping my head up on my knuckles with a sigh. “Hopefully no regrets,” I started teasingly, “Look, if Betty is exactly the way you describe her, then I know this is as big of a thing for her as it is for you. Okay? Just one step at a time, J.” I encouraged, patting the space next to me as the microwave beeped loudly and the toilet in the bathroom flushed.

We all sunk into the cushions of the couch, the banter between the boys fading as I listened to the dialogue of the movie. I tucked my feet under Pea’s thigh, propping my elbow up against the armrest of the couch to hold my head up. As each minute passed, my eyelids grew heavier, and I began to struggle to keep them open. The exhaustion that had swept over my frame weighed down on me like a blanket, and lulled me into a deep sleep.

Sunday February 4th, 2018

3:58 AM

I didn’t remember being moved from the couch to the bed, and I didn’t remember when Sweet Pea joined me. The sound of vibrations against wood woke me from my slumber, eyes trying to focus on the outlines of shapes in the dark room as my mind registered that a phone was ringing.

I rubbed the heel of my palm into my eye and groaned as I stretched, reaching over Sweet Pea’s shoulder to grab my phone on his table next to the bed. I squinted against the brightness of the screen, swiping left on the incoming call with a disgruntled sigh as Sweet Pea groaned, detangled our limbs and rolled over.

“It’s four in the morning, Sabine, what do you —”
“Calliope, I need your help.” My body froze in confusion, eyes opening slowly to stare at the ceiling as the sound her of her shallow breathing sounded in my ear. “I fucked up, and I owe someone money — and usually that isn’t a problem except she wants the money by midnight or she’s gonna fucking kill me.”

I held the phone away from my ear as her voice raised in anxiety, “Sab, what are you talking about?” I asked as I sat upright, stepping over the sleeping Serpent’s legs to get to his bedroom door and out into the living room — I paused by the front door, noticing Jughead’s sleeping figure on the couch, beanie pulled down over his eyes with his arms folded across his chest. The television had been shut off and the garbage had been cleaned up, meaning the boy had only just settled into their beds for the night.

“— cocaine, I **fucked** up, Allie. I didn’t think I’d be in there more than an hour.” She cried into my ear; I held a hand to my head and tried to focus on her again.

“Wait, what **cocaine**?” I hissed, feet carrying me to the bathroom. I flipped the lock shut behind me, turning on the light despite the loud fan that accompanied it.

“It wasn’t for me — I was supposed to bring it to Collin for the prom after-party he’s throwing. And I stopped at Micha’s on my way back from Greendale, and someone stole my bag.”

I glared at my reflection in the mirror at the sound of his name, licking my lips as I shook my head in defeat, “So you’re not doing drugs, just selling them. And hanging with **Micha**. Even better.”

“This isn’t fucking funny, Allie!” She yelled into the receiver, her annoyance thick. “My life is literally being threatened, and you’re sitting here **judging** my poor life choices — you know what, you have the rest of your life to tell me I fucked up, but you don’t get to do that right now, okay? You have to fucking help me.”

“With what, Sabine? You’re the one with an allowance.”

“She won’t wait until that comes in.” Sabine sighed in frustration, “I need to borrow. You’ll get it back before the end of the week, you know I’m good for it. I only have three-hundred on me.”

My teeth picked at the inside of my cheek, mind reeling through what savings I had left in my account. Depending on how much she needed, what I had should be enough. “How much do you owe?” The line was silent; she had stopped sniffing, the only sound I could make out was cars in the background. I hung my head braced a hand on my knee. “Sabine.”

“I’m short twenty-seven.”

“**Hundred?**” I yelled incredulously, surely waking one (**if not both**) of the boys from their sleep, so I dropped my tone quickly. “How much did you have on you?”

“Three ounces.”

I smacked my hand against my forehead, turning to face the door with a long sigh. “What are you doing with blow, anyway?”

“It was for a friend.” She repeated monotonously, “I haven’t done it before, and didn’t plan on doing delivery after. One time deal.”

“And now you owe a dealer three thousand fucking dollars, even though an ounce costs eight hundred a piece.” I retorted dryly; part of my anger was coming from the fact my work-free weekend had gone from two days of naked canoodling with my boyfriend in his bedroom to trying to figure out where the fuck I was getting another twelve hundred dollars from to pay her debt off. I couldn’t win that much betting with Pea, not with the lack of body in the Serpent den in the last few weeks, so I’d have to find another way. Despite the inconvenience, I preferred if my best friend wasn’t cut into bits or shot in the head, so naturally I knew I would eventually accept what was.
The line was quiet for a few minutes, neither of us having much to say. I promised her I would come up with the money, just to text me the address and the time to meet her. With my hands braced on the sink, I took three deep breaths. A dull ache had started throbbing in the rear of my head, no doubt as a result of sudden onset stress.

The floorboards creaked, and there was a gentle knock on the wooden door. “Come back to bed.” Sweet Pea pleaded quietly. Of course I wanted to go back to bed, but I knew that my mind would not rest and the anxiety pumping through my veins would not stop until I had come up with the money. Until I had found a solution.

I unhitched the lock and slid the door open, glancing up at Sweet Pea’s tired features with a grimace, “Okay.” I mumbled, lazily wrapping my arms around his waist to hug him. We stood embraced for a few moments, his fingers pulling through the tangled knots in my hair gently as I focused on his consistently beating heart. He bent over to press his lips to the top of my head and pulled me back into his bedroom with a sleepy smile.

We fell backwards onto the bed, and after twisting onto my side, Pea spooned in against me and pulled the blanket up over our shoulders to block out the chilly air. His arm settled over my waist, pulling me tightly against his chest while he shoved his face into the crook of my neck and sighed into the flesh.

I waited for his breathing to even out, thumb aimlessly stroking the soft cotton fabric of his duvet. We remained laying still for close to five minutes before he spoke and broke the silence of the room, “You good?” He asked, his voice quieter than I expect it to be, lips brushing against my shoulder.

I twisted so that was I was facing him, snaking a leg over his hip, “Did you hear any of that phone call?” Two heartbeats later, he nodded once slowly, as though he were ashamed to have been listening in. “She’s playing with fire, and this game is only gonna end one way for her this time.” I hissed into the darkness, fingers still wrapped around Pea’s.

The room fell silent, thumbs gently rubbing together comfortingly. “What do we gotta do?” He asked me expectantly, propping himself up onto his elbow.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room, making our his features now that I was facing him. I shouldn’t have been surprised by his initial response. I expected some sort of snide comment about Sabine, backlash of any sort — it was certainly a surprise I wasn’t ungrateful for. “I need money.” I started, bringing my hand up to fiddle with his tags.

“How much money?” He pressed, bringing a hand up to pull the stray strands of hair around my face back behind my ear.

I gnawed on my lower lip, “Twelve hundred.” I murmured quietly, dropping my eyes to his bare chest. I splayed my fingers over right peck, palm pressing firmly against the flesh to feel the thunderous beating of his heart. “Long story short, she made a bad decision and it’s led to a pretty severe consequence.”

Sweet Pea paused for a moment, holding up his finger with a quick, “Hang on.” As he detangled himself from the blanket and threw his legs off the bed. The corner of the mattress then lifted, shifting me to the right abruptly as he let it slam down onto the bed frame again. He opened the flat pencil case, pulling out two wads of cash with thick elastics around it. “It’s mostly twenties, but there’s about ..” He mulled over the numbers in his head, eyes looking back and forth between the two before he shrugged and offered one of the bunches to me, “Seven hundred.”

I snapped my eyes to his, raising a brow as I sat upright slowly and took the stack in my hand. “Seven hundred is a lot, baby, I can’t take this.” I shook my head as I fingered through the cash, quickly rounding the numbers.

Sweet Pea braced his hands on his knees, glaring up at me from the ground. I could now make out the sour scowl of his lips and his unruly bedhead. “Don’t start this.”

“We can find another way.”

“Like what, hm?” He asked, propping his elbows up on the mattress, staring up at me with a quirked brow.

“You can take a hundred and triple it, no problem.” I waved him off, pulling on his hands to coerce him back onto the bed.
“C’mon, Sweets, we can talk about this in the morning —”

“Sweetness, I can’t do that with the way the den’s been looking the last few weeks. And I can’t bet against the boys.”

“Well, that’s what we have to do, okay? I won’t take it all, I can’t.”

“You can.” Pea argued with single nod, “And you will, not just because I love you but because she’s your best friend.”

I licked my lips, dropping my hands into my lap with an expectant look.

“Plus, it gives me a leg up on her.”

“There we go.” I sighed with an eye roll, retreating back into the pillows as Sweet Pea finally joined me on the mattress and under the duvet. “Fine,” I said quietly after he had stopped shifting, “I’ll take the money.” We settled into our previous positions, only this time his lips lazily kissed along my neck, teeth pulling gently at the bruising flesh and while my heart raced in excitement, body reacting to the all-too familiar sensation of his lips against my neck, my mind couldn’t have been further away.

8:47 PM

I sat in the breakroom upstairs at the Wyrm, fingers nervously pulling through the cash for the fourth time — Sweet Pea had given me what he could, but we were still short by five hundred. There was no way we could win that kind of money on a night like tonight. The bar was empty, unsurprising for a Sunday; Sweet Pea joined Fogarty and the boys around the pool table as soon as we joined them earlier in the evening.

When Sweet Pea finally emerged from the bedroom with his jacket on his torso in the early evening, the anxiety I had felt earlier in the morning returned and my stomach flipped uneasily. We decided that we would leave straight from the Wyrm to Greendale so he left his keys on the table in the kitchen and followed me out to the Jeep.

We had been at the bar for nearly four hours; Sweet Pea certainly had a better poker face than I did. He had been playing against Don since we arrived, hustling Fogarty out of all of his money. It wasn’t much, and it definitely wouldn’t be doubled. We would pocket what we could when the night was over, but with the way Pea had been snacking all evening, it was doubtful we’d have much left after he paid his tab.

I exhaled and straightened, only now just noticing that Teddy stood in the doorway with his apron tied loosely around his waist. “Are you feeling okay?” He asked, certainly appearing uncertain with his question.

I couldn’t form a verbal response, so I sighed with a shrug. He let the door close behind him, coming to join me at the table. We sat in silence for a long while; admittedly, his company was quite calming. What didn’t help is when he started asking me questions — I completely spaced.

“This whole thing with Sabine is freaking me out a little bit.” Teddy glanced sideways at me knowingly. “Fuck.” I breathed, dropping my head into my palms.

“Just tell me what’s going on.”

“I can’t.” I shook my head, tremble returning to my core. Everything internally felt like it was shaking, like I was cold. Like I was standing in the middle of a blizzard with nothing but my hoodie. “You’ll tell Dean — out of obligation to him, because he’d fully kick your ass if you kept something like it from him.”

“So I show up and say I know something incredibly stressful is happening that should have adult help,” He looked at me again, only harder as his voiced dropped. “But I have no idea what it is so we can’t help.”

I nodded, “Sounds great.” I slapped his shoulder, getting up from my seat to retreat from the room.
“You need to tell someone.” He replied, grabbing my bag to pull it from my shoulder.

“I did.” I gestured to the door, “I told Sweets.”

Teddy’s frame crumpled in defeat, his eyes rolling as he shook his head, “Someone other than your partner in crime, Cal.”

I paused again, contemplating his words. “Fine.” I spun on my heels to return to my seat. “Don.”

Teddy shook his head again, “No, I was thinking more like Hog Eye or some—”

I glared down at him, dropping my bag into the seat, “Go get me Donovan. End of discussion.”

“You’re mouthy,” He sneered as he stood, eyes drilling into mine as he shouldered past me to the door. “I’m just trying to help, but fine. I’ll let the children play.”

When the door shut, I sunk into his seat and dropped my head back into my hands. He was right, if I told Dean then we could get the remaining five hundred. But I also knew that Dean would refuse to let me go, rip Sweet Pea another asshole and then show up to support Sabine himself. She’d kill me for telling him in the first place — it was unnecessary drama I didn’t want nor did I need.

“What are we doing?” I asked myself quietly, scratching at my head with another sigh. Sabine and I had always been prone to this sort of drama — prior to this whole new town, new me act I had going on, we used to be those girls that were always down for a good time. We never touched hard drugs, but we did on occasion leave with strangers to go to other parties. We snuck out of the house every weekend, all weekend. All but one of my counts for underage drinking were nights I was with Sabine. We weren’t those girls anymore; Sabine had experienced heartbreak for the first time, and Byron died.

Things were rocky for a while. I had been ripped from my best friend overnight, left most of my entire life behind without much thought. Had I been a little older, and had a little more perspective, I might’ve packed photo albums.

Of course I had the storage closet that would open once I turned eighteen, but there were nights I would have killed to have a photo of my parents together when they were in their teens. I had no photos of my mom — I had seen them, but none of them were something I owned.

I had one sketchbook that held small doodles of her features. I was sure they weren’t entirely accurate to how she looked, the image in my mind isn’t as clear as it used to be. I tried, but the only thing that really mattered was that they served some sort of tangible comfort in my times of need.

I had a hard time getting my feet on the ground when I got to Greendale, but once I did there was no looking back. I had sight of the bigger picture, I wouldn’t make the same mistakes. I wouldn’t let history repeat itself. I refused to become my father, I was determined to be anything but.

The door opened, sneakers hitting the wood, “Teddy said you needed me — woah.” He froze, door shutting behind as as I sat upright and wiped underneath my eyes. The sob broke past my lips when his face crumpled, hands immediately covering my mouth to quiet myself as I hunched into his arms. I’ll let the children play — fuck, we were kids. Circumstance had forced us to assume adult responsibilities and survival tactics at a younger age, but this wasn’t circumstance anymore. It was a dangerous game to play, and I didn’t want my friend to get burned.

“Don, I’m fucking losing my mind.”

10:35 PM

It felt a little strange, watching Sweet Pea adjust the seat to fit his body — even when the seat went as far back as it could, he still looked too big for the space. He belonged on a bike, we both knew that. That wasn’t news to either of us. I never questioned letting him drive though, despite knowing he didn’t have a driver's license, just his motorcycle — even so, this
was necessary given the predicament we had been thrown into.

Well, I had been thrown into. Sweet Pea was merely adhering to his boyfriend duties.

I sighed quietly to myself, reaching forward to flip on the heat while Sweets started the Jeep. My fingers pressed against the heater eagerly, body shivering slightly. “How aren’t you freezing?” I asked, a little harsher than I intended but perhaps that was because I was envious of the obvious fact he always just happened to be naturally warmer than I was.

“You’re cold?” He asked, reaching with both hands to take mine. He rubbed his palms over my fingers, the warmth burning my skin most pleasantly. I watched his long fingers wrap around my hands, in awe of how the heat trailed through my veins, causing an immediate eruption of goosebumps to coat my skin.

“You’re not?” I asked dubiously, slipping my hands away from him so he could fix the radio and place his hand on the gearshift.

Sweet Pea shrugged, pulling the gear into drive before he twisted the wheel and brought the Jeep into a steady roll forward. I looked out of my window, watching the group outside of the Wyrm laugh — my eyes momentarily locked with Don’s before I moved my stare forward as the car pulled into the street.

In the last few months I had learned a lot about Donovan. He loves cars almost as much as he loves girls, he loves to laugh, but more importantly I learned that Don really took this adoption situation very seriously. He had adapted to hearing ‘sister’ instead of ‘cousin’, and after some time the rest of us followed. I turned to him in times of need, and I knew he didn’t have any money but he would listen. He’d talk me through it. He’d talk me down. *Eyes on the prize, Hobbs.*

Tonight had been no different; Don had been the one to come console me, and it hadn’t been until tonight that I noticed how deeply this sibling thing went.

I refused to have Sweet Pea know. He’d would have had second thoughts about going, and he was already pretty hesitant with me going to begin with. Don understood, decided to coach me through my thoughts to find the goal, and focus on it. Admittedly, that had helped for the time being; we were just leaving for Greendale and we had about an hour before we needed to meet up with Sabine.

“Cold doesn’t really bother me all too much.” He said merely after a few moments, shifting in the driver’s seat for a moment before he awkwardly rested his left elbow against the window and leaned to the side, guiding the wheel with his right hand.

“Everyone gets cold,” I argued spitefully, cursing to myself when I inherently leaned forward into the heaters again.

Pea chuckled, rubbing his lips with his free hand, “Not everyone, sweetness.” He corrected.

The ride into Greendale was quiet, both of us too preoccupied with our minds to really fill in the gaps of silence in between the GPS navigation. The road was familiar and long, and as the dashboard clock switched to **11:28 PM**, Pea pulled into a gas station nearly halfway there and all but fell out of Dixie with a groan. “Holy fuck.” He groaned as he rubbed his knees, bangs falling into his eyes as he leaned forward. “This thing is too small.”

“I’m too small.” I barked back, glaring at him from the passenger seat.

He turned to me and braced his hands on the door and roof of the Jeep, smile wide as leaned into the car and sneered, “Pocket size.” He teased, lips securing themselves to mine in a short, sweet kiss. When my eyes opened, he was beaming down at me, contentment having overtaken his previously anxious (*almost angry*) expression.

“I love you.” I mused quietly, bringing a hand up to move his bangs away from his eyes. “But I’m not gonna pump the gas for you — *vamanos*, baby. We’ve got thirty minutes.” I patted his chest expectantly, sitting back in my seat.
Sweet Pea’s smile slowly shifted as he ran his tongue across his lips and retreated with narrowed eyes. Once he disappeared behind the body of the car, I pulled my phone from the dashboard and checked in on Sabine. She hadn’t sounded quite right in the last few hours, progressively getting more concerning with each new message that appeared on my screen. I couldn’t tell what might be the core reason for her panic. The fact her life was being threatened, the fact she owed a drug lord money — the list went on.

I had spent the last year in Greendale, and knew most of the town like the back of my hand. Pea was reluctant to let me drive, but after some (hard) bargaining, he was easily won over. He sat in the passenger seat with his eyes focused on the road for the remainder of the trip; we pulled into the empty parking lot that once belonged to a Walgreens. Sabine sat on the curb, noticing the Jeep’s headlights with a squint before she eagerly stood and ran to where we were parked.

Sweet Pea hopped out to let her crawl into the backseat — she protested at first, but he pointed out that he was a lot bigger than she was and she would definitely fit. Once they had settled again, I turned in my seat to look at her, reaching back to take her hand. “Thank you.” She sighed once the door shut. Pea flipped on the light overhead; my eyes noticed her dark circles and bare face.

“Have you slept?” I asked, reaching forward to grab a fistful of her shirt to sniff the front of it, “Or been home?”

Sabine slapped my hand away, “No, I haven’t.” She bit back, folding her arms as she sat back in her seat. “I’ve been cafe hopping.” She shrugged, “Told mom I was staying at Nancy’s.”

“You ever gonna man up and just ask for more freedom?” I wondered as I turned back in my seat to pull the vehicle into drive, looping back around to the exit to head towards the docks. “They’re gonna catch you one of these days, and then your whole life is over, dude.”

“I know that, asshole.” She sneered, “It’s just not a good time.”

“It’s never a good time.” I explained to Sweet Pea quietly, glancing over at his silent frame in the passenger seat. His right hand gripped the handle above his head, appearing distracted. “So, who exactly is this drug queen?”

“She’s new to the town, but doesn’t really go anywhere without her friends.” Sabine replied from the darkness of the backseat, voice suddenly much quieter now that I had asked about the woman. “Overheard my phone call with Collin, said she could hook me up. At the time, she didn’t seem like she could’ve been much of a danger.”

“You don’t know very much about drug dealers, do you?” Sweet Pea asked with a chuckle, eyes dropping to the hands that now were folded in his lap. “Rookie mistake number one, amigo.”

“Bite me, Chachi.” Sabine retorted weakly, causing Sweet Pea’s eyes to move from the road to meet mine in worry. The address had led us to an abandoned warehouse that Greendale used to use for deli meats and poultry by the docks. We circled around the building a few times, finding an open window on the second floor. Pea hoisted us up, our frames climbing up onto the platform just outside of the window; Sweet Pea was able to push it open the rest of the way so we could squeeze through.

Once on the inside, I pulled my cell phone from my jacket pocket and examined the time. Sabine quickly tugged on my sleeve, face worried as she inhaled deeply and gripped my shoulders, “I trust you, I do, but I don’t wanna die here.”

In all of the years we had known each other, I was usually the one who found herself in trouble. Sabine was tactful and cautious, never straying too far out of line, never pulling attention to herself to allow for anything wrong to ever really happen. I never thought there would have been a day when she needed my help — where I had to assume the role of the cool and collected best friend, to have a game plan.

What would Sabine do? I thought wearily to myself, staring into her eyes in search of an answer. She always knew what to do, always knew what to say. I wasn’t sure how she did it — assumed her to be some sort of witch or something, thinking it wasn’t humanly possible for someone to be that secure, that sure of themselves. How she was able to make promises
and follow through with them, even if they seemed impossible to me.

But for her, I could do the same. For her, I would go to the same lengths to ensure her safety.

Instinctively, I reached forward to take her hand in mine and pulled her to my side. There was something about the human contact that seemed to ease an anxious soul; hoping I could provide some form of solace to her troubled mind, I wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulder and squeezed, “You’re not dying tonight, Sab.” I reminded her.

“You don’t know that,” She argued, shaking her head again as tears brimmed her seafoam hues, “You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I pressed in a firm tone, turning to face her fully as I rested my hands on her shoulders, “I won’t let anything happen to you,” I promised. I meant it. If it meant stepping up to shield her, if it meant hurting somebody else to protect her, I wouldn’t hesitate.

The door finally clicked as Sweet Pea unhitched the latch and shoved it open with a hard push. Sabine’s fingers tightened around mine as we wandered forward into the building, and then down the stairs. The survival instinct inside of her had bunkered in — this Sabine was sober, alert and what I presumed to be in flight mode.

Sweet Pea, on the other hand, looked like he was fitted comfortably in fight mode. He wasn’t necessarily back up so much as he was a bodyguard. His eyes scanned each hall as we passed, feet moving carefully as he guided us deeper into the basement of the warehouse. The echoes of his heavy boots and Sabine’s heels were all that could be heard as we ventured through the empty corridors, drafts sending shivers along my spine.

Twenty-five hundred dollars — that’s how much cash was wadded in the envelope burning in my back pocket. It wasn’t all of what she owed, but it was all we had. I didn’t know who we were dealing with, or what we were walking into, but something didn’t settle well with my gut, and it left my stomach flipping nervously. I entwined our fingers together, and pulled her closer to me as Sweet Pea’s towering frame came to an abrupt halt; his shoulders were tense, body frozen in place.

I started to move around him with an annoyed, “The fuck, Pea?” when his arm shot out to yank me back behind his frame.

Sabine, unsure of how to respond, folded her arms around herself and shrugged. I peered around his arm, noticing the petite blonde woman that stood several feet in front of us. Her leather baring arms were folded across her chest, head tilted to the side as she examined Sweet Pea with a scrutinized expression, and then she laughed once, short and full of distaste.

“I really thought I had seen the last of you.” She sighed almost as though she were annoyed.

“Sabine,” Pea hissed, eyes closing as he pulled his brows together, ‘Please tell me you don’t owe Peabody money.”

Bewildered, Sabine walked around his frame to scrutinize his face carefully, “How do you know Penny?”

It was quiet for a few moments; the sound of the crickets in the tall grass outside echoed throughout the empty building. Penny was the one to break the silence, taking a step forward into the light of one of the dim bulbs that illuminated the room. “Is this the girl?” She asked, pointing a finger towards my peeking frame.

When Sweet Pea refused to respond with his words, but rather with clenched fists and an angry glower, she cackled loudly and dragged her tongue across her mouth from corner to corner.

“She was amused, clearly relishing in how deep under his skin she was able to get. I was slightly impressed — Sweets had an incredibly short fuse, and most were aware that it didn’t take much to upset him or set him off. I had never seen this much restraint on his part before. Typically so prone to blowing his top, letting his clouded rage get the better of him, seeing Sweet Pea so quiet, so tamed — unnerving was an understatement.
Something was definitely wrong.

I reached forward, taking his large fingers in mine with a hard squeeze to pull him back to reality, “Baby?” I mused, eyes focused on Penny’s frame as she sauntered forward again, hips swaying with each step. “On a scale of one to Teddy, how intimidated are we?” I tried to defuse the situation was light humor, tugging his thumb.

Sweet Pea exhaled slowly, pulling his eyes up from the ground to cast a glare forward towards her approaching figure. Sabine ran a shaky hand through her hair and took a step back, “The only people that know of this psycho are her clients and her runners.” She murmured as she stared at the back of Pea’s head. Her face twisted as she weighed the options, now viewing Pea in a new light. “So which is it, Chachi?”

“Runners?” I asked, stepping around his arm with a forceful shove of his arm, “Like drug runners?” I pressed with narrowed eyes. I wanted to sound angry and enraged, but the crushing disbelief slammed down on my shoulders like bricks. Sweet Pea’s refusal to meet my gaze spoke as confirmation enough; in denial, I shook my head as folded my arms. I was sure there was a lot he had kept from me, I was sure there was a lot his lifestyle called for that I didn’t want to know about, but this? Selling drugs — hard drugs? “There’s no way —”

“Way.” Penny interrupted, hands dipped into her pockets as she shrugged. “World ain’t as black and white as you think it is, Tinkerbell.”

I shifted my glare over my shoulder to Penny, then took another step towards Sweet Pea, “You wouldn’t sell drugs —”

“Well, he didn’t sell them,” Penny interjected again; I had to clench my fist shut around a handful of his leather to keep myself from spinning on my heels. “He just delivered them — he owed me a favour.”

Patience worn thin, I released his jacket from my grip and turned to face her with a tight jaw and hard eyes, “Who are you?” I seethed as Pea’s fingers worked to grip my wrists and pull me backwards. She was incredibly irritating, and not in the least bit scary.

“Hi,” She waved, taking another step forward to examine me better; Sweet Pea shoved me behind his frame once more, and brandished his knuckles as other figures joined us in the shadows. For a moment or two, her eyes were scrutinizing and squinted, then they softened as her head tilted. “I’m Penny — Nate’s big sister.”

“And Nate is?” Was this woman insinuating that ‘Nate’ was Sweet Pea? I was aware that I wasn’t really in a position to point fingers, given that he still didn’t know about my dad, but I assumed that he would have at least told me he had some sort of family — especially if he had a sister.

But thinking back on all of our time together, Pea hadn’t said a single word about his childhood at all — if it didn’t include Teddy or Fangs, I hadn’t heard about it.

“Nathaniel,” Penny corrected with a smile, looking up at Pea. ‘Peabody.” She added sweetly, almost proudly, hitting her heel against the ground once with an amused laugh before she turned to retreat to her side of the room. She tossed a quick glance to Sweet Pea over her shoulder, “You should see the look on your face right now — priceless.”

I quickly scanned my eyes over the length of her body in disbelief, then raised a brow, “Does it look like I was born yesterday?”

“Apparently.” She barked back, refolding her arms across her chest, turning her attention to Sweet Pea expectantly.

He looked down at me; jaw clenched tightly under the surface as his nostrils flared and he spoke through gritted teeth, “We have different dads.” That was it — that was all he had to say. There was no explanation, no apology, no defense.

I could feel Sabine’s eyes on me as I took a step away from him; then shared a look of worry, his fingers reaching forward for me. I evaded his hand, pulling the envelope from my rear pocket to hold out to Penny as I walked towards her. “Sabine’s cut.”
Penny took the stack from my hand, counting through the bills skillfully prior to her head tilting to the side, “Her cut was an even three — there’s only two-fifty here.”

“That’s all we had.” I snapped as I crossed my arms. “She only owes for three ounces, that’s more than enough.”

Penny paused for a moment, eyes focused on me curiously as she ran her thumb along the bills in her hand. “Tell you what: if you can come up with the remaining five hundred before sunrise, I won’t blow your girlfriend’s brains out.”

I felt the heat drain from my face; body left feeling cold and clammy as I scanned my eyes along the several figures that now loomed along the edges of the room. Their shoulders were layered in thick leathers, chests bare and jeans ripped. One face, in particular, stood out amongst the crowd, his hair pulled down into his eyes and mouth taunt in distaste as he hid in the shadows.

Joshua’s eyes opened to meet mine briefly, chin lifting as he swallowed and stepped forward, drawing in the others around him.

“Sweet Pea ...” I whispered anxiously as the familiarity of the faces resonated in my bones. Staring back were several faces of former Southside classmates alongside Eddie and his friends, only now noticing the studs on their leather that gleamed tauntingly in the dim light of the room.

His fingers reached for me, feet tripping over each other as he pulled me to his chest and wrapped an arm around my shoulders as the other reached around to hold Sabine to his back. “She’s not staying here.” He stated.

“There’s a quaint little biker bar up the road on Westmount, and I know brother dearest has a horseshoe shoved up his ass. Shouldn’t be too difficult for you to win that kinda cash.” Penny pocketed the envelope and retreated to stand next to one of the Ghoulies that had ventured too close for comfort. And for a moment I was pulled back to October, nearly half a year ago, when I had found myself in a similar position in Southside’s parking lot. The first time Sweet Pea had been around to save the day — this time, he didn’t have the same backup he had before.

Penny Peabody meant business. Judging by the number of bodies that now lined the walls, I assumed she didn’t travel alone frequently. I looked up at Sweet Pea, all anger in regards to his drug running momentarily put on hold as his eyes carefully surveyed the group and his body froze.

He didn’t know what to do.

“We’ll do it,” I said quickly, meeting Penny’s eyes over my shoulder. “But she comes with us; I won’t leave her here.”

Penny licked her lips, eyes drinking in our entwined frames with an amused smirk as she shrugged, “You can stay in her place.” She replied to me, though eyes were knowingly trained on Sweet Pea.

“Absolutely not.” Sweet Pea snarled back.

I placed a hand on his chest, “I can do that.” I nodded.

“Calliope.” He hissed angrily as his eyes met mine, tugging desperately on my arms as he shook my shoulders. “What are you doing?” There was an urgency to his tone, his eyes searching, hoping for some reasoning to what he deemed to be my insanity. “She’s not holding you ransom.”

“She’s not; I’m staying willingly. I would rather Sab were with you than here, anyway.” I whispered, meeting Sabine’s gaze around his arm.

Sweet Pea bent down slightly so he could recapture my attention, face screaming with desperation, ‘I would rather I didn’t leave you alone with her.”

“You don’t have to worry about me.” Penny chimed from behind me.
“See?” I encouraged, removing myself from his grip, “I’ll be fine.”

Sweet Pea and Sabine watched in slight misery as I joined Penny’s side; it was almost immediately thereafter I felt two pairs of hands latch onto my arms tightly to secure me in place, dragging me behind Penny’s frame. My feet dragged along the floor, wrists twisting as I pulled against their restraints.

The colour drained from Pea’s face, leaving his eyes burning in anger as his legs pushed him forward, his hands clenched into tight fists. He was stopped quickly, held back by three separate bodies as the rest of Penny’s backup circled in around him and Sabine.

Penny stood between the two clusters, amusement spreading her lips in a broad smile as she looked back and forth from Sweet Pea to me. As though what she had seen had given her some confirmation, like everything had somehow fallen into place and she hadn’t even been trying.

“You see, I promised one of my new pals here the honors tonight.” Penny explained as she moved to stand in front of me, pushing stray strands of hair away from my face. “Your boyfriend has until the sunrise to get me my money; otherwise Eddie here is gonna get his pound of flesh.” She smiled smugly, lifting her gaze to one of the two who had their hands holding me steady. “An eye for an eye, ain’t that right?”

And then it hit me — stale breath and cigarettes.

“Been a long time comin’.” Eddie mused in my ear with a light chuckle; Sweet Pea resisted against the hands that held him back, blazing hues focused on our former classmate. I was sure if there had been nothing between Sweets and Eddie, the Ghoulie would have been dismembered. Both hands, his tongue — you name it.

Penny turned on her heels and put her hands together, “Three of my guys go with you two —”

“Three?” I laughed with a glare, “That’s a bit unnecessary.”

She snorted, “Yeah, right.” Her finger lifted to point to Sweets, narrowing her eyes at his lumbering figure, “I’ve seen Jackie Chan here in action. Not taking any chances.” Penny walked forward, arms clasped behind her back as she came to a halt just in front of him. “If you pull any shit, if you try to leave, if you put a single finger on one of my boys, I will ensure Tinkerbell loses a lot more than just an eye.”

“She’s got such pretty eyes.” Eddie added teasingly, pulling a collective chuckle from the other members in the room. I watched Sabine’s fingers lace with Sweet Pea’s, and I watched her frantically pull on his arm, try to pull him from his disjointed thoughts and into gear. His eyes remained focused on mine, never seeming to stray even as she managed to get his feet moving.

I was thankful he had her, knowing that with a goal in mind, Sabine wouldn’t rest until they had gotten precisely what they needed and came back for me.

Joshua shouldered past us, he and two others stalking out after Sabine and Sweets. The air around us melted as the electricity died; Penny peered over to where I stood and sighed. “I’ve always wanted a sister.” She mused after a few moments, smiling impishly to herself again.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.” I spat, “I’m sixteen.”

“Your birthday’s in a few days.” She reminded me.

Wait —

“How do you know that?” I asked, ripping my arms from the increasingly tight grips of Eddie and his friend. They were reluctant to let go but did take two steps back as Penny beckoned me forward with the tilt of her head.
“Come with me, Callie.” She smiled again as she extended her arm open for me to fit under — this time the smile reminded me too much of Pea’s, only darker, more twisted. “Let’s have a little girl talk, shall we?”
TWENTY

Chapter Summary

I am so, so, so sorry that it’s taken literally half a fucking year for me to update this story. I hit such a huge wall in the summer and I’ve been struggling to recover mentally, and so writing of any sort has just been .. hard in general. I promise you, chapter 21 in underway and will be posted before Christmas (I hope!), if not before the year is over for sure. Thank you so much for sticking with me during the hiatus, I lava you all so much and hope you enjoy!

OCTOBER 3RD, 2014

“Who the hell are you?”

“Hi, I’m Yvette Webb, from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). Calliope, right?” I looked down at her extended hand with a raised brow, and then up at her. She had a pleasant smile, but the rest of her face screamed that she was as over this drop-in visit as much as I was. Her brown hair was pulled back and secured with a clip, and despite being in her late forties, she looked no older than thirty and definitely hit the gym.

I already decided that I didn’t like her, and was trying very hard not to make that known.

Byron always said that the OCFS stuck their nose in where they didn’t need to be. Our first run-in with them had been by accident. I had shown up to school with a bruise the size of a baseball on my face one time — because Sabine had accidentally hit me in the face with said baseball — and a man from child services came by the principal's office to talk to me about life at home.

As far as I was concerned, things at home were pretty good. I saw no reason to lie.

I probably should have, though.

[[MORE]]

What the youth worker failed to remember is the vital point in her being there to begin with — how the bruisereally ended up on my face. As soon as the words “daddy and his friend Jim Bean spend a lot of time together” had left my mouth, it was as though she were no longer interested in the rest of my story.

Here I was, five years later, meeting with another youth worker, because I made their jobs harder being the delinquent that I was. And yet, they never let me be.

“I prefer Cal.” I replied stiffly, folding my wet arms across my chest. “Can I help you with something?”

Yvette followed me into the house, ensuring to look around as we went, taking mental notes of anything that may have looked off. I wasn’t surprised by her disappointment when she realized the house owned was nearly immaculate and looked barely lived in. “This isn’t your regular visit,” she replied as she dropped into a seat in our dining room as I returned to the dishes. “Someone reported Byron; we got a call about negligence and child endangerment a few days ago.”

I felt my brows come together, peering over my shoulder at the woman in worry, “Who reported him?”
Yvette’s lips pursed as she shook her head, “You know I’m not allowed to tell you.”

I let the plate slip from my hand back into the water and sighed. It didn’t seem to matter how much I practiced it in the mirror, and these people would never understand.

“Who called?” I persisted.

But they were always finding a way to meddle with our lives. If anything, they disrupted the peace and brought more pain than they did justice. After each visit, Byron was always left feeling particularly sorry for himself and would spend the remainder of the night wondering where exactly he went wrong, making false promises to do better. To be better.

“It was an anonymous phone call.” Her tone was tired as she let her body sink further into the seat.

Unable to form a coherent sentence, we remained in that silence while I finished the rest of the dishes. Once I had cleared the sink and dried my arms, I turned to Yvette and noticed the series of notes she had spread over the table. It didn’t take my mind very long to play catch up, quickly coming to the realization that each folder had been marked with a date, no doubt each one being an incident report. About me. About Byron.

There were very few people that believed my father was capable of taking care of me. Yvette didn’t happen to be one of those people, despite obvious circumstances indicating that she probably should have had the state take custody of me. In her head, I was probably better off with Byron than I was in some of the group homes.

She checked in regularly, always had me come in to do a physical and make sure I was looked after and in good health. When seasons changed, she either gave me a gift card or brought me clothing. As much as I absolutely dreaded each and every visit, I knew I could go to her with anything, and she wouldn’t freak out on me.

She hadn’t been around that long, but she had lasted longer than the others. So they kept sending her and assigned her to my case. We coexisted peacefully, and when the time came, I knew she had already figured out what was best for me.

2:13 AM, PRESENT DAY

I sat on the cold concrete floor with my back pressed to the wall and legs splayed out in front of me. The numbers had dwindled as the night crept on, Penny remained with the careful supervision of three remaining Ghoulies. I didn’t recognize any of them from Southside’s halls; however, one man, in particular, stuck out.

His hair was long but coiled into messy curls. The stubble on his upper lip and face made him look older, and his eyes had been smeared with black eyeliner. Without the ridiculous trenchcoat or the permanent snarl he wore on his face, he would have been quite attractive under different circumstances.

It was just past two in the morning, meaning we had been sitting in near silence for quite some time. In spite of the early hour, my body was awake and alert, full of energy I didn’t think would exist given that I had been up for the better part of the last forty-eight hours. But with each passing minute, I was finding it harder to not to worry, and more often than not had to repeat a mantra in my head to remind myself to breathe — *inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale*.

I played with the zipper on my jacket in an effort to keep myself distracted, focusing on the individual teeth, running my nail along the indentations. The sun would be rising within the hour, leaving Sweet Pea very little time left before my former classmates played doctor, and held me down while Eddie gauged one of my eyeballs from the socket. There was a small part of me that felt it *could* have been an empty threat, but given the Eddie-Pea track record and long-standing feud, but I didn’t put it past Ed to be satisfied taking his frustrations out on me.

“You know he’s gonna come back.” Penny drawled lazily, seeming unamused with my current anxious state.

I wanted to snap back and mutter something about it being none of her business, but it was every bit of her business, and I was trying to stay on her good side. I had rationalized that if Sweet Pea had gone through the trouble to keep me from knowing about her, there was a good reason, and maybe the fear he had shown should be enough for me to take her threats
a little more seriously. So, I remained quiet, trying not to draw attention to myself.

I was still pissed at him and didn’t want to believe he was right, but if anyone in Riverdale knew trouble, I was sure it was him.

Penny still watched me, again drinking me in as though I changed with every breath. “Take a picture.” I sneered.

She shook her hair away from her face as she leaned forward. “I’m trying to figure out why you ended up with Nate. Don’t get me wrong, he’s not all bad, and I don’t completely hate him, but you?”

“What about me?”

“If I didn’t already know the in and outs of who you were, I’d have assumed you were a Northsider, which is red flag number one.” I removed my eyes from hers, staring down at the dirt on the heels of my boots instead. “I just don’t get it — I mean, I get it. Look at you,” she gestured to me with a snort, “you’re a solid ten, honey, but I just don’t understand why it had to be you.”

I wasn’t sure if she expected me to know the answer to her questions. Fuck, I hardly knew if I believed him when he said he loved me. I had always felt insecure about not knowing if he was as into this, and as into me as I was with him. I had watched his anger shift from one person to the next in a mere matter of ten short minutes; naturally, I assumed the same was plausible when it came to his feelings for me. “What would you like me to say?”

I wondered about the way she looked at me then, leaning forward with her movements, the rise to my feet slow and cautious. She took a step forward with her eyes narrowed and mouth pointed, the challenge in her light hues sparking some animalistic instinct within me, “You’re a sad, broken girl from a sad, broken home,” she began tauntingly, stopping a mere six inches from my body to smile as she continued, “You were raised by a drunk, you’ve got next to no life skills by the looks of it, and I don’t have much faith you’re any more good for him than he is for you.”

I tried not to be too offended by her words, no matter how much they stung or how much truth there was to them and turned away from her. “Once you get past the jackets and tattoos, we’re all the same. Everyone’s got skeletons in their closet.” I repeated the same words Sweet Pea had said once to me before, moving around her frame to take her seat.

“Especially you,” she added, “when Nate first came to me with your sob story, I thought for sure he was just wasting my time, but then again, he has spent so much time trying to stay away from me … figured I could finally have my fun.”

“You turned him into a drug mule,” I retorted with an eye roll.

“He had to pay his dues like everyone else, since he couldn’t afford to pay in cash. I’m a very reasonable woman, Callie.”

I lifted my brows in slight disbelief, “Sounds like it.”

The silence fell between us again, leaving her to sigh indignantly and turn her attention away from me. She glanced down at the phone she held in her hand, then pointed to where I sat, “Watch her, I’ll be back.” she barked to the curly-haired man, who nodded once curtly.

I wasn’t really comfortable being left alone with strangers — and definitely not these strangers. Their hair fell in thick strands, leather embroidered with steel studs and jewels. The three males turned their gazes to me, none of them saying anything after her departure, but they seemed to relax when they realized I showed no intentions of moving.

What had started out as an attempt to save my best friend had quickly turned into a horrible disaster. I was thinking about how fast dawn was approaching — we all had class in the morning, and I had very little hope that I would get any sleep before my alarm went off. I had been stuck in the basement for hours, and time was running out. With each passing minute, my anxiety reverberated my every organ and bone, leaving me feeling cold and on edge.

I thought about what Teddy said, and regretted not having told him at the very least where we’d be going. Just in case I
didn’t make it home, in case none of us did. That thought suddenly felt very real, and with it in mind, I slowly lifted my eyes from the dusty floor to where the three Ghoulies sat. None of them looked any bigger than Sweet Pea or Jughead, and only one of them seemed to have the same muscular tone Fogarty did. Aside from that, the more I analyzed them, the less scary they appeared.

_That’s assuming they’re not packing heat_, I thought. There’s no chance in hell I’d be getting out of here alive if they were. I could run, and I could run fast, but I was sure I couldn’t run faster scared than they could angry. I lifted my eyes to where they stood once more, picking apart pieces of the puzzle, trying to decipher a way out of this mess.

There weren’t very many exits to the building, none that were open or easily accessible, anyway. I wasn’t sure where Penny and the others were coming in and out of, but it sure seemed quicker than the way we had originally came in.

I had learned at a young age not to have such high expectations of people, especially those you stupidly handed your life to. I believed that Sweet Pea was doing what he could to get back here and even the debt. But I also knew there was a possibility that didn’t happen, and I wasn’t sure he had a Plan B in mind, so I would have to.

When Penny returned, she looked to where I sat as lifted her hands in a sort of ‘standing’ gesture. I followed suit, rising to my feet, bracing myself for her next words.

**FEBRUARY 11TH, 2016**

I walked in through the front door of our two-story home on Nottingham Avenue. It wasn’t unlike any other Friday evening; I was getting in late from dinner with Sabine and her parents, just barely taking notice of the television that still droned on from the living room. This usually meant that Byron had retired for the night, and was already passed out on the couch.

I didn’t bother to look up at him as I passed into the kitchen.

It was my retreat upstairs that made me pause. Something was .. different. And the ominous feeling pulled on a thread in the rear of my mind, and that lingering sensation made my skin crawl. _Just go check on him_, I thought indignantly, which was followed by a loud sigh, returning down the stairs once I had changed into pajamas for the night.

I stopped at the edge of the carpet, noting the dark stain growing and the pungent smell that hit me like a brick wall. I retched for a moment, holding a hand to my nose to stop the burning sensation as I stepped forward to smack the back of his head. “Bedtime, c’mon,” I growled, reaching over his frame for the remote to shut the television off. There was no grumble in response, no huff in petulance. I nudged him again, “Seriously, I’m not pulling you up the stairs again, let’s go.”

If there was any movement in his chest, it was very faint. For nearly thirty seconds I stood in silence, watching his body so closely, counting the seconds in my head. At the time, I didn’t think to put my hands on him to check for a pulse.

I refused to believe what my mind was telling me.

“Byron,” my voice was weak. “Byron!” I tried again, this time placing my hands on his shoulder to roughly shove him deeper into the cushion beneath him.

.No response. No grunt. No snore.

“D-Dad? Dad, seriously, this isn’t funny!” I hated hearing it, the whine my voice picked up in my moments of vulnerability and weakness. I hated how desperate I sounded, and even worse than that, I hated how I threw myself at him. “Daddy, _please_!”

I pulled on his flannel until he toppled off the couch, laying him flat on his back. The last time I had been in this situation,
the last time I had made this call, the last time he drank himself to this point, I had been too afraid to touch him. By now, it was something I looked for. Standing at the foot of his bed to make sure he was still breathing, trying my hardest to hide every ounce of liquor he didn’t need for the day to prevent it from happening, but my efforts had been futile.

And I hated him with as much of myself as possible.

“You selfish asshole,” I whispered angrily to myself, wiping my nose with the back of my sleeve as I dialed 911 with the other. He couldn’t hear me, and to be frank, at this point I couldn’t care less if he had.

Once the phone began to ring, and the operator’s voice blared through the speaker, I started the compressions. Being as small as I was, I wasn’t optimal for this sort of thing, especially not with someone the size of my father, but I put as much force and strength behind every press.

I was determined to keep his heart beating, whatever was left of it, for as long as I could.

3:49 AM, PRESENT DAY

The snow fell gently from the heavens - my feet carried me forward through the dark forest, holding my hands out in front of me to guide myself. I squinted, trying to make out the shapes of the branches as I moved as quickly as I could while keeping myself upright.

“We’re going to play a little game,” Penny mused coyly, touching the side of my face tenderly. “You’re going to try to navigate your way home - and if your boyfriend doesn’t show up with the money, then something very, very bad is going to happen to you. And I really hope that the cold doesn’t kill you - that would just defeat the purpose of all the trouble I’ve gone through.”

I was exhausted, but I refused to stop. I hadn’t bothered trying to find my way back to the main road - it was unlikely passengers were travelling at this time of night, anyway. Most of the area between Greendale and Riverdale was forest and empty highways.

“It’ll be okay,” I chanted to myself quietly, teeth chattering in response to the cold. I had left my jean jacket in the basement of the factory, foolishly thinking I would be squatting the wait out. I stopped walking for a moment, leaning against a tree as my eyes shut tightly.

As Penny told it, Jude was a good friend of hers that owed her a favour - much like any of her ‘good friends,’ I’d assume. After a couple of phone calls, and a convincing pitch to Dean, Jude was signed over to become my new support worker. He didn’t work for the OCFS, but it required less travel and was far more convenient to have my worker placed here, and so my cousin was willing to make an exception.

Jude was working with Dean to make the necessary preparations to adopt me. He had already gotten legal guardianship of the boys when David left and felt it was only right he have custody of me, too. To make sure we stuck together. I hated the idea less, now that I thought about it. I knew I was going to be here until I graduated. I never planned on moving back to Greendale to begin with — if I had been smart about it, I would have moved back to Pelham with Sabine.

But this was fine. This was preferred, actually. I had a home here, a family to call my own and a place I could hang my personal things — a permanent settlement. It would likely remain there for many years untouched, even after I moved out. From the outside looking in, no one would’ve known we had lived all of our lives separately. Our walls were covered in photographs, our fridge coloured with an array of schoolwork and a growing grocery list.

And when it came to those boys, it was as though no time had passed at all between us. We existed in perfect harmony, balancing each other out, picking up where one slacked to create one well-oiled unit. There was an understanding between the four of us, and we had agreed that what we had now was here to stay; we were in this, together.

I made my peace living on the Southside of Riverdale.
What bothered me was knowing that it wasn’t on my own terms. Regardless of whether or not I felt comfortable staying here until graduation, that hadn’t made the blow any softer, and the blood pumping through my veins was fueled by an odd mixture of frustration, anger, and fear.

If Sweet Pea wanted to keep me here, did that mean he assumed this was permanent?

As awful as I felt for even thinking it, it was something we had yet to discuss. One part because things had been too good to ruin, one part because I was sure he was already aware. Graduation would come, and as far as I was concerned, the plan remained the same. I knew he felt differently about the situation, believed it might turn out in his favour, but I knew I couldn’t guarantee him that.

I nervously glanced down at my phone for the umpteenth time in the last half hour, but there was still no update. The signal out here wasn’t the greatest, and I had already tried sending numerous text messages to Sweet Pea and Sabine. I had grown too anxious to close my eyes and rest for more than two minutes at a time, too worried about when they would get back —

If they came back.

I knew they would. Of course, they would. I couldn’t afford to think otherwise, and if what Penny had told me was true, then Sweet Pea had already gone through so much trouble to keep me here and hold me down to this town, all so that he wouldn’t lose me — so, he would come back, right? I wasn’t too much trouble, and I was worth the inevitable fight. I was worth five-hundred dollars; I was sure of that.

There wasn’t much time left on the clock. I had less than an hour before dawn, leaving me very little time to find someplace to either a) hide until Sweet Pea (or someone other than a Ghoulie) saw me, or b) try to hitchhike back to Riverdale.

Neither of those options sounded very likely. There was a sharp throbbing in all parts of my skull and neck, vision fading in and out with the painful throbbing. Each passing minute felt like I was closing in on certain death. I wasn’t sure what I had to expect when Sweet Pea’s time ran out; I didn’t know if I would be the only one hunted tonight. The lingering thought felt heavy on my shoulders, and I found myself turning my head back over my shoulder in spite of it’s protesting.

What was coming for me?

Keep moving, my conscious demanded, pulling my mind back into focus. Tense and on edge, I continued forward. My knees shook with each step, making the climb over each twister root that much more difficult. It was hard not to give into the part of me that wanted to collapse and give up. I just wanted to rest.

I needed to rest.

But still, my feet kept trudging through the dampness.

“It’s going to be okay.”

I couldn’t make out the shapes of the forest any clearer now than I could two hours ago. My eyes were fighting to stay open, and my body was struggling to stay upright. Find a light. A light meant a home, or at the very least, a person. Help. Any help was better than no help at this point.

I couldn’t have screamed even if I wanted to. My throat was sore and dry, making breathing painful. I wanted to cry. But crying was a weakness, and I couldn’t afford to be weak.

Weakness is gonna get you killed if you don’t start running, I thought grimly.

I hadn’t ventured much further when the shadows in the trees surrounding me began to play tricks on me; I could feel the anxiety crawling along my spine, dipping into the acid in my gut, bile poised and ready to burn my esophagus. The stress
of the situation had been hard enough on my body, nevermind the fact that I had quite literally forgotten to ensure I put some substance into it earlier. My stomach was far past cooperating nicely.

I leaned over a twisted root inhaled deeply to keep the spinning at bay. For the most part, I had started to lose feeling in most of my extremities, fingers and toes now null and void due to the dropping weather outside. I hadn’t dressed nearly as well as I could have, but then again, I hadn’t really expected to be set loose on a wild hunt.

Deciding that I had no other options left, I tried my luck with climbing a tree. If I couldn’t outrun them, I could hide until the sun rose. I slowed as I approached a branch that appeared low enough for me to grab onto, and after several minutes of jumping in an effort to get a good grip on the oak, I sighed and scowled.

“You’re about two inches too short for that,” a voice called from behind me; I dropped my arms and turned. Joshua stepped forward with his hands shoved into his jacket pockets, and his smile was promising trouble.

Unsure of who else followed, I folded my arms nervously, “Aren’t you supposed to be with Sweet Pea?”

He nodded once, “I was.”

I swallowed the lump that formed in my throat, “Did he get the money?”

Joshua took a step forward, his green hues carefully studying me. He was closing the space between us until there was nothing more than three inches left, and I was forced to look up at him. He was here to deliver me to my fate, and if not that, then he was here to deliver it to me.

“You don’t really want to do this,” I reasoned, hands held up in surrender. “This isn’t about us, right?”

Joshua paused only momentarily, registering my words slowly enough for me to take another precautionary step backwards. “Penny’s got everyone looking for you,” he replied after some time, resting his hands in his pockets and rocking back on his heels.

I grimaced. “I know that.”

“There’s no preference on whether or not you’re returned alive,” as the words make it past his lips, my eyes lock onto the object gleaming threateningly in the moonlight, the streaks of silver reflecting dimly. Then, it felt like the soles of my feet had been bolted to the ground, and I was unable to move. Unable to breathe. Unable to think.

“Josh,” I breathed quietly, hoping and praying that the fear bubbling in my stomach wasn’t too evident in the sound of my voice. “Please don’t.”

“Why not?”

**Why not?** Why did the question sound frivolous? Couldn’t he see the very obvious, very real predicament we had landed ourselves into? Growing up in the suburbs of Pelham, I had assumed if I was going to die at a young age, it was going to be because of an accident. I would never have dreamed that I would be standing face to face with the barrel of a gun that was aimed for the middle of my chest.

“What are you gonna do?” I deadpanned, thinking that maybe, just maybe, if I could prolong the inevitable by distracting him, I could do something to change my outcome. Perhaps an attitude wasn’t the way to go, but he seemed to be listening carefully. “You’re going to shoot me? Right here?” I brought a finger to point to the place above my heart, “Or here?” I moved it a little up towards the hollowed base of my throat. I swallowed the lump that built there. “One pull of that trigger, and it’s all over.”

There was nothing but the sound of the winds blowing through the trees above us; Joshua stood there, unmoving, his face securely set into stone. He had made his choice. “You should know,” he said quietly after a few moments, blinking his eyes. They were softer now, less angry. “You’re the last person I wanted something like this to happen to.”
I let my lips fall into a sad smile, “Then just let me go.” I tried.

“I can’t,” he growled loudly, almost as though it were done in desperation. One thing I knew was certain, and it was that this wasn’t Joshua. Not the Joshua I knew, at least. He wasn’t light-hearted, or carefree. He definitely wasn’t looking at me the way he used to. Not that I personally minded, but that only served as a reminder that he wouldn’t be giving me any mercy. His feet rushed him forward towards me with concentration pulling his brows together as he twisted his lips into a frown. His arms, thick with long muscle and littered in healing (and horribly done) tattoos, wrapped tightly around my torso.

I swung my arms as roughly as I could, trying to rip them from his grasp. “Let me go!” I cried as I dug my heels into the soil to ground myself firmly. Joshua fumbled to adjust his hold on the gun; my elbow knocked his shoulder back, the object in his hand dislodging.

We watched the gun fall to the ground, landing with a distinctive CLINK! I dove headfirst down into the dirt, clawing the earth with my nails in my reach for the weapon. A small part of me felt victorious feeling my fingers lock into place on the trigger, and with that confidence, I hurried to my feet and held it out at arm’s length. It now pointed to his chest. My arm wasn’t steady by any means, leaving me to look fragile, small, and nervous.

Joshua rose to his feet slowly, hands held up.

“Please,” I panted heavily, trying to keep my strength and balance upright. The annoyance that had settled over his shoulders was enough to know my request would surely go unheard. “Just let me go.” There was no mistaking the conviction in my voice. I needed this. Really, this war wasn’t between us. We were collateral damage, and if we kept playing by someone else’s rules, we were going to end up burned in the crossfire.

“The only way you’re going anywhere is if you outrun me,” he lamented wearily, lowering himself into a crouch as he prepared to pounce. I moved the gun to the right and pulled the trigger, my eyes squeezing shut in the process.

A bright muzzle flash, the sudden fire jolted me back, a deafening POP! rung in my ears, and all that remained was the acrid smell of burnt gunpowder.

Holy. Shit.

When my eyes finally opened, I brought my stunned gaze to the tip of the barrel, watching the smoke swirl up into the bitter air, mingling with the clouds of breath before it disappeared. Joshua remained frozen in fear, one part because he was still determining if he had been hit, one part because that really just happened.

Did I seriously just do that?

First, I noticed the sweat that had collected on my palms, and how much looser and heavier the metal felt in my fingers. My heart was racing painfully in my chest, and my stomach swayed uneasily. It took my body several heartbeats longer to register that I needed to move. I didn’t bothered watching where I was going, and I wasn’t entirely sure I was heading in the right direction, but truthfully, anywhere but right next to Josh was better.

I had done this run many times before, but I never thought at any point in all my years that I would ever be running for my life. As kids, Sabine and I used to run from boys we had stolen alcohol off of. We ran again when Sabine had slept with the head cheerleader’s boyfriend, and she chased us down the block with a knife in hand —

These were times where I had ran and laughed because I knew that no real danger was waiting for me on the other side. This time, the fear of the unknown drove me forward. The way I saw it, Joshua didn’t owe me any favours. Especially not now. My boyfriend was one of his biggest tormentors, and regardless of how close he was with Donovan, I didn’t see that relationship really stopping him if he were to get his hands on me.

Honestly, I had probably just given him enough reason to want me dead outside of all of that, given that I had just taken a shot at him.
So I ran. Deep inhale, and exhale. My feet throbbed in my now too tight boots, my skin raw and cold with the dropping weather. I kept my grip on the gun tight, shoving it into my pocket as the sounds of Joshua’s following steps behind me were audible again.

It was a sick and twisted game of cat and mouse, and the worst part was knowing that he was definitely going to hurt me if he got his hands on me.

*Keep going.*

I didn’t stop. When my lungs began to burn, when my legs felt as though they were caving, I pushed myself forward, and didn’t stop until I was certain I was alone, and safely out of harm's way. I rested against a tree, dropping backwards with a sigh, caressing the weapon against my chest.

My ears perked to the sound of screeching tires on the wet road just left of where I had been sitting. I looked up, frantically searching for the break of light in the darkness. Tires meant one of two things:

1. Someone was *actually* driving towards Riverdale at this ungodly hour.
2. The manhunt for me had moved out of the woods and onto the streets.

“Help me!” I screamed as loudly as I could manage, my throat sore and hoarse from the bitter air. I rose to my feet “Anybody, please!” It was bloodcurdling. The desperation that leaked into my plea sounded foreign, not typically an emotion I worried over.

I was moving again, only this time hoping to make it to the break in the trees before the car drove too far ahead and passed me completely. Daylight was coming, and squatting risked my well-being. I needed to get out of town. I didn’t care whose car it was, I didn’t care who was behind the wheel, as long as it featured a one-way trip out of here, I wasn’t too concerned.

I just needed to get back to Riverdale.

When the heels of my boots hit the paved road, I bolted straight into the middle, arms held high above my head as I stared at the oncoming traffic.

*For the love of God, please don’t hit me.*

**5:27 AM**

One hour.

One hour was far too long to spend stuck in a small vehicle with a complete stranger. I had done it before, and on any other given day, under different circumstances, I would have been okay. I guess I should have been thankful the driver asked minimal questions, though he did spend a good amount of the time glancing sideways at me out of concern.

It hadn’t taken much convincing, to be frank, he seemed to already have the idea on the tip of his tongue when I finally found my voice again to ask for a lift back into town. I wasn’t sure if he was stopping in, or just driving through, but he had been willing to take me to Sunnyside. The entirety of the ride, I had kept my hands inside my pockets, one hand balled into a tight fist, the other gripping the gun. I hadn’t needed to use it again, and truthfully, I would have preferred it that way.

Now, we sat parked just outside of the entrance; I could see the lights on in the trailer and the Jeep parked against the side, indicating that he had made it home safely. I swallowed the lump in my throat and exhaled, wondering if Sabine’s fate had been any different from mine and if she had made it home safe.

I returned my attention to the driver, and offered him a smile, “Thanks again,” my voice was hoarse, and so it squeaked. I tried not to let him notice how uncomfortable I was as I pushed myself out of the car; he tipped his hat and waited until I
I knew that the sun would be peaking in over the tops of the trailers in a matter of minutes, and with that knowledge in mind, it felt as though the exhaustion of the last twenty-four hours came crashing down in one final drop. My feet dragged through the slick mud, baring no caution as I trudged up the steps to the trailer and barged through the door.

The disco light was swirling in its usual corner. However the couch was occupied by Pea’s unusually large frame; his hair was slick against his forehead from his shower, the lower portion of his torso and legs just barely covered by the throw I purchased for the back of the couch. I grasped the knob, using as much of my remaining strength as possible to slam the door shut behind me.

Sweet Pea’s body jolted awake, his eyes moving in a glare to meet mine before they softened. He looked as tired as I felt, dark circles underlining his eyes. “Hey,” he sat upright, removing the blanket from his frame as he rubbed his eyes, “Sab’s asleep in the room; we’ve been looking for you all night.”

“Have you?” I asked quietly, dropping my jacket onto the floor by the door prior to retreating towards his bedroom, flipping on the lights as I went. I could hear his footsteps following behind me.

“Penny said she had let you go.”

I snorted, turning to throw a look at him over my shoulder, “And you believed her?”

“No. We checked every street in Greendale twice. We only just got home, and that’s only because Sabine looked like she was going to keel over.” he replied, now standing behind me as I ran the hot water in the bathroom sink and filled the porcelain. “I knew something was wrong when she said she let you go. She doesn’t just do that.”

I held a hand up and turned to face him, “Why didn’t you tell me about Penny sooner?”

Sweet Pea took a few moments to gather his thoughts. His jaw flexed as he ground his teeth together; clearly, he was still reluctant to talk about her. “Why didn’t you tell me the truth about Byron?” he fired back after a moment, his head falling to the side as he narrowed his eyes.

Uh-oh. That’s not good. I turned back to the sink full of water and submerged my hands. “What do you mean? I have told you about Byron —”

“About how his drinking is what killed him, and he wasn’t the father of the year?” I could feel my entire frame abruptly halt as the air caught in my throat. Anything I had said to anyone in the town about my father had been very much the same, and that hadn’t been by accident. I then thought to the girl sleeping in the next room over; a new anger bubbled in my veins. “About how he drank from the time your mom died until the day his liver quit? Or about how you spent half of your childhood being called by your mother’s name, and not your own?”

It took a lot of self-restraint and focus, but I brought my eyes up to examine my face in the mirror and wiped the running mascara away with a cloth. I tried not to appear phased by anything he was saying. I didn’t tell him the truth about Byron for many reasons, and as much as I loved him, he wasn’t entitled to know those reasons. “How do you know about any of that?” I asked, voice stoic and hard.

Sweet Pea laughed once dryly from behind me, jerking his thumb towards the hall, “Sab let it slip; though, to be fair, it wasn’t really her fault. She assumed that as your boyfriend, I definitely knew all about your past.” I tried not to pay mind to the way he hung his head, chin tucked into his chest. “You really shouldn’t have kept something like that from me, Cal, I’m supposed to be here for you.”

I nodded in agreement, “You have been, you just didn’t know the details.” I corrected, “And you didn’t need to know the details.”

“And you needed to know about Penny?”
A huff of air flew past my lips, exhaling in annoyance, “Look, I get it. You have a past you don’t want to talk about, obviously, so do I.” he stood behind me, his fingers absently playing with my sides as he listened. “But my past is dead, and your past just moved out of town. Mine isn’t going to be causing any sort of trouble for me.”

“Penny is?”

I shrugged with a nod, “She’s half to blame.”

“Half?” his brow rose in question.

“The other half is you.” I added, looking up at him as I leaned forward to cup my hands in the water.

Confused, he met my gaze in the mirror, “Me? What the fuck did I do?”

I rubbed my face vigorously, blindly reaching for the hand towel hanging above the toilet. “You know what you did.”

“That’s not true.”

I stood upright, “So, you didn’t approach Penny with an offer back in November? Your help in exchange for her help?” I pressed, hands gripping the porcelain as we stared at each other. I hated confrontation, but with the night’s events finally weighing in on me, and exhaustion threatening to remind me that I was only human and could only handle so much, I knew I needed to finish this.

“Doesn’t ring a bell.” he lied.

I glared down at the water circling the drain, “You couldn’t just leave it alone, could you? You had to meddle. And for what? So Dean couldn’t permanently take me from you?”

I could feel the anger radiating off from his frame, but I didn’t take the chance to look at the mirror in fear his eyes might meet mine. There was something about his silence that had always been terrifying; Sweet Pea wasn’t one to keep quiet during his temper tantrums, and not knowing what was going on in his head was nearly equally as frightening as the situation I had just been a part of.

Even still, the restlessness inside me was stirring, and having nothing else left to do with my night other than think about what he had done, I couldn’t stop myself from speaking up again. “All of those nights you didn’t come back to the trailer .. all of the times you told me you had Serpent business .. were you out? Working for her?”

His grip on my hips tightened, and then he nodded once.

I let my head drop back; of all the things I had pictured him doing, this had not been one of them. Because when he told me he wasn’t apart of that, I believed him. Because he promised he was clean and straight, and I wouldn’t have imagined him locking on our middle fingers had that been a lie. “Oh, god.” And now, the utter disbelief of it all had my words tumbling out in between slightly hysterical laughs, “You know, you’d think I wouldn’t be laughing because this is so not a conversation ordinary people have, and I’m so pissed you’ve been lying to me the whole time -”

“Oh, like you didn’t know.”

I deadpanned, glaring at him in the mirror, “That you were moving drugs?” I questioned quietly, voice raising an octave as I continued, words barring no caution, “No, Sweet Pea, I didn’t know that you were your sister’s bitch boy. Or that you were making drop-offs worth thousands of dollars as a favour. You told me you weren’t into that shit.”

Sweet Pea’s jaw hardened as his eyes met mine and he released my hips, “We live in the Southside, Cal, get a grip. So what, I cleared my debt, and then I helped FP out with a few jobs. It’s not like I’m still doing it.”

“You helped FP out?”
“You really need to gain some fucking perspective before you start judging me and my life choices, alright?” he growled, “We all have dues to pay — it’s not like I didn’t have help with mine.”

This time, it was my jaw that clenched together tightly, nails pinching into the flesh of my palms. “Who, Fogarty?”

“None of your damn business, that’s who.” he snapped.

“So long as I’m stuck here, your business is my business.” I barked back, moving to push past him.

“Stuck here?” he called out from somewhere behind me, followed by the slam of the bathroom door.

I lifted my arms in a shrug, “Yeah. Stuck. Tied.” I began to list, voice beginning to tremble; I stripped the stained sweater from my body and pulled on a clean long sleeve. “Fucking linked to this town until I’m eighteen - because you decided you didn’t want to share me!” I roared at him from over my shoulder.

“I made sure you didn’t get bootfucked back to Greendale!” he bites back. “Since we both know it’s such an outstanding town live in, but by all means, feel free to correct me if I was wrong with assuming you didn’t want to go back.”

I shook my head, grabbing my towel off the back of one of the chairs by the kitchen table to clean my boots off, “It doesn’t matter if you’re right or wrong - you don’t get to fucking make those kinds choices about my life, period. If I was going to end up stuck here, it should have been by state terms —”

“It was —”

“ — as directed by a registered social worker, not my gangbanger boyfriend that’s reluctant to lose me!” I was standing toe to toe with him now, face surely red with the anger that was seeping from my bones. All of the disappointment and confusion was soon replaced with nothing but raw resentment as I stared up at him, studying his features. From what I could see, he felt no remorse. Then, I was sure he didn’t see the issue with what he had done because he didn’t know consequences. He had already rationalized what he had done and excused it.

“Is that such a fucking horrible thing?”

“You don’t get it, okay, I don’t want to fucking be here!” The burning behind my lids had returned, voice quivering again, body seeming frozen in place but alight with anxiety as the words tumbled from my mouth, “Everything here reminds me of something I didn’t have, or something that I did have but don’t anymore. But neither of these things have to do with you, and that has been okay, okay?.”

Behind the mask of the tall, dark, handsome young man I had fallen in love with was someone far more malicious, someone I had once been certain would have never thought to make an appearance in my presence. “You’re not the only person with issues, Calliope. You had a deadbeat alcoholic for a father - so did I.” he shrugs. His shoulders were locked in a square, hands closed into tight fists at his sides, “And, I mean, it doesn’t really sound like he hit you, and you’ve said so yourself you got everything you ever needed, so excuse me if I fail to see where the childhood trauma is supposed to come into play.

His words hit like a hard slap to the face, and I took a step away from him. I was left feeling nothing other than disappointment and disbelief as I stared up at him, “Two seconds ago you were pissed at me because I didn’t tell you the truth about Byron, and now you’re throwing it in my face like it’s nothing?”

Sweet Pea’s hands came up into his hair, tugging on the roots with a frustrated growl, “Do you see what I mean? This is why I never told you about Penny, or introduced you to my family; everything is all fucked up.”

But still, it felt as though I were talking to a wall. And this was all it ever was with us, really. Arguments were never merely disagreements - we were two emotional waves constantly rocking against each other, battling for dominance. The decision wasn’t an easy one, and I was sure by dinner the following day I would have regretted it.
“No, my best friend didn’t know how to keep her fucking mouth shut for more than ten minutes when she was alone with you and told you my life story before I could.” By now, I had swallowed every bit of nervousness that once resided in me, voice hard and firm as I spoke, “She took that from me. You people just keep taking things from me expecting me to be okay, to just sit back and let the chips fall where they may - fuck that shit! You might think you have it all sorted out, you might think you know who I am, but you have no idea who I am, okay? Not a goddamn clue. You don’t get to tell me it doesn’t sound like I had a traumatic childhood, and I’m getting really sick of playing this whole my-tragedy-is-worse-than-your-tragedy bullshit with everyone.”

Silence looms between us, a thousand unspoken words catapulting back and forth, two different arguments ensuing in each of our minds; I couldn’t find the energy to care anymore. Instead, I sunk into the familiar feeling of loneliness. Once again, it was me versus the world.

Uninterested in any further conversation, and knowing we likely wouldn’t be able to reconcile, I took that as my cue to leave. I reached for my bag on the coffee table and started throwing belongings into it.

“He reached for my arm, “Let me drive, we can talk on the way back.”

“I can drive myself.” I assured him.

He shook his head, trying to stand in front of my moving figure, “You’ve been up all night, you’re cold, you’re soaked. You need a shower, and sleep, alright? We can figure out what to do with Sab after class.”

Class. Right. I had forgotten that the beginning of our weeks was starting and that I was expected to be present and in attendance in the next few hours. I thought about having to make myself presentable, forcing myself to focus on the lectures, and internally cringed thinking about how hard that would be.

“Alright.” I lamented after a few moments, deciding that I didn’t want to fight with him anymore. I spent my entire night stewing in my disappointment and anger, and frankly, this wasn’t worth it. “I’m still gonna head home. I need a shower, and clothes,” my feet brought me around his frame and towards the door again, reluctantly pulling my arms through my damp jacket, hand immediately reaching into the pocket to ensure that the gun was still concealed, “I’ll figure Sabine out. Get Dean to come by, or Teddy, bring her to the terminal, do damage control with Em.”

“Calliope,” I stopped when he grabbed me again, forcing my eyes shut. This time, I allowed him to pull me into his chest. His arms barricaded me to him, his warm breath saturating the top of my head as his placed his lips down in a gentle, lingering kiss. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I didn’t have anything left to say, but his warmth was intoxicating, and his scent was comforting, and even though this moment between us lasted a short thirty seconds, the lingering heat made the ache in my chest feel all that much more powerful, and raw. I nodded against his chest, and wrapped my arms tightly around his waist to squeeze him to me one last time.

“I’ll be okay.”

He was reluctant to let me go, but helped me get into the Jeep. He didn’t return inside of the trailer until I was onto the
street and heading towards the main road. The drive from the trailer park to Mooregate wasn’t very long, and in less than twenty minutes, I was begrudgingly carrying my feet up the stairs to the bedroom.

I didn’t bother with my clothing, limbs screaming and crying for relief as I focus my gaze on my heaping pile of blankets folded neatly on my bed. I kicked my jacket under the box spring and collapsed face forward onto the mattress.

It felt as though all of the exhaustion was pressing down on my body, sinking it into the pillow-top inch by inch, as though I were melting into its plush comfort. I had barely ensured my legs were securely covered by my duvet when sleep finally came for me, pulling me under, my mind incessantly chanting:

This is for the best.
Chapter Summary

lol ok so it’s been like a year since I last updated this story - this chapter has been written for a long time, I just personally felt like the story had died. lately, I’ve wanted to start writing for these two again. I figured if I end up never finishing the story, this might at the very least be somewhat of a conclusive chapter -- this doesn’t mean I may never post 22, but if I decide to end it, i’ll work ya feel? ** There is a section of the chapter written in 3rd party for ~dramatic~ effect.

The sunlight was blinding by the time I woke, but my body made no move to get into motion. I heard the sound of wind breaking through branches of the tree next to my window, and pipes knocking together in the bathroom. Any other day, the anxiety of being late for school and missing class would have driven me from the bed and into gear in no time. But today I remained glued to the mattress, staring up at the ceiling fan with sadness pulling on each of individual my heartstrings. The blades circled slowly, as if with each passing second time dragged.

The combination of the noises was deafening to the headache that lingered, serving as a reminder of last night. The pain began right at the nape of my neck, coming up behind my eyes and around on either side of my temples. The pounding was constant. I knew it would only get worse the further the day progressed. My body still screamed with exhaustion, my muscles sore and stiff. I sat upright with difficulty, but after several grunts and deep breaths, I could hold myself up on my own.

“Water,” I croaked out loud into the empty room, scanning my eyes over the dresser in search of a half-full water bottle. The lining of my throat felt dry like sandpaper, and with each inhale, I cringed. I worried that it was the start of an infection, but decided that I was simply dehydrated. When water was no where in sight, I pulled my muddied frame from my bed.

“You should be in class, my conscious reprimanded. Since when do you allow your emotions to get in the way?

“Since you let it happen to begin with,” I was angry with myself, for several reasons. One of which happened to be that I allowed this sadness and exhaustion keep me from my duties as a student. But truthfully? I had no desire to be there.

I didn’t want to spend the day pretending to be okay when I just wanted to be.

Hating to show weakness had not been something my father hardwired into me, but something I picked up all on my own. Growing up in Pelham, my life had been full of deep sympathies and sad smiles. It takes everything in me to not lash out at people offering me their condolences. This is part of why I hadn’t wanted to drag my closet full of skeletons with me to Riverdale.

This fresh start I promised myself was quickly turning into a nightmare. I wondered if I was happier here than I was in Greendale.

Don’t be stupid, you know you’re better off.

I peeled my jeans from my legs and tossed them towards the laundry hamper sitting in the corner. My shirt followed, along with the rest of my undergarments until I stood naked in front of my dresser. I pulled loose and softer clothing from the drawers, and grabbed my bag of toiletries before padding into the hallway.
With the air was considerably colder in the rest of the house than it was in my room. When I adjusted to the bitter air, I pulled the shower curtain back and cranked the lever. The pipes whined with the pressure that raced from the water heater in the basement. While I waited while the water reached its highest temperature, I pulled a brush through my tangled strands and examined the blisters I had accumulated on my feet from the night prior. I touched the tender skin, frowning as an ache lingered in its wake. I didn’t have money for a pedicure, and I couldn’t find a desire to care to go and get one. I merely wished the pain would stop.

Once steam drifted over the curtain, I stepped into the tub and secured the curtain back in place. Taking my time, I washed away the restless night and leftover ache. I spent time letting the pressure of the water massage my shoulders and upper back, straining my neck to the side every so often to encourage the warmth to ease the tension that had built there. After some time, the warmth began to provide some relief, and the strain on my muscles alleviated enough for me to move my body a little more comfortably.

I spent a considerable amount of time cleaning under my nails, and scrubbed every part of my body with a soapy loofah twice. After several minutes of scrubbing, I massaged my scalp with shampoo and lathered my ends in conditioner.

I hadn’t noticed how hot the shower was until the air grew thick with humidity, and my skin turned beet red. The temperature didn’t seem bother me, but after another few moments of relishing in the warmth, I switched the dial back to cool. Tipping my head under the water, I washed out the remnants from my hair before I shut the water off completely and stepped out of the tub onto the bath mat.

I dressed myself in a pair of clean sweatpants and long sleeve shirt, not bothering with my hair. Standing in the center of my room, I looked around at the various items that littered the walls and shelves. My room overflowed with tokens of my relationships. Photos of the Serpents filled frames that hung along the walls, and my desk was littered with tiny trinkets I had picked up from outings with Kevin. There were few of Reggie’s (very rough) first draft sketches tucked away in one of the books stacked against the wall. And, of course, every drawing of mine tacked up along my cork board featured Sweet Pea’s jawline and deep set eyes.

My hand lifted and fingers brushed over the lines and contours of his face, another wave of guilt sloshing inside me. During a brief moment of self-depreciation, I thought about piling the belongings into a trashcan or burning them in the fireplace downstairs. I knew I would regret those actions sometime down the road, so I thought against the idea and decided to rip the sheets off my mattress instead. I removed the linens from the pillows, and shoved everything into the laundry hamper that I could find. Anything that might hold any of the memories from the night before; from the sheets, to the clothing that I had worn.

I glanced down to where my bed lifted off the ground, and knelt. My jacket had sat a little further back than I remembered, but I reached for blindly until my fingers gripped onto the handle of the glock. I pulled it out carefully, and at arm’s length. It didn’t look any different in the daylight, it still gleamed dangerously and felt heavy in my palm.

The residue smell of burnt gunpowder remained. Moving quicker, I dumped the contents of a shoe box I tucked in the rear of my closet onto the floor and wrapped the weapon in a shirt before concealing it away.

We’ll handle that later, I decided.

Over the course of the next hour, I completed my laundry, remade my bed and even managed to pull myself together a little bit. I covered the dark circles visible under my eyes and slapped on some blush to give myself some colour, but that was all the effort I was willing to put in.

The closer the school day came to an end, the more on edge I felt. I hadn’t yet bothered to charge my phone, and I expected it to explode the moment I did. There was no doubt that Sweet Pea had been messaging me every hour on the hour since this morning, wondering where I was and if I would be joining him. It wasn’t like me to skip class, no matter the weather, no matter how sick.
God, I was a coward.

I still needed to get a hold of Donovan, and I knew I couldn’t put off turning the phone back on for much longer. I left it unattended on the living room table, charger barely reaching from the extension cord peeking out from behind the television. I busied myself trying to clean the rest of the mud that dried onto my boots.

I scrubbed every inch of everything I could from last night. I was half tempted to bring Dixie through the car wash, too, instead opted for hosing her down. Even though she wasn’t dirty, the idea of washing the bad memories away was cleansing. Feeling the weight alleviate from my shoulders was even better.

When I finally felt like I could catch my breath and fill my lungs with air, I pulled my phone from the table and looked over the messages that came through. 16 missed calls, 38 unread messages. Not all from the same person, but by the request of the same person I was sure.

My finger hovered over Don’s contact, deliberating if I was going to be selfish enough to involve him before I gave in and hit CALL. He would be between periods, and I was hoping to catch him before he settled into his next class. “C’mon, Donovan, pick up the phone,” I hissed, collapsing into the couch as the ringing continued. I hit speakerphone and rested the device on my chest, staring up at the ceiling as I waited.

When it rang through to voicemail, I tried again. This time he answered.

“Look who finally decided to join the land of the living,” Don mused into the receiver. I could hear the lull of student conversation filling the background noise and made out Danny’s voice among the group.

“Haha,” I droned, glancing towards the television to watch my actions mirror on the blank screen. “Can you do me a favour?”

“Is it gonna get me in trouble?”

I pondered the thought, “Possibly.”

“Oh.” Donovan’s voice had lowered, clearly surprised with my response. “Does it involve me ditchin’ econ?”

“Yes,” I sat upright, feeling a little more at ease knowing he was looking for an excuse to skip. “Can you come home? I need your help with a few things.”

“Count me in, sis. Anything to get me away from Juumian. I’ll see you in fifteen.” The dial tone followed shortly after; I smiled in victory, placing my phone back onto the coffee table. That was the easiest part of my day.

I had nothing left to occupy my time with, so I worked as fast as I could. I ran back up the stairs to my bedroom, pulling the shoe box from under my bed, along with grabbing my empty duffle. I hadn’t used it since November, the last time I thought about ending things with Sweet Pea. It seemed only fitting it helped me a second time.

Even though fifteen minutes was nothing in comparison to the rest of the day, each second that brought Donovan closer to the house was another second the anxiety reverberating inside of me grew. Soon this buzzing vibration and restlessness consumed me. By the time his bright red truck (Lexie, as he so affectionately called her) had pulled up to the side of the house, I waited on the front porch with the shoe box in one hand, a shovel in the other and bag over my shoulder.

Donovan appeared perplexed as I began to walk towards the vehicle, staring at me from the driver’s side with his brows knit together in the middle. The music lowered when I opened the door, and it wasn’t until I buckled in that he began to speak, “You’re not leaving, are you?”

I rolled my eyes, “With an empty duffle bag?”

He glanced at the withering material of my bag, then lifted his shoulder up in a half-shrug before he pulled the gear back
into reverse. “How did last night go? I didn’t hear you come in.” His voice was soft, as though he were trying to keep anyone from hearing.

I pressed my lips together, nervous for his reaction. If not of his, then the potential of Dean’s reaction (which was worse. Always worse). “I didn’t get home until six this morning.”

“That’s a little … late?” he tried, unsure if ‘late’ was the right word he was looking for.

“That wasn’t supposed to happen. And full disclosure, you won’t have to worry about it again.”

Donovan kissed his teeth, head cocked to the side. “Dean’s gonna have something to say – even if you don’t tell him, he’ll know. Teddy knows. This is a dangerous game, Cal, do you have a death wish?”

I asked myself the same question. Numerous times. “You know how I have this bad habit of helping people out when I probably shouldn’t?” When had that changed?

Donovan nodded with his brows raised, “Yup.”

“Don’t let me do that anymore.” I lamented as he pulled off Mooregate and turned onto the main road.

My cousin pursed his lips together in a tight line, glancing sideways at me with an apologetic look. “I’m guessing it didn’t go as smoothly as I thought it would, huh?”

“No even close.”

Another pause.

“What happened?”

I sighed, fighting to keep the annoyance at bay as I sunk deeper into the passenger’s seat. I thought about telling him the truth about Penny and Sweet Pea, but decided that it wasn’t my place to say anything. Much like it hadn’t been Sabine’s.

“Do you really want details, or can we go and do what I need to do?”

He licked his lips, sucking in a deep breath before he responded. “Sure.” he nodded, using his knees to keep the wheel straight as he dropped his hands into his lap. It was only silent for two heartbeats before he started talking again. “Are you ever going to tell me what happened last night?”

“Yes.” I snapped, looking out of the window. “No. I don’t know, are you going to rat me out?”

“Well, I mean, I never plan on ratting anyone out –”

“Donovan.”

“No, I don’t.” This time, he sighed, “Can you at least tell me if you’re okay? You look like hell …”

“I feel like I’ve been there once or twice this week.” I felt his eyes glance down at me anxiously as we rolled to a stop at the red light. I kept my eyes on the road. “I’ll be okay.” I reassured him.

It was quiet for a while, and it wasn’t until I signaled for him to turn that he bothered speaking up again. “So, what exactly are we doing?”

“I need to stop by Sunnyside to grab the rest of my things from the trailer, and drive Sabine to the bus terminal, and then,” ignoring his bewildered expression, I lifted the shoebox off the floor and onto my lap. After removing the lid and flipping back the shirt to reveal the glock hidden inside, I felt his body shift. “I need to know if you know what to do with this.”

“What’s that?” He asked curiously, peering over with furrowed brows. Once he registered the shape, he shot his eyes to
mine with a new fear. The car swerved off the main road and onto the shoulder, then he pulled the gears into park and turned in his seat to face me. Red colour was crawling up his neck, “Calliope, what the fuck? Where did you get that?!”

A brief flash of Joshua’s face passed through my mind. Not telling Donovan about where Josh was and what he had become was horrible of me. I know he had lost sleep over the loss of his childhood best friend. That was hard enough to watch, but now I knew information he deserved to have, and I was keeping it from him.

Selfish bitch.

I flipped the shirt back over the metal and pulled the lid back onto the box, ton clipped with my response. “Don’t ask questions you don’t want to know the answers to. Believe me when I say you don’t want to know.”

Don shook his head with a glare, “Cal, we don’t keep secrets in this family.”

“If you’re going to give me a hard time about this, I can get out and figure it out myself.” I offered in place, throwing him a warning glare of my own.

Neither of us blinked for several seconds, our eyes fixed and brows knotted. I understood where he came from. I knew that this family was all we had, was all I had. But he knew I needed someone I could trust to keep things from the others – or at least from Danny. To hell with that boy and his lack of filter. “Oh, for the love of God, don’t be so dramatic.”

Donovan rolled his eyes, returning his attention to the road in front of us as he pulled away from the curb. “Fine. Whatever. I’ll help you. I … are you safe?”

“I’ll feel safer once we get through this,” I gestured towards the trailer park as we rolled up. “And we hide this.” I shook the shoe box on my lap. I looked out of the windshield to where Sweet Pea’s trailer sat; his bike was still missing, as was Jugheads. I relaxed a little more knowing that they hadn’t left early to attend to any sort of business or come looking for me.

I unlocked the trailer door with the key I had pulled off of my chain, shoving against it to push it open roughly. The trailer still looked the same as when I had left it, only empty. Sabine’s shoes were no longer left by the front door. “Sab?” I called into the trailer, eyes stopping to look around the kitchen at the empty containers that littered the counter.

“Guess she found her own way home,” Don mused from behind me, transfixed by how much room there actually was inside of the trailer. From the outside, it didn’t look very big. I was sure he was doing much of what I had the first time I entered it. Wondering how the fuck someone the size of Sweet Pea managed to fit his entire life (and himself) into the space.

“Guess so,” I exhaled in relief, making a mental note to call Sabine as soon as I had the time to check in on her.

I moved towards the bedroom with my bag open and ready. My heart sank deeper into my empty stomach, my feet reluctant to move any further into the bedroom to gather the rest of my belongings. Don busied himself cleaning the living room and kitchen. He was muttering about how much stuff I had managed to accumulate over the last four months, leaving me to tend to the bedroom and bathroom.

I rubbed my eyes with a tired yawn, coming to a full stop in the doorway when they registered on the outline standing on the other side. Was I dreaming, or was it really him? Or, a version of him at least. He was leaning against the wall next to the door, an almost empty bottle of Jim Beam in his hand. Of course. He looked like his usual self; full of sweat, a little bloated, deep bags gathered under his eyes to make the skin droop. His flannel left unbuttoned, sleeves rolled to his elbows with a white t-shirt covering his chest. Stains of some sort of reddish colour littered it. Probably grease.

I tossed the bag onto the bed and started to pack, dumping my designated drawer empty onto the bed. My hair fell forward, serving as a curtain so that I don’t have to look at him. Why was he here? Why now?

A cold draft snaked along my exposed flesh, and I felt his presence circling the room. My mouth went dry, thinking that this all felt too incredibly real.
“It’s going to kill him, you know,” his voice still sounds the same, sloppy and slurred together. Byron Babble was something I’d learn to tolerate, though it had been quite some time since I last heard it. “You leaving him.”

“It’s easier this way.” I whispered mostly to myself. My motions had stopped, but my eyes remained focused on the bag in front of me.

“Easier for you,” the voice retorts.

I shook my head vehemently, ripping the zipper shut before pulling the strap over my shoulder, “Easier for him.”

“I didn’t realize I had raised you to be this thoughtless”

I ignored him, ensuring I had retrieved my dirty laundry from the army duffle in the corner and my personal belongings from the bathroom. Another draft caused my arms to erupt with goosebumps; vague shapes and outlines of his frame now stood by the front door. I was sure I was hallucinating. I must not have gotten enough sleep. Still, I couldn’t shake how haunting it was seeing and hearing him again.

Donovan walked through the figure’s cloud, holding up a sketchbook in his hand and gestured to the rest with the other. “These are all yours?”

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

“Calliope,” struggling to keep my composure at the sound of my name, I began to stack the books together to hold against my chest. I wanted to say something about how he wasn’t allowed to call me that anymore, but then reminded myself that he wasn’t actually here, and merely a figment of my imagination. “Calliope, look at me.”

“I’ve got everything.” I choked out; Don looked down at me with concern, brows pulling together but I had already eased myself around his frame to pull open the door.

Don tossed my bag into the back of his truck, and once settled into the driver’s side, he started the car. “Next stop: Fox Forest.”

Byron didn’t follow.

We managed to make it home before the high school let out their students for the day. We found a gathering of twisted roots with rich soil soft enough to dig up, and spent a solid forty minutes making it deep so I could toss the shirt and gun into the pit. It was the smart thing to do. No one should have their hands on it.

Donovan kept the shovel in the bed of his truck when we parked alongside the house, and after several deep breaths and much encouragement, he ushered me inside and out of the cold. It was past five-thirty, dinner was being served. Much to my surprise, I finally noticed that the rest of my day had gone by without another interruption from Byron, and had been far quieter than I had expected.

Until it wasn’t.

I looked down at the phone that vibrated on the table; another message from Sweet Pea popped up onto the screen.

SWEETS: Really? This again?
I swallowed the lump in my throat, feeling the heat rising to the surface of my skin until I was uncomfortably warm. I wondered what would have gone through his mind the moment he got home and realized everything belonging to me was missing. I was sure it didn’t take him long. It could’ve been the missing spare toothbrush that tipped him off, the half-empty dresser, or the sketchbooks that no longer littered his kitchen table. I wondered if the trailer was in ruins like the last time, or if he had more sense in him now to approach the situation without resorting to relying on his temper to get him through it.

“How was everyone’s day?” Teddy asked; Don and I shared a glance but kept our heads down and continued eating while Danny, animate has ever, filled us in on his day. I was thankful he managed to get through it without bringing up my absence in the halls.

I cut through my chicken breast slowly, not really making sense of any of their small talk as my phone began to vibrate again in my pocket. This time, the vibration pattern indicated that he was calling me now; when he couldn’t get through to me the first time, he called again.

And again.

And again.

I tore the chicken into pieces, not really caring about precision. If I didn’t start eating soon, I wouldn’t eat at all. No food and anxiety typically resulted in a lot of cramping – for me, at least. Surprisingly, I was the first to finish their meal. The boys were too busy talking to eat continuously, and they only realized they needed to finish their now cold dinners was because I sat back in my seat and pushed my plate away from me.

Another single text came through. Deciding I couldn’t put off reading it, I pulled my phone from my rear pocket and unlocked the screen.

**SWEETS:** *You don’t get to do this.*

I pressed my eyes shut, grip tightening on the device in my hand. Tears burned behind my eyelids, and sadness pulled on my heartstrings again. My stomach felt hollow. I spent the entire day trying to rationalize why leaving Sweet Pea was the best option - for both of us. That didn’t make the hurt any less present. We weren’t as compatible as we thought we were. We shared mutual interests, and for the most part liked the same things, but we were two very different people. Like night and day. Opposite sides of the same coin.

That, and nothing was ever accomplished without a fight. Every moment worth remembering, everything we had built together was not done without an argument, tears, or hurtful words. We had overcome a lot, thinking we could make it work. The reality was that we didn’t know very much about each other at all. Maybe that was me, and maybe I was giving up too.

Or, maybe I wasn’t made for this.

“Excuse me.” I said abruptly, tossing my napkin onto the table. The boys, startled by my sudden departure, hushed their conversation as I took the stairs two at a time. Once locked into the bathroom, I paced back and forth across the tile, pulling the air into my lungs as deeply as I could to ease my stomach. Bracing my hands on the counter, I looked up into the mirror and stared myself down. You will not puke. You just finished eating and have managed to get through most of today without needing-

I crashed down onto the floor in front of the toilet, combing my fingers through my bangs to keep them from the line of fire. My stomach heaved until there was nothing left, and the reflex continued until a pain extended all the way across my abdomen. I gagged into the bowl.

After I felt certain I wouldn’t puke again, I flushed the toilet and fell backwards onto my ass hard. Then I rest my back
against the tub to catch my breath. Once I was a little calmer, I stood and turned the sink on to cup my hands under running water, thankful for the relief it provided. This was not good. Not good at all.

There was a loud **BANG!** followed by shouting. A lot of it. Hurried and anxious, confused and halting. Demanding. It was hard to pinpoint who was who in the mix, and what exactly was going on. I wasn’t able to make out the words; shutting the water off, I strained my ears to make out the yelling on the other side of the bathroom door.

Idle conversation came to a halt at the sound of retching coming from the upstairs bathroom. Four pairs of eyes exchanged looks; Donovan felt guilty seeing the concern wash over his brother’s faces. To them, this could have been anything as simple as a twenty-four hour bug. But Don knew better. Don knew this was a reaction to the stress she carried with her.

“Should we go check on her?” No liquid fell into the toilet, but the girl still heaved violently. The sound echoed through the quiet house. “God, it sounds like she’s gonna throw up an organ or something.”

Dean’s shifted a disapproving gaze to Danny, “She isn’t feeling well.”

“Give her some space,” Don quipped, standing from his place at the table whilst Teddy cleared their empty plates. He wanted to rush up the stairs and check on her, but decided that he should take his own advice. If she wanted help, she would ask for it.

And she rarely ever needed it.

The house was peaceful and serene in that moment where the heaving finally subsided and running water took its place. This made Sweet Pea’s arrival all the more startling as the front door swung open and **slammed** into the wall.

His hair matted with sweat, his bangs curling into his hardened, angered face. He took two steps into the house, eyes looking over the space before he rested his mahogany hues on the boys at the dinner table. The leather of his jacket that he refused to shed creaked with every movement he made. For a moment, it was hard to decipher if he were angry with them, or angry in general.

“Calliope? Cal!”

After a split second, his heavy boots thundered up the stairs; Danny and Don followed, calling after him. It seemed to matter how hard, loud or harsh words were, getting through to Sweet Pea was impossible.

“Where is she?” Another door slammed against the drywall; Don wouldn’t be surprised if Calliope found a hole in her wall later. Sweet Pea took this time to review her room - the disarray of her bed, clothes littering the floor. His nostrils flared when he returned his attention back towards the boys. “Her shit is gone, she hasn’t answered a single message or call from anybody in hours, she didn’t show up for class –”

“She what–?” Came from the bottom of the staircase.

“She’s not here!” Don lied, his voiced strained. He sucked at lying, which was part of why he was quieter than Danny. These words only seemed to irritate the Serpent more. Sweet Pea’s long fingers gripped the front of Donovan’s shirt, rearing him into his cousin’s bedroom with considerable force. Donovan was pinned to the wall; there was a struggle, and the scuffle of boots against the wooden floor indicated that Danny attempted to pull Sweet Pea off of his brother and away from the upper level of the house.

It was unsurprising they were having a difficult time
Sweet Pea stood in the doorway to Cal’s room. His entire frame took up the majority of the space, and it was the slightest bit theatrical that Danny and Don were both putting in a lot of effort into keeping him out of the bedrooms. Danny eventually gave up, and settled on standing toe-to-toe with the Serpent, arms folded.

“Where is she?” Sweet Pea demanded, something that didn’t seem to sit well with Donovan. The teen’s arms filled with heat, heart beginning to thunder in his chest. “You,” Donovan watched with great horror as the teen’s glare focused on his frame. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anyth –”

“Bullshit!” Evading the swing of his arm, Don backed himself out of his way and into the hall.

“Woah, hey!” Danny tried to step forward around Sweet Pea’s frame, but this proved to be a difficult task. “Sweets, stop!”

“It was your truck leaving the trailer park this afternoon,” Sweet Pea pressed his finger into the center of Don’s chest. “So it must have been you.”

Something clicked. Donovan hated being the youngest of his brothers; he hated how small and weak he felt in comparison. Sweet Pea was several inches taller than him, he hated how vulnerable he was standing in front of him. He used his hands to push the Serpent away, eyes hardening into his own glare. “I didn’t do anything.”

He didn’t believe that. Sweet Pea wanted to yell. The man’s heart and ego were bruised – Don knew exactly what the Serpent was feeling, and under different circumstances might have even felt sorry for the guy. But he couldn’t find it in him to spare empathy.

Instead, he cocked his head to the side, taking a rather large inhale before he dropped his arms. “She’s at Sabine’s,” he felt his brother glance sideways at him, confusion pulling his brows together in the middle. That definitely wasn’t the truth. “She needs some space, dude. It was the only option.”

“The only option?” Sweet Pea directed his anger towards Don, looking down at him as though he were the enemy. Like he was the cause for his pain, simply by being an associate. Donovan knew that Sweet Pea knew. It was unspoken, but he knew. “Did you know?”

“I drove her.”

Sweet Pea stopped resisting. When Don felt the restraint subdue, he slowly released his grip from his leather jacket; just long enough for his guard to be down. With their chests heaving and eyes locked on each other’s, the boys watched the Serpent’s lips curl over his teeth. “You fuckin’ prick,” he seethed, his fist launching forward into the side of Donovan’s cheek, knocking him backwards into Calliope’s open bedroom. Danny tried his best to restrict Pea’s arms to his body, shouts followed by Teddy’s voice that traveled up the stairs as he took the steps two at a time.

Donovan could only feel a thumping sensation where the contact had been. His jaw clenched so tightly it hurt, pain creeping up from his cheek and into the back of his skull. He looked up in time to see Teddy hauling Sweet Pea away from Danny – who was doing a much better job of holding his own. “Outside! Right now!” The older Serpent gripped Pea’s jacket in his hands, forcing the teen down the stairs and dragged out of the front door.

Good to know Teddy doesn’t tolerate disrespect in his boyfriend’s home, Donovan thought wearily to himself. He can stay.

The house waited and remained silent as their shouting voices grew quieter and quieter, and when it seemed safe and he was sure Teddy escorted Sweet Pea away from the property, he noticed the bathroom door inched open. Calliope stood, eyes wide and remorseful as she took in his frame on the floor.

Danny looked back and forth between his brother and cousin, leaving Dean to glare up at them from the bottom of the staircase. “What the fuck?” He asked with his arms raised up; his words were sharp and angry. All three teens flinched.
“I’m …” Calliope sighed, looking over her shoulder to Don; he remained seated on the floor, nursing his cheek. “I’m breaking up with Sweet Pea.”

The lack of response was unsettling. Donovan knew that Cal tried to keep drama out of the house, knowing that Dean was still bitter about her taste in guys. To be frank, it was better that they didn’t know about everything. One thing he had noticed in the time she had been here was that none of them were very shy with voicing their opinions - even if it wasn’t asked for. He was sure she had no doubt in her mind they wouldn’t give her the same unsolicited opinions in regards to her relationship if she gave them the details.

Dean dropped his arms and sighed, “A little warning next time would be nice.”

The girl nodded, pursing her lips together as Donovan joined her side. Her reply was short, emotion void in her tone. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

As the day came to an end, I curled into my cleaned sheets and collapsed onto the pillows. As soon as Teddy returned to the house, Dean sent him on a run to the wholesale store to grab another set of curtains for my room, along with a window lock. There hadn’t been any verbal confirmation from my cousin that he knew about Sweet Pea’s midnight visits, but I was grateful nonetheless.

When the cordless phone next to my head began to ring, I picked it up with a sigh. “Yellow,” her voice greeted; I smiled immediately, turning so that I was on my side.

“She lives,” I teased.

“She’s so grounded,” Sabine responded grimly; I imagined her sitting against her pillows with her hair piled into a bun at the top of her head and her lips pulled into a pout. “Had to tell them I ended up crashing with you until I could get a bus into town.”

“Mmm, bet they loved that,” I said. “Did they believe you?”

“No, but they let it go.”

Figures. The Abernathy’s didn’t expect much from their daughter, apart from maintaining a good average and kept up the family appearance. Which, she did, and she did so without much complaint, but it definitely wasn’t without a little hell raising. Their prodigy had a taste for the wild side, and knowing such had put them in several compromising situations. Provided their daughter was safe, and they were safe, they didn’t care much for what she did.

Well, unless it had to do with me.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” she said after a while. “Nate said you got in around five-thirty?”

My stomach twisted at the use of the unfamiliar name; I nodded, in spite of the fact she couldn’t see, “I did.”

“Where did you go? We looked everywhere for you.”

I frowned, pulling the duvet to my chin. “I’m scared, Sab,” my words were slow and cautious, the anxiety of not completely being alone lingering in the back of my mind. “Penny had her cronies hunt me down in the forest.”

“I beg your pardon?” Yeah, definitely had her attention now.
“Some sick twisted version of cat and mouse.” I whispered, letting my eyes fall shut. “I spent hours running around in the cold. At first I didn’t actually think she was being serious, but—” The words stopped before I could speak them.

“But?”

Joshua’s face flashed past my closed lids, stirring up a nervousness in me. “I ran into someone. Someone with a gun.” We were quiet for a minute, listening to the sound of each others breathing before I could muster up the courage to speak again. “Sabine, I’m okay.”

“No you’re not,” her voice sounded sad. “You absolutely are not. I’m so sorry, Allie, if I had known —”

I stopped her before she could get too deep into it, “There was no way you could’ve known.”

She paused before she replied, “Would Sweet Pea have known?”

I opened my eyes. That was a valid question. My mind reeled back to the urgency in his voice. How angry he was when I offered to stay in place of my best friend – as if he expected differently. I knew it was the part of him that cared and felt responsible for me, but I could never live with myself if something had happened to her.

“I don’t know.”

“Ohkay.” Sabine replied slowly, “What now?”

“For the next week I’m ‘staying’ with you, okay?” I winced, hoping that I could lie my way through this one, “Birthday getaway.” I added quickly. Not too terrible.

“You want to come home to shitty Pelham for an entire week?”

I rolled my eyes, “I’m not actually coming –”

“No, that’s my point. You wouldn’t come home to shitty Pelham for an entire week – you wouldn’t be caught dead back in these towns borders.”

“An exaggeration,” I grumbled. But, I guess now was better than never. The more I repeated the words out loud, the harder the reality was to face. “I’m breaking up with Sweet Pea. I haven’t figured out what I want to say so I’m … avoiding him.”

This isn’t working. I need some space. It’s not you, it’s me -

Why bother to lie?

Sabine was quiet on her end for a minute, seeming to let that information sink in. “I’m sorry,” she whispered again. “I shouldn’t have dragged you into this.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Because, Allie. The two of you were fine before last night. I’m the one who told him about Byron, I’m the one who asked you for money, this is all my fault —”

“Sabine, it was going to happen eventually. This thing we have .. it’s built on the wrong things, and Dean was right. About him. About everything.” That wasn’t true, but I kept pretending like it was. Maybe that would make this easier. I’d have to face him at some point, after all. “And about Byron …”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She asked; I imagined her sitting on her bed with her head in her hand. She likely felt awful for spilling the beans.
“I was gonna tell him,” I confessed. “There was never a good time.”

“Honestly, Allie, is there ever a good time to bring up Byron?”

She had a point. The rest of the night carried on like that, and over the next few days our conversations consisted of repeating the same things over and over - yes, I was okay. Yes, I was safe. No, I hadn’t talked to Sweet Pea, and no, I hadn’t gone back to school. By the time Saturday came, I had been absent for an entire week and had managed to avoid speaking to anybody except my cousins and my best friend. Donovan brought home the work I missed, most of which I caught up on. I decided that if I refused to walk into the school, the least I could do was keep on top of my work.

Every chance he could, Sweet Pea showed up on the front steps looking for me. After turning the Serpent away for the umpteenth time, Dean requested that I do something about the situation soon. He was more calm than he was Monday evening; after spending an hour trying to articulate a story that worked in my favour to explain the situation, Dean seemed to have more grounds for understanding. I promised him every day I would; truthfully, I hadn’t picked up my own phone and plugged it in since Monday. I knew I couldn’t avoid him forever, or anyone else for that matter, but I decided that two more days of solitude wouldn’t hurt anybody.

I was wrong.

“Rise and shine, sleeping beauty!” I rolled until my face shoved into the pillow, concealing the fluorescent light. Danny stood at the end of my bed, gathering my duvet in his arms while Donovan drew open the curtains and pulled the window open, letting in a gust of cold February air. I whined in protest.

“C’mon, Cal. You’ve been sleeping since eight o’clock last night.” Danny sighed after a few moments, hitting the back of my legs with a pillow. “Get your ass in gear, Hobbs.”

“Oh, fuck off.” I growled, pulling the pillow from his hand with a glare before I covered my head with it again. “I’m tired.”

“Tired?”

“Yes, tired.”

“Oh, she’s tired.” Donovan repeated, falling onto the bed next to me. “I didn’t realize you’re tired, why didn’t we think of that Danny?”

“Come to think of it, I’m pretty tired, too.” He yawned, the bed dipping under his weight as he joined us on the mattress. 

Oh, god.

“So tired.” Don agreed; they began rolling from either side, squishing me between their shoulders. It wasn’t something they did often, but there were the rare occurrences where their moods would click and they’d be hellbent on giving everybody grief together. It had become a typical sibling bond between the three of us.

It wasn’t until I was begging for air and kicking them that they relaxed with a shared laugh. I grabbed the pillow from over my head and sat up, smacking it over Donovan with a frustrated growl, “You’re - such - a - dick!” I punctuated each word with another hit, watching his lips curl back over his teeth in a triumphant smile. “Must you insist on making me miserable?”

He rolled his eyes as Danny climbed off the bed, resting his arms behind his head. “No, your company downstairs does.”

I froze, looking to Danny for further explanation.

“Reggie came looking for you,” he lamented after exchanging a look with Don. “He wasn’t on your list of unwelcome visitors, so we let him in.”
“He’s in the living room.”

“With Dean.” Danny added as he exited into the hallway and disappeared into his room.

I didn’t think to put Reggie’s name on the list because I definitely figured he would be the last person to venture into the Southside to come looking for me. I owed him a little more credit than I gave. There was a beating human heart in his chest after all.

Don watched from the comfort of my bed as I pulled a clean pair of socks over my feet and ran a brush through the tangles of my hair. We had done a lot of this over the last five days, sitting around in silence. It was nice having his company because he respected that I didn’t want to talk about what happened with Sweet Pea. Either way, his efforts to keep me distracted didn’t go unappreciated. A part of me wondered if he wanted to know, or if he was happy I wasn’t a blubbing mess like most girls seemed to be after a breakup.

Though, I hadn’t broken up with Sweet Pea. Yet.

“Mantle, huh?” He asked absently, eyes glued to the screen of his phone. He was pretending to act indifferent, but there was curiosity that laced with the last name.

I lifted my shoulders in a shrug, “Don’t look at me,” I huffed as I pulled a cardigan over my arms, “I know about as much as you do.”

I left him in my room, retreating down the stairs and bending the corner to find that the boys were telling the truth. Reggie sat on the couch facing the dining room, his eyes glancing around at the photo frames. Dean sat in his usual seat at the kitchen table, sipping from his steaming mug with amusement plastered all over his face as he watched the teen in his living room squirm on his couch.

“Hey.” I said finally, standing at the foot of the stairs. Reggie snapped his eyes to mine, his shoulders relaxing as he drank my figure in.

“Hey,” he stood from the couch and walked towards me, holding out the small bag he carried with him. “This is for you.”

I looked at it in question before I took it from his fingertips; I pulled the tissue out and peeked into the bottom, surprised to find a collection of three powdered spheres. “Bath bombs?” I asked, trying to keep the smile off of my face.

“Midge swears seven ways from Sunday that these cure every kind of pain,” he shrugged, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Figured if you were sick or whatever, they’d help you feel better.”

I pressed my lips together, pulling one of the bombs up to my nose to inhale the scent; Dean’s chair dragged across the floor in the dining room before his bedroom door shut down the hall. Thankful for the momentary privacy, I set the bag down on one of the stairs and wrapped my arms around Reggie’s frame in a quick hug. “Thank you.”

“You hungry?” He asked, glancing nervously down the hall to where Dean disappeared. “I’ve been working with my dad at the Jamboree all day and I’m starving.”

Stress kept me from eating on a regular schedule, but despite the lack of hunger I felt, I nodded and pulled my jacket from the hook by the door. “Food sounds like a good idea.”

He led me out to the dark vehicle parked on the curb and drove us down to Pop’s for a late lunch. Most of my afternoon was comfortable, which surprised me. He didn’t ask about why I wasn’t at school, but did offer his help if I ever needed it. Part of me wanted to ask why he was so nice to me, given that I was still part of a world he hated. I decided I didn’t want to know that answer.

I must have been hungrier than I thought. We each ordered a basket of curly fries and wings. As I was finishing the last bit of my milkshake, he pushed his basket towards me with a defeated look.
“Full already?” I laughed as he adjusted his frame in the booth and leaned against the window. He placed a hand on his stomach while I wiggled my saucy fingers and plucked one of the uneaten wings. He hadn’t pried too much into my absence from school, instead mentioned that he missed having someone to bug during last period. It appeared I did, too.

Reggie sighed, placing a palm against his cheek as he watched me devour the rest of his food, “You’re coming back, right?”

“To school?” I clarified; when he nodded, I followed his actions, “Monday morning, bright and early.”

“Woah,” he lifted his brows in surprise. I sat back and wiped my hands with a petulant look on my face. “You look less excited for school than I do, and that’s saying something.”

I threw the napkin at him, rolling my eyes as Pop came by to take the empty baskets with a smile. “I’ve gotta talk to Sweets about something, and I’m having a difficult time figuring out exactly what I want to say.”

“And you have to wait until Monday?” Reggie asked, confusion lifting his brow.

“I don’t have to,” I amended, staring down at my arms. “I want to.”

Sensing my tone, his brows relaxed and his frame softened. Recognition lit his features. He knew. “Oh. Is everything okay?”

“Not that it’s any of your business,” I sighed, shaking my hair over my shoulders, “No. They’re not.”

“So … you’re breaking up with him?”

“I think I already did.”

“You think you did? Guys are simple creatures, Barbie, you gotta lay it out for us like we’re ten.”

I pressed my lips together and shot him a sheepish look, resting my arms on the table. “Something happened last weekend with Sweet Pea. I don’t think being in a relationship with someone that’s everything I’ve been trying to stay away from for the last year is a good idea.” I shrugged. I wanted it to be that simple. “It wasn’t going very well, anyways.”

“Are you sure about that?” He wondered, not looking too convinced with my words. “It looked like things were pretty good, if you ask me.”

“There’s more than what’s on the surface.” I reminded him, “And since when did you want the two of us together? You’ve been trying to get under my skin for weeks now.”

Reggie smiled, sitting upright, “You’re right, I don’t. But, I can tell you that you didn’t look nearly this miserable when you were with him.”

“I look miserable?” I asked quickly, almost immediately bringing my hands up to cover the lower half of my face. “Not in a bad way, just …” he searched for the right word, staring at me with a frown when he finally shrugged, “Exhausted.”

His words stuck with me for the rest of our lunch. It was well past five before either of us made move to leave our booth; after some time, his appetite returned and we ordered another round with mine to go. Dean was likely hungry, and I figured dinner on me was the least I could do after the trouble I had caused all week.

Reggie was reluctant to see me go, but after reassuring him that he would see me Monday, he let me go. I zipped my jacket up to my chin, looking at the flurry of snow that came down from the heavens with a slight pout. After a mini pep talk, I ventured out into the cold.
The quickest way home was the path behind the restaurant. With my chin tucked to my chest, I hurried my way towards the side where the edge of the forest gathered, boots dragging through the snow rather than stepping into it.

“Hey, sweetness.” I felt my heart sputter before falling into the pit of my stomach; I stopped immediately, a hand braced on my chest.

“Jesus Christ, you’re something else.” I retorted bitterly once his features registered in the darkness. Sweet Pea switched his weight from one leg to the other and shrugged, not looking too ashamed that he resorted to sneaking around in the dark. “Do you always lurk around corners?”

“If you picked up your phone or showed up for school, this definitely wouldn’t be happening.”

Silence hung between us for a few moments, and I took this moment to drink in his tall body for the first time in a few days. Being near him never ceased to spark the fire in me; even now, my fingertips and cheeks burned. I focused on trying to study him. His tired eyes circled with heavy bags, and his hair untouched. “You look like crap,” I mused sadly. There was another painful pang in my chest.

That’s your fault.

“I’m trying out a new look,” he joked bitterly, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

He had meant for the words to trigger some sort of emotional response from me. Instead, I sighed and held up the takeout bag in my hand, “I’ve gotta get this home to Dean. I’ll call you later, okay?”

Lie. We both knew I had no intentions of picking up my phone. With a slow shake of his head, Sweet Pea blocked my path by stepping in front of me. “Why won’t you talk to me?” The despair that seeped into his words was startling. The heartbreak was evident. I could see my reluctance to grow a pair was more damaging for him than it was for me. Then, I thought about how Reggie still occupied one of the booths, and wondered what sort of assumption the Serpent would make from it if he had known we came here together.

“I don’t have much to say.” That might have been the first half-truth I said all week. There was plenty I could say, but confrontation had never been my strong suit. That was what Sabine had been for. And looking up at his sullen expression accompanied with dark circles, I felt guilty about the pain I was causing and how much worse I was making it.

“I do,” he said, thinking he could keep me where I was long enough to keep the conversation going. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know. I’ll tell you about Penny – who she is and the deal we made. I will never make another run, I swear. I’ve even made sure she’ll never set another foot near you again, okay? Just come back to Sunnyside with me and I’ll explain anything you want.”

It appeared as though he had spent the last five days seriously considering this offer, because I was sure I had never seen him look so desperate. He wanted this. He fought so hard for this, and it was ironic that his actions to try and keep me had been the very thing that pushed me away.

“And then what?” I inquired, folding my arms against my chest. Deflecting his emotion was easier with my own barricades up; my arms moved to fold over my chest and I rocked back on my heels, staring up at him with a blank expression. It was the only thing I knew I had mastered that would make this easier. I was sure that he wasn’t very appreciative of my coldness, though I couldn’t bother to care. “No harm, no foul?”

We only prolonging the inevitable.

His face fell, eyes weary and sad. I looked over my shoulder to the restaurant as the bell over the door rang and customers exited out into the winter evening. I noticed several pairs of eyes that watched the two of us from inside Pop’s. When my eyes returned back to him, anguish had taken over his features. An emotion I had never seen before. “This is it, right? This is you actually breaking up with me.”
With the words out in the open between us, I found it difficult to keep eye contact. He deserved that much. I swallowed the lump that built in my throat, willing my voice to come out clear and concise, “It’s over, Sweet Pea.”

His face crumbled. I watched as he restrained himself from reaching out for me, now too scared to touch me at all. I kicked him when he was already down. “I don’t want to be without you, okay? I feel like I’m sick in the head; I can’t eat, I can’t sleep.” His eyes scanned across my face, eyes transfixed on my own. He was hopeful, and the scent that wafted off of his body smelled intoxicating but I resisted, pressing my eyes shut. “I know you love me, Calliope.”

I shook my head, “You made a choice, Sweet Pea. These are the consequences.”

“Consequences? We’re not five, Calliope, there are no time outs –”

“Do you even hear how you sound right now –”

“I need you –”

I wasn’t sure when I started to sound like Dean, but there was no stopping the words once they tumbled from my mouth. Cutting him off, I interjected, “We’re not supposed to need each other, okay? It’s codependent. It’s not healthy for either of us, and if Sunday night didn’t already prove that, maybe you’re the one who’s in need of a serious wake up call.” I fired back, folding my arms. “This isn’t love.”

“It is –”

“You had Penny switch my support worker because you love me, right? Not because you need me?” Sweet Pea switched his weight from leg to leg again and huffed in annoyance. “That’s not love. Love is about respecting boundaries, privacy and home life. Not sticking yourself in wherever and finding loopholes in the system.” I glared at the ground, not able to bring myself to look at him. “Should I start calling you Nathaniel?”

He paused. I figured I had hit home. When he spoke again, it was through even breathing and a controlled volume. “I don’t blame you. I would be mad at me, too. But I had known you’d walk out on me, I would never have …” he sighed angrily, looking down at his boots as he dropped his arms, shoulders falling in defeat. “Please don’t do this. It’s killin’ me.”

“It’s killing me too.”

“We’re over.” I repeated.

The words, though they were my own, hit me like a swift punch to the gut.

“Don’t say that.” I could tell that the anger slipping into his tone was out of frustration, but I couldn’t help but feel as though this was all the more reason to rip the bandaid off. “We’re barely gettin’ started –”

“I don’t love you anymore.”

If hearts could break, I’m sure the entire town would have heard mine. I was saying whatever I could to make him hate me, as it seemed that trying to do this any other way wasn’t working. He deliberated for two heartbeats before his lips took capture over mine roughly, his hands coming up to grab the sides of my face. I could taste alcohol on his breath – whiskey.

My reaction was immediate, also painful. I didn’t try to fight him, but instead shut my eyes and allowed our lips to move together. As sickening as it was tasting something I’d grown to hate, my heart had ached for this all week. But the longer I allowed this to go on, the harder it would all be. I braced my hands flat against his chest and pushed hard, shoving him backwards away from me. This kind of self restraint was hard.

“Please, Calliope,” his plea was desperate, hand reaching out for me again. With the sun disappeared behind the trees, I
could barely make out tears shedding down the length of his rosy cheeks. “Please, please, please don’t do this.”

I shouldered past him and away from the restaurant; warm fingers gripped my wrist to stop me, but I evaded. I couldn’t find the heart to look at him, mostly because I didn’t want him to see that I felt as broken as he did. I didn’t want him to know I hadn’t been sleeping, either. I didn’t want him to know that I wasn’t able to keep anything down. I didn’t want him to know that this week had been nothing but hell for me, too, but I wished that I could tell him that my nights were plagued with bad memories and visions I couldn’t stop.

“Calliope!” It was like another swift punch hit me in the stomach; my heart twisted painfully in my chest, tears of my own threatening to spill. I chose not to respond. After standing in the cold for sixty seconds too long deliberating, I exited the parking lot and took off towards the gravel path that led me towards the tracks.

My legs carried me home in less time than usual; I didn’t stop until I reached the front porch, the pressure that had built in my head nearly blinding as I held back my own tears. I could see the boys lounging in the living room through the front window, game controllers in their hands, eyes glued to the television. Behind them, Teddy and Dean were seated parallel to each other at the kitchen table; Dean’s work was laid out in front of him while he worked on his laptop, and Teddy was reading another novel.

They barely acknowledged my presence when I entered the house.

“Hey,” Danny drawled, waving to me over his head.

I tossed the food onto his stomach; it had been intended for Dean, but now I really didn’t care who ate it. “I’m going to bed,” I said in one breath, tossing my coat onto the hook by the front door and kicking my boots off to the side. There was only grunts in response; thankful for their distractions, I bounded up the stairs to my bedroom. Once the door was secured shut and locked behind me, I leaned against it.

And with a deep exhale, I slid to the floor. No longer trying to keep the sadness buried inside, I let it all out. With a hand covering my mouth, and the other placed over my heart, I pulled my knees to my chest and tried my best to keep quiet, as heart wrenching sob after sob tumbled past my lips.

It was over.

After a week of missed classes, and his avoiding his calls, I finally managed to grow a pair big enough to end what shouldn’t have started in the first place. And the way I was feeling in this moment was precisely the reason why it needed to be done. I was positive I had broken him in ways I didn’t even know yet, but convinced myself that his pain would only last temporarily. He would recover, and move on.

Sweet Pea was built to last.

Fifteen minutes passed, and I hung my head in my hands. The tears hadn’t stopped, I wasn’t able to control them anymore. They flowed freely, leaving streaks of black mascara running along my cheeks and neck. Every so often, my thoughts would wander back to him and I would have to restart the process.

“Look at you,” I shut my eyes tightly, hands moving to cover my ears. I knew it was too dark in the room to make out his shape, but his voice was close. “You’re a goddamn mess.”

“Go away.” I whispered, voice cracking with my plea. Every night it was the same thing; poor sad broken orphan girl. As though he were taunting me, giving me every reason to justify how much I hated myself.

“You know I can’t do that” he replied; his voice was softer now, calmer. It were as though he was trying to soothe me.

I lifted my head slowly. After another deep inhale, I finally opened my eyes. The room was empty, apart from myself. Oddly enough, seeing his face in the dark might have been more of a relief than anything. Some sort of reminder that he wasn’t real.
When he spoke again, it was as though I was being wrapped in a security blanket by his words. *Bet you wish you had some of my Jim Beam now.*”

I swallowed thickly. “Does it ever get any easier?” I asked, feeling pitiful for believing he was really there, for conversing with him.

“Oh, Calliope,” the voice tsked gently as melancholy settled into my bones. “This feeling? *This is only the beginning.*”

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