**road to me**

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**road to me**

by heavyliesthecrown

**Summary**

There are things you need to let go of to become the person you’re meant to be and want to be. Sometimes, there are people you need to let go of, too. But, there are certain people in life that you’re just never meant leave behind, and no matter what you do, the road will always lead you straight back to them.

Or, they had perfectly good reasons for breaking up – but that may not be enough for their friends, for fate, for their own hearts - that keep marching them to crossroads with each other time and again.
Then.

It’d been snowing.

She’d been no stranger to snow; she liked it, in all honesty. She thought there was something romantic about it, something clean, crisp, something innately pure at its core. A blank slate, tabula rasa, a blank page ready to be filled with perfectly pressed footprints and uncharted, unwritten stories.

But, for as long as she could remember, she’d never been any good at balancing herself in it. She blamed her mother and her good intentions, who’d always insisted on dressing her up in little buoyant snow boots and puffy jackets so big and with so much insulation that she’d invariably tip over to one side or the other, rolling around like a tortoise on its shell, unable to move, unable to stand.

Her ineptitude in the snow hadn’t even been a working theory, because at the ripe old age of eighteen, balance fully formed, she’d wiped out while running across Washington Square Park, cartoon-like, legs kicking up in the air in either direction as she squealed and landed hard on her tailbone for all of New York to see.

She couldn’t walk in the snow to save her life, let alone run; it hadn’t been a theory, so much as a known, bona fide fact.

But she’d been late so she’d thought she’d give it a shot.

“Hey,” she’d said, slowing her jog over to the bench and sitting down with a wince and an out-of-breath huff. “I’m so sorry.”

He’d flipped his book closed and looked up at her. “Didn’t notice,” he’d said with an easy smile. “Everything okay?”

He’d definitely seen her fall, she gathered from his tone, and had just chosen to save her from further embarrassment by bringing it up in the most innocuous way possible.

“Oh, fine,” she’d said quickly, brushing the snow off the back of her coat. “Spec meeting just ran over. You know how it is, the editors get a kick out of hearing their own voices.”

She’d never been all that great a liar – she has no poker face – but he’d let this one slide, too. Her meeting hadn’t run over, not by a long shot, but she hadn’t wanted to admit the real reason why she’d been a thirty-minute no-show – she’d taken the wrong subway and ended up in Brooklyn.

“Hey, how’d your pitch go?” he’d asked, tapping her wrist with the spine of his book.

She’d sighed. “Not great. Got stuck with copy-editing again.”

"Next issue, then. You'll get there."

“I know.”

She hadn’t known that at all.
“Hey,” he’d said, zeroing right in on her doubt and tipping her chin up to catch her gaze. “You’ll get there. You’ll get there because you’re Betty Cooper, and you always find your way.”

She’d managed a small smile. She could tell he was freezing despite the brave front he’d put on, and she didn’t want to dwell on it any longer, either. Her failures were her own and there was nothing for her to do but to move on and try again, and harder this time.

“Come on.” She’d slipped her gloved hand into his, pulling him off the bench. He’d waited long enough. “Pizza’s on me tonight.”

But he’d stopped her, his hand firm in hers as he tugged her still. “Jug, what are you-”

“Here,” he’d said. “I found it on the bench.”

“What is it?” She’d twirled the playing card over between her fingers.

The two of hearts.

She didn’t know much about cards other than how to play Go-Fish with Polly’s twins. She didn’t gamble because she’d always been the risk adverse type, but there’d been a certain inexplicable beauty in the stark red symbols across the card’s face that had all but mesmerized her.

He’d shrugged, the apples of his cheeks as red as the twin hearts on the card. “You’ll get that byline soon, and anything else you want in life. You’re a safe bet, Betts,” he’d said almost shyly, smiling at the alliteration. “I’d bet my heart on you.”

Now.

It doesn’t feel like a break-up.

All she can think while it’s happening is that it doesn’t really feel like a break-up. There’s no shouting; no wild accusations being flung around – no one’s cheated, no one’s found someone else, no one is moving across the country. There are no tears. There’s no screaming.

She doesn’t even know if there’s any heartbreak.

She remembers – back when they were sixteen and feeling everything she’d thought a human body capable of feeling – it’d been like her soul had been ripped from her when he’d walk away, like her entire existence slipped away with him as her fingers slipped through the worn leather of his jacket. It’d been like death itself when he told her it was all for the best, that he was doing it to protect her, that she’d understand why one day.

It doesn’t feel like that now.

It feels like nothing now.

“So, uh, my Keurig,” she says, voice raspy and cracking through the silence. The sound startles her – it’s coarse and affected, and not at all like her. “I know you like to use it, and so does Archie,” she trails off, unable to bring herself to say the words I’d like it back. This whole line of conversation feels rude, nonsensical even, because shouldn’t they be talking about something else, anything else
other than her incredibly unimportant, replaceable coffee-maker?

But, she reasons, they *have* talked about everything else – how it’s not working anymore, how they’re not going to make this awkward for their friends, how they’re going to be mature adults about this and agree to cut off all communication because it’d just be too hard otherwise – and this was all that remained.

The coffee-maker.

She wonders if divorce is at all similar to this – coming together and dividing up assets based on who loves the wedding china more or who used what credit card to buy the flat screen TV. Maybe there’s even more feeling in divorce. Maybe there’s more screaming, more shouting, tears – more of anything beyond two people watching for the other’s reaction through the black mirror of the television screen with an ocean of couch cushions in between.

He clears his throat then and she thinks it might be preamble for something profound, something finally meaningful.

It’s not.

“I’ll bring it over,” he says softly, staring down at his hands resting on his knees. “And the rest of your stuff.”

“Thanks,” she says. “Oh, and my black heels, the ones with the-”

“Are in the back of my closet,” he finishes. “I’ll grab those, too.”

She doesn’t really know why she’s so focused on any of the very replaceable things she’s choosing *this moment* to think about. This is the moment, she thinks, this is the *only* moment, the *last* moment they have to talk about what went wrong, to wax poetic about enduring, endless love, to cry, to scream, and here she is thinking about her *stuff*.

Stuff she doesn’t even like.

“My PlayStation,” he blurts out, so suddenly and so loudly that it makes her jump. “I, uh... it’s still...”

“I’ll bring it back,” she says quickly. “We can - I don’t know - find a date that works and just swap things? Or-”

“That works,” he interrupts. “We can... yeah.”

The silence is deafening. It’s been an entire night of silence and half-sentences at best, and at this point, she’s thinking seriously about screaming into the void just to hear *something* louder than her own heartbeat thumping in her ear, the chimes of the elevator down the hall, his breathing – his goddamn *quiet* breathing – all the way across the couch.

There’s a part of her that’s tempted to ask, just to make sure, if they’re actually really and truly *done* because she’s realizing now that it wasn’t really made clear – but her beats her to the punch.

“So, we’re good?” he asks.

*It’s an oxymoron,* she thinks about saying. They’re not a *we* anymore, so by definition doesn’t that mean that they’re not ‘*good?’* Isn’t that the very definition of ‘*bad?’* But they’re also sitting here calmly, discussing things rationally, and in some universe she thinks that must qualify as *good,* at
least from an objective standpoint.

“I think so,” she whispers back. It’s not what she’s thinking.

*I’m sorry,* she thinks, *I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt you but I think you wanted this, too. It’s me, it really is, it isn’t you – it definitely isn’t anyone else, either. I don’t know how there’s ever going to be.*

*I’m going to miss you, I think.*

*I know.*

*What I don’t know is how I’m going to learn to stop loving you.*

He falters for a moment, rocking his weight from his toes to his heels, building up the strength to move from the heaviness of the silence. When he does, his entire body seems to roll through the space like a thunderstorm over the prairie, breezing past her and swirling up the quiet like the crash of a wave against the shore. It happens so suddenly that she doesn’t even have time to pull her legs back, and he bumps into them while striding to the door.

“Sorry,” she mumbles; he shakes his head in return. *It’s okay,* she reads. But he doesn’t spare her so much as a glance.

His hand pauses on the doorknob, and it hits her then that for the first time in years he’s about to walk out right out without so much as a hug or a kiss goodbye. He turns back to her, frowning like he’s forgotten something, and she thinks that he’s realized it, too.

She wonders if he will, if he’ll double back and hug her or kiss her just once more for old time’s sake. That would be okay, she thinks, after all they’ve gone through. A goodbye kiss, or a goodbye hug. That would be okay.

He looks at her, hand tightly wound around the doorknob but, not angrily, not even unkindly - just with that same nothingness that has permeated this heavy, horrible night. “I’ll let you know what day works to swap stuff. Or you can let me know,” he says.

*Wait,* she thinks. *Wait.*

But for what?

She squares her shoulders and nods once, curtly. “I’ll let you know.”

“Bye, Betts.”

And just like that, he’s out of her door.

Just like that, he’s out of her life.

She had thought that she’d feel more once he actually left, that the presence of his absence would suddenly kick her heart into high gear, or at the very least, kick her tear ducts into action. But she’s been watching the minutes tick by, watching the numbers change from eights to nines on the stove clock for a full hour and there’s been nothing.
It’s frustrating to wait for a feeling, she thinks, frustrating to wait for the heartbreak she’d suited up in armor to tackle, the heartbreak that now seems to be completely eluding her.

Something comes at 8:37. It isn’t heartbreak, but it’s something, spurred by the sound system sitting unassumingly underneath the flat screen, a gift from Veronica to Veronica.

“You know there’s this thing called the Geek Squad and they’d gladly do this for you, right? They actually call themselves that because they enjoy doing stuff like this, unlike me,” he’d said, staring down the two cable wires he’d held in either hand.

“Yes, well, the onus shouldn’t be on me if you and Archie can’t figure out how to set up something that says ‘easy installation guaranteed’ on the box,” Veronica had retorted.

“You know, I’m actually looking at the box and-”

“Okay,” she’d interrupted, plucking the manual from Veronica’s hands. “We’re obviously getting nowhere.”

“It doesn’t say that on the box, Betty,” he’d muttered to her under Veronica’s heavy glare.

“I know,” she’d said softly, patting his knee. “Don’t worry. You’re still the smartest guy I know, big brains, etcetera, etcetera.”

“I know you’re placating me, but it’s working. Feel free to say more things like that.”

“Do you have cable D? ” she’d asked, bringing the manual close to her face. “The dots inside the metal part look like a face.”

“How romantic,” he’d deadpanned.

“I’m sorry. I meant, do you have cable D, D as in my darling Jughead, light of my life, without whom I’d be lost without?” She’d already been snickering halfway through – they’d never been the terms of endearment types.

“Oh, that cable D? Here,” he’d said. “Although for future reference, I think the official NATO D is delta.”

“Hmm,” she’d hummed back, matching his smirk with one of her own. “Just as romantic.”

It’s 8:42 when she realizes that she won’t be able to look at that sound system without thinking about that memory, and then she’s suddenly on her feet, pulling manically at the PlayStation’s wires because she thinks that it’s for the best that she gets that thing out of sight and out of mind before she starts walking down memory lane there, too.

She figures the sound system has to stay, though, since it technically is Veronica’s.

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She takes the PlayStation straight to her room and drops it in a box she’d been planning to use to return her textbook rentals. She’ll find another, she thinks, because this trumps any need she has to get her rentals back to the warehouse on time. She doesn’t want to see the PlayStation right now.

She can’t see any of his things right now.
There isn’t much in her room that stick out as glaringly his, but there’s enough. She grabs what’s most instantly obvious to her – a few books on the nightstand, a pair of tangled headphones on the desk – and then she’s ransacking her closet and drawers for any other hint of him, throwing out her neatly folded clothes behind her onto the floor in a heap of cashmere, wool, and rising emotions she’s trying to quell because she doesn’t want to miss anything, doesn’t want to find something of his hiding in between hers months after she’s thought she’s removed all trace of him.

*It can’t stay,* she thinks frantically. *It all has to go – none of it can stay.*

Her hands still when she comes to the contents of her wallet spilled out over her desk, a messy collection of bills and various ID cards; when she sees it, her heart catches and lurches against her so hard that it has her rubbing at her chest.

*No.*

*Not this,* she thinks, gently brushing her fingers over the worn two of hearts. *Anything but this.*

It’s what she’d keep out of all the random pieces of him she has left, of all the symbols and tokens of a man she’s reducing to the contents of a box and mere memory.

This is what she’d keep over the worn copy of *On the Road* he kept on his side of the bed to read when he couldn’t fall asleep, over the flannel stuffed in one of her drawers that he’d left one morning in a rush out the door to get to his ten a.m. because he’d been so lost in her, over his worn hoodie she liked to wear on nights he didn’t stay over because it smelled like him, a poor substitute for his arms around her, but better than nothing.

She’s tucked away the playing card in her wallet for years, a strong and always constant reminder that someone believed in her, that someone loved her, that she mattered as much to him as he did to her. Two hearts on the same page, equals in love and equals in life.

*Just this one thing. I could keep just this one thing, he’d never know.*

But she would know. She would look at it when she was feeling sad, turn it over and over again in her hands, wonder what he was doing right then and there in that very moment. Maybe in a moment of anger, she’d even think about defacing it, debate whether or not she should take a permanent marker to its face and black-out the second heart in an instant of irrevocable, spiteful vindictiveness that no one but him and her would understand the significance of.

She sighs wetly, blowing instead of breathing out her exhale as she drops the card into the box, feeling her heart sink with it as it flutters between his clothes and books, slipping between the cracks and disappearing out of sight.

She hopes he doesn’t throw it away. She doesn’t have any claim to it anymore, but she wishes that there was a way she could tell him to keep it because it’d been so completely meaningful to her that it deserved a better home than the trashcans of New York City. She wishes that she could tell him that even though she’s sure the memory of it will hurt, maybe for a long time, maybe longer than any of the other memories she’s collected in the box, that one day it won’t anymore. That maybe he’ll want this piece of her heart one day after all the dust has settled, a reminder of how completely and truly she loves him.

After the pillage and ransack of her room, it’s still quiet. Unnervingly quiet.

She crouches down with the box at her feet, cups her hands over her ears, and screams as loudly as she can, the sound ripping at her throat; screams until she tastes the nauseating, metallic tang of
blood and bile building at the back of her throat, screams until her head is dizzingly light and her chest is heaving with wasted breath, wasted energy.

Even as she collapses onto her bed, spent and gulping in air by the mouthful, she’s not at all surprised that the echo of her screams does nothing – absolutely nothing at all – in the way of breaking the harrowing silence she can’t escape.

When she hears the sound of footsteps approaching the front door and keys twisting in the lock, she wakes with a start and a snort, legs kicking out in either direction. It takes her a minute to register where she is because she’s fallen asleep at the wrong end of the bed with her feet on either pillow, and it’s a disorienting angle.

It’s a disorienting night, if she’s being honest with herself.

It all comes crashing back to her when she sits up and pulls the hair-tie out of her lopsided ponytail. She’s Betty Cooper, newly single-girl in New York City; she is free. She is unbridled and has the world at her disposal. She is a wild thing, or at least, she has the potential to be.

She doesn’t know who she’s kidding.

She is a power-napper extraordinaire at nine on a Friday night with sleep lines etched deep into her cheeks, and there’s nothing remotely wild about that.

She is the roommate who left the Sad Boyfriend Box on the entryway table where Veronica tosses her keys because she doesn’t know how else to admit to the world, or at the very least, to Veronica, that she’s now just her, by herself, party of one.

She hears Archie’s voice before she does Veronica’s. He sounds happy, she thinks; they both do, and she resents herself for resenting that they’re so happy right now when she’s not. She hadn’t planned on telling Archie tonight – she’d figured that they’d each play man-to-man with their own roommates instead of her bearing the burden of an all-out double-team.

It takes them longer than she had expected for them to notice the box – or maybe it takes them just the right amount of time and she’s far too self-centered to think they’d notice it right off the bat. They have each other to pay attention to, she reasons, their own love to get wrapped up in and their own problems to occupy their time. She may have been Jughead’s first thought, but she’s definitely Archie and Veronica’s second.

But she catches the exact moment they do clue in, Archie’s loud “oh, sh*t,” carrying through the distance to her room, followed by loud murmuring, loud as enough that feels like she’s standing right next to them, heart naked and exposed – did they break up, did they not, did you know about this, did you not.

The front door opens and slams shut again.

She thinks that there’s a good chance it’s Archie hurrying home to make sure that his own roommate is okay, which means that Veronica will be in charge of taking care of her tonight and she’ll be knocking on her door soon. That’s okay, she thinks, it’s even preferable. Of the two, Veronica is likely to be less invasive than Archie, and that’s what she wants right now – to not talk about it, or at the very least, to talk about it as calmly and as rationally as possible, without the but
why’s, no really, but why’s Archie would likely throw her way.

She sits up on the bed and waits, counting her breaths. She thought she’d removed all trace of him, but she hadn’t bargained for the emptiness that now sticks out like red paint splashed across a white wall – the dusty outline where his book had been, the empty drawer full of S shirts and flannels, the piece of her heart she’d packed up haphazardly and sent away with the cardboard box.

She thinks it’s funny – a horribly ironic kind of funny – how emptiness can in some twist of fate be the biggest presence of all.

She can tell from the shadows swinging under the crack of her door that Veronica floats by her door a good three or four times before knocking, but she understands the hesitation. It isn’t in Veronica’s natural instinct to be a comforter – she’s a straight shooter and tells it exactly like it is.

Which is why she thinks Veronica’s pacing right now because this isn’t exactly night where she can shoot it straight.

“I come bearing good wine,” Veronica says, holding up the bottle, worried smile pulling at her lips. Betty has learned the translation long ago - good wine means stolen from Hiram’s wine collection and this is a serious occasion. Bad wine means I bought it from the two-buck chuck section at Trader Joes and I’m looking to get wine-drunk, sing Shania Twain songs off-key, and not feel guilty if I happen to throw this up in a few hours.

She doesn’t really feel like drinking right now, good or bad wine. Getting horribly wasted is such a break-up cliché, and she’s been doing a pretty good job of avoiding all of those tonight. But she also knows that “good wine” is Veronica’s way of expressing the whole I’m here for you, I’m trying to be a good friend sentiment and she thinks that she probably shouldn’t shun that right now since, because as of officially three hours ago, she’s now down a best friend and boyfriend.

“Thanks,” she says, moving over on her bed.

“So,” Veronica begins, sitting down on the edge cautiously. “There’s a box outside.”

She takes a swig straight from the bottle. “There’s a box outside,” she confirms.

“And does that box mean-”

“Yep.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Another swig, then she passes the bottle back to Veronica. “No,” she admits. “I don’t want to talk about it. But I’ll answer questions.” There’s a difference – there is – even if Veronica doesn’t understand it.

Talking about it means that she has to analyze her own feelings, accept them, and make them real to herself – and the fact of the matter is that she just doesn’t know what exactly what she’s feeling right now. She doesn’t think it’s heartbreak, and she doesn’t think it’s sadness either – if she has to put a word to it she supposes it’s close to numbness, but that doesn’t seem like the right sentiment for a moment like this.
Shouldn’t she be sad, after all these years? Shouldn’t she be on the floor surrounded by piles of his stuff, weeping about all that could’ve been and all that won’t be, shouldn’t she be belting out *I Will Always Love You* on repeat until her neighbors call the cops on her for disturbing the peace?

*Why isn’t she?*

She’s also pretty sure that Veronica *thinks* she’s feeling all these sad things right now, and what does that say about her as a person if she admits that she’s feeling more or less *fine*?

Questions, though, questions she can answer objectively. There’s a direction to questions, an angle, a guiding path that isn’t just the waywardness of the unformed mess of thoughts running through her head.

“Questions,” Veronica says, kicking off her heels, and Betty thinks then that Veronica just might understand her. “Okay. Are you okay?”

She takes a deep breath before nodding slowly, her whole upper body rocking along with her. “I think so. I’ll be okay.”

“Did he hurt you? Do you want me to kill him?”

She chuckles shortly at the last one, and then abruptly stops because she realizes that Veronica might have the means to make that happen, or at least Hiram Lodge might, and she doesn’t want Veronica getting the wrong idea.

“No, V. He didn’t do anything. I didn’t do anything. Definitely don’t kill him.”

“What happened?”

It’s blunt, but then again, so is Veronica. And it feels good, she thinks, the directness after all the indirectness and half-sentences that had been spoken tonight.

“He came over, we sat on the couch. I said that I didn’t think that this – I didn’t think that *we* were right anymore. He agreed and we said we’d give all our stuff back.”

She doesn’t know why she’s so focused on the goddamn *stuff*. She supposes it’s easier to think about her things because the alternative is thinking about them and what had gone wrong, where exactly in the convoluted timeline they’d broken down, if she’d given up to easily on them – on him. And that’s exactly what she doesn’t want to think about.

“Betty,” Veronica encourages softly, and it’s all that it takes for every single thought she didn’t know she had to come tumbling out of her mouth.

“I feel like I don’t know who I am anymore, V. I feel so lost sometimes. He was everything I could’ve asked for. He made me feel so loved, and I was safe with him; I always felt so safe.”

She exhales then, her breath catching the edge of the wine bottle and whistling. It’s a pretty sound she thinks, a little sad and melancholy, hollow, but still – pretty.

“But I don’t know who I am without him, and I’m can’t stand that. I don’t know what things I like, things I like just for me, by myself, because I everything that I’ve done in the past six years has been with him. I don’t know how to stand on my own two feet because he’s always standing there with me. I don’t know what it’s like to be just Betty Cooper anymore, because all that I am is Jughead’s girlfriend.”
It’s a whisper now, her voice low and reserved because she doesn’t want to admit what comes next.

“How can I be with him if I don’t even know who I am?”

She wonders how much of her stream of consciousness made sense to Veronica, the girl who first and foremost takes care of no one else but herself. She remembers how she’d swept into Riverdale like a storm in the night, full of power, unapologetic. Confident and sure, the girl who took off her pearls for no one because that’d been who she was, who she still is. She doesn’t think that Veronica has ever not known exactly who she is down to her bones, and Betty thinks sometimes it’s why she has such an easy time standing up for herself – she knows exactly what she’s standing up for.

“Do you still love him?”

The wine bottle stops halfway to her lips; it hadn’t been the question she’d been expecting.

She thinks the right answer is no – no because they’ve broken up, no because she’d thought that when the relationship stopped, the love would, too.

“Yes,” she admits, because the right answer isn’t necessarily the true answer. “But I don’t think that love is ever enough just on its own.”

“No,” Veronica says softly. “I don’t think it is either. You have to know yourself, B, and you have to be happy with who you are.”

Veronica squeezes her arm, and she thinks then how glad she is that she’s gotten Veronica instead of Archie tonight. She loves Archie with her whole heart and then some, but Archie doesn’t have a clue about when or how of when to back off, at least about things like this.

She remembers how Veronica had once said to her that she wasn’t good at ‘the whole comforting thing.’

She thinks now that even if that had been true then, she’s come a long way since.

She wakes again with a start – it’s pitch black this time, save for the dull glow of her laptop sitting open on the bed, and when she sees Veronica’s sleeping face across from hers, her instinct is almost to shove her off the bed in shock because hers is not the raven-haired face she’s become used to seeing on the other pillow. She supposes that this another thing she’ll have to get used to – sleeping alone at night – although she’s sure that somewhere out there, Reggie Mantle’s head is exploding at the image of her and Veronica passed out in the same bed after polishing off the good wine. The stuff of his wildest dreams and all that.

Veronica’s hand is still strewn across the keyboard, and Betty carefully slides the computer out from under her and walks it to her desk. She can’t remember when she’d fallen asleep, but she thinks it probably had something to do with what looks like the latest episode of The Bachelor pulled up on the computer screen – it’s like a lullaby for her, she never makes it past the first fifteen minutes as hard as she tries.

When she exits out of the screen, she wishes then that she’d just left it well enough alone, because the one thing she hadn’t been able to stuff into the sad box sitting out on the entryway table stares
right back at her – their four shining, smiling faces on her twenty-first birthday in front of some bar in Brooklyn she doesn’t even remember the name of.

“Jug, come on,” she’d said, sidling up to him with the courage of a few Irish Car Bombs behind her. “Just one where it doesn’t look like I’ve told you the Shake Shack on campus is closing tomorrow.”

“I’d look at lot worse than this if that were true, trust me,” he’d said, wrapping his arms around her from behind. She’d loved it when he held her like that – strong and sure, steady, like he had nowhere else he’d rather be.

“Do you think you’d cry?” she’d asked through a hiccup.

Too many Irish Car Bombs.

He’d rolled his eyes at her. “No, I don’t think I’d cry.”

“What if all the Shake Shacks in New York closed? Do you think you’d cry then?”

“I’d be upset, sure, but-”

“All the Shake Shacks in the world closed?”

“Betty, this conversation’s making me want to cry,” he’d said, his smile betraying his words.

She hadn’t been looking and she’d just been barely aware of the camera’s flash out of the corner of her eye – his smile, fleeting and rare, was infinitely more beautiful to behold.

They look happy in the picture, she thinks, tracing the outline of them on her screen. They look like the world could fall apart around them as long as they were left standing, they look like they’re so in love.

She corrects herself almost as soon as she’s thought it. Not looks. They had been so in love – the honest-to-god, cross my heart and hope to die kind of love – and it would be unfair to diminish any of what had come before tonight; it would be an insult to him, because there hadn’t been a moment she’d once doubted that he loved her.

“I’m here for you, B,” Veronica mumbles with a feeble, tired lift of her hand, flipping over on the bed. Veronica’s voice is quiet and slurred, but it’s enough to make her jump - she's not used to this, not used to Veronica’s voice lulling through her dark room.

She could shake Veronica awake and help her stumble back to her posturepedic, memory foam mattress, and there’s a part of her that knows that Veronica would probably appreciate it if she did. But there’s a bigger part of her that wants Veronica’s company now, that wants just for one more night to have someone’s weight on the other side of her bed before it’s just her alone in it, learning how to not reach out to pull his arm around hers in the still of the night, learning how to cross the great divide of the halfway line between her side and what had once been his. Learning how to sleep alone, to be alone.

Tomorrow, she’ll deal with falling asleep with only her own thoughts for company. Tomorrow, she’ll change her desktop picture to the one of her and Polly’s twins at a bowling alley, she likes that picture a lot, too, and it’s as good a replacement as any other picture. Tomorrow, she’ll figure out how and when to give him the sad box of stuff.

Tomorrow, she’ll start finding that missing person she’d once known as Betty Cooper.
February

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I've been afraid of changing because I've built my life around you.

When everything starts looking a little more red and a little more pink, Archie starts hovering and starts asking if he’s okay, if he’s sure he’s okay? It’s when candy starts getting just a little more expensive that the reassurances start coming, the reassurances that it’s perfectly okay to have feelings about it all, and that it doesn’t make him any less of a man if he wants to cry or drink himself into oblivion about it. It’s when the world starts reminding him that two halves make a whole that Archie starts asking if he wants to talk about it.

No.

No he does not.

Frankly, he’s a little confused. He had expected this... this onslaught of overbearing sympathy when it’d first happened, but it’s been at least a month now and he doesn’t understand why Archie has chosen this particular point in time to repeatedly check in on him, impending red and pink holiday aside. He thinks that it maybe has something to do with the fact that it’s only just sinking in for Archie, and that up until now, he’d been thinking they’d be back together any day like nothing had happened at all.

It’s not happening, he wants to tell Archie, because she’s not interested in exploring the backtrack.

He wants to be mad at her.

He wants to be so mad at her, to let that anger over what she did to him, to them, take root inside his mind until he can’t think of anything else other than just how filled with rage he is. Anger is easy. It’s all-consuming and prejudicial, like a fire blazing out every sentimental thought and sweet memory he has saved up of her until all that’s left are the harsh words and fights. Pain.

But he knows that he can’t be mad at her, as much as he wants to be, because she had been brave enough to do what he couldn’t.

He’d known it was coming even before he had walked through her door that night, to the point where he’d thought about playing sick when she’d called and asked if he could come over just to avoid the inevitable, the inevitable that he’d ashamedly wanted, too.

Really, the sadness of it all had come long before, building little by little every time an argument had ended with a sigh and a “you just don’t understand,” or every time she’d blown him off to have a quiet night in to “chill with Veronica,” and he had been secretly filled with something very much like relief.

That night when she couldn’t even look him in the eye as she told him she still loved him – so much, he’d never know how much – but that she couldn’t be with him anymore had just been a death knell in symbol only, the dying had come in the weeks and months before. It had hurt to be on the receiving end, to be the one broken up with, but he can’t even hold it against her because she had simply been the one to show her hand and fold first; he doesn’t know exactly when or where
he would’ve done it, but he knows that he eventually would have if she hadn’t that night.

It’s an impossible feeling to come to terms with. It’s not that he didn’t love her anymore—doesn’t love her still, because he does. He’s spent so much of his life doing just that, loving her, comforting her, trying to protect her, and that doesn’t just fall away in a month. He doesn’t know if it ever will, and the thought that he might have to live with the constant, dull ache of her vice grip over his heart for the rest of his life truly terrifies him.

But he also knows that whatever and whoever they are right now, it just isn’t right. They don’t belong together anymore, at least not like this.

So, no. He does not want to talk about it, partly because it’s none of Archie’s business, and partly because he doesn’t know how to string together a coherent sentence about it, other than it all just kind of sucks.

But Archie has a whole host of sentences he’s more than willing to share.

“About tonight,” Archie calls from the kitchen over the clang of a spatula flipping into the sink. “Ronnie’s coming over.”

He’d figured as much. “That’s nice.”

“She doesn’t have to. I could go over there. Or we could go out. Or-”

“I said, that’s nice, Archie.” From the couch, he can just barely make out Archie moving around the kitchen ungracefully, a mess on every surface he’s come into contact with—it is, all of them. He thinks that Archie is probably the only person in the world who can turn a kitchen into a war zone just by making pre-made cookies from a box.

Jughead has looked at the instructions before, all two steps of them—peel from packaging and stick on baking sheet—and he doesn’t think that it requires every fork in their collection of mismatched utensils to accomplish.

But then again, Archie has a truly unmatchable knack for making things harder than necessary.

“Do you want to talk about it? Also, do you want these?” Archie asks, holding up box with a few rounds of leftover cookie dough.

He does because Archie has sprung for the good cookies this time, the kind with caramel swirls and chocolate chunks.

“What are those?”

Archie frowns down at his handiwork on the baking sheet. “Hearts. Why, do they not look like them?”

They don’t, which is why he asked, but he doesn’t want to be roped into making them look more like hearts, either.

“No, they do,” Jughead says quickly. “Very organic hearts.” He hopes for Archie’s sake that his aren’t the kinds of cookies that puff up and change shapes when they bake.

“Ronnie’s coming over tonight,” Archie repeats. “She’s bringing dinner, and we have these cookies, so we’ll be here and-”
“And I’ll be in my room with my headphones on. Pretend that I’m not here.”

“Jug, are you sure you’re okay? You can talk to me, man.”

This again.

“Archie. I’m fine. It’s fine that Veronica is coming over. Your cookies are fine. Great even. This day is fine. It’s all fine. Besides, it’s not like I’m missing much anyhow.” Which, he admits, is somewhat true – they’d never made a big deal out of this day.

“You sure you don’t want to go out?” he’d asked, rubbing absentmindedly at her feet that she’d plopped in his lap. “It’s not that late. We could go... somewhere.”

“At risk of derailing your meticulous, well-thought out plans,” she’d teased, tipping her head tiredly against the couch cushions. “I’m happy right here.” He’d shrugged – if she was happy staying in and ordering takeout in her fuzzy socks buried under her even fuzzier blanket, that was all that mattered.

“You know what would make me really happy though?”

He’d raised an eyebrow. “The sun? Just say the word and I’ll throw a lasso around it.”

“Jughead Jones misquoting a movie. The day has finally come, and what a day it is.”

“What?” he’d frowned. “Which part was wrong?”

“It’s the moon, George Bailey. Anyhow, we should order pizza. To go with the Thai food.”

God, he’d loved this girl. “You know the way to my heart,” he’d said simply.

She’d smiled at him then, coyly, almost bravely. “I thought I was already there?”

“Dude, it’s okay to be not okay about it.”

“I’m aware, Archie.”

“What happened, anyway? Between you two?”

It’s the first time Archie’s asked this particular question outright. He’d fully expected some variation of it that night, but Archie had simply passed him a beer, said that he knew and that he was sorry, that he was really, really sorry and that had been that.

“I don’t know,” he admits, and it’s the honest truth – he truly doesn’t know when they had devolved from a version of them that worked into one that didn’t. What he does know is that it’d happened somewhere in the midst of the fights and furious attempts to staunch bullet holes with band-aids. It’d happened somewhere around the time he’d looked over at her sleeping fitfully next to him one night and just known that soon, she wouldn’t be there anymore and he’d be waking up next to nothing and no one.

“I stopped writing.”

He doesn’t think he’s ever seen Archie look more confused, even in Calculus when he realized that solving a matrix had nothing to do with the movie.

“What?” he squeaks. “No you didn’t, I see you writing all the time. You were just writing this morning - you told me to turn the music down, remember?”
It’s kind of sweet, he thinks, how much Archie wants to find a way for them to just knit themselves back together.

“That was for school,” he clarifies. “I stopped writing for me.”

“Okay. Why?”

He looks down at the cookie round he’s been mindlessly molding – it looks more like a heart than any one of Archie’s miserable attempts.

“I don’t know. Haven’t been inspired, I guess.”

“And that’s Betty’s fault?”

“No, of course not,” he corrects quickly. “I just... I haven’t felt like myself. And everything I write doesn’t come out like me, either. It’s just all... wrong. It’s lost and without any direction.”

If that isn’t the great metaphor of his life.

He flattens his cookie dough heart, the melted chocolate and caramel sticky under his fingertips and cloyingly sweet. “It’s not her fault. It’s just that none of this feels right anymore. Not even her.”

It’s a realization that hurts more than he thought it would. There was a time when everything had felt wrong – incredibly wrong. The world had been imploding around them, his dad was in jail, he was living in a closet, Riverdale was caught in a civil war, and all that had felt right was the way he felt about her; the way he loved her and the way she loved him. She had been the one thing keeping him moored in a world trying to untie him and cast him off into an unforgiving sea of biker gangs and drug runs. She was right. She was the only thing that had been right.

“I’m sorry, man,” Archie offers.

He shrugs, sweeps up the remnants of his cookie-art, and trashes it all without second thought. “It just wasn’t meant to be.”

He feels like a pervert of epic proportions.

It’s only after he’s heard Veronica’s entire cheesy but admittedly, sweet declaration of how much she loves ‘her Archiekins,’ after he cringes at every one of Archie’s attempts to serenade Veronica by rhyming ‘Ronnie’ with ‘bonny,’ that he realizes that there isn’t a volume setting loud enough on his computer or his headphones combined that to block out the sounds of what’s coming next.

He hasn’t really thought through this problem as well as he should have, and he has no excuse other than the fact it’d just never been a problem he had to think about before – in years past, Archie and Veronica had been in one apartment, he and Betty had been in the other and they had all successfully avoided the sheer trauma of hearing one’s best friend in the throes of passion.

Now, he and Archie are in the goddamn same apartment and he only has a thin wall and a pair of knock-off headphones he’d bought in Chinatown to protect and defend himself with. And from what he knows of Veronica, he may as well be armed with nothing because she’s not a quiet
person and doesn’t do anything halfway.

She’d fallen asleep on his shoulder, and even though he loved the movie playing quietly on the laptop balancing on her leg thrown over his, he figured they’d watch it again another time when she hadn’t just come off an all-nighter and a midterm. She was exhausted and he saw no point in waking her up over something as trivial as a movie.

But she’d jerked awake when the front door slammed shut, nearly knocking his computer clean into the air.

“What was that?” she’d mumbled.

He’d held a finger over his lips. He’d been sure that Archie had said he’d be uptown celebrating his ‘physical dating anniversary’ with Veronica – he had no idea in hell what a ‘physical dating anniversary’ was or why it needed to be celebrated, but he’d realized in that moment they were about to get a front row seat.

A giggle, a moan, and an ‘oh Archiekins’ had been all it took to send her bolting upright and shaking off the remnants of sleep.

“Oh my god. Oh my god, I can’t be here for this.”

He’d thought she’d been joking, but she’d jumped right out of the bed and almost tripped over herself in a wild, blind reach for her coat.

“You’re serious?”

“Yes! Come on, Jug,” she’d said, pulling him to his feet, hands fluttering in nervous circles. “We have to go. We have to go right now.”

“What, like leave here? Now?”

She’d thrown his own coat at him, catching him square in the face. “Right now,” she’d confirmed. “Come on, hurry!”

He’d obeyed, his confused slowness in gathering up his things flustering her more by the minute.

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know!” He’d still been zipping up his bag as she’d all but pushed him out of his room with both her elbows, hands clamped tightly over her ears as she ushered them out past Archie’s room, past the living room, removing her hands only to throw open the front door with gusto.

He’d barely remembered to grab his keys from their usual spot on the kitchen counter as she hurriedly motioned for him to join her in the hall, stomping down the steps with fervor when he did.

He’d never left his apartment that quickly before. He’d also never seen her behave quite like that before.

“So, I’m not saying that was an overreaction, but-” he’d said when she’d finally slowed her mad-dash away from his apartment to a brisk walk.

“Oh, that wasn’t an overreaction. They were about to, you know.”
“Have sex?”

She’d rolled her eyes at him. “I was going for subtle.”

“And I was going for literal. I don’t see what the big deal is,” he’d reasoned. “They have sex. That guy down the road there probably has sex.”

“There’s a difference between two people having sex and listening to your best friends do it on the other side of the wall.” Fair point, he’d thought. “It’s not like you wanted to hear that, either. Or did you? Jughead, if you did, I swear-”

“No! Of course not, what kind of voyeur do you think I am?” he’d interrupted loudly, quickly shutting down her runaway thoughts. “All I’m saying is that I wouldn’t necessarily be scared out of my apartment because of it – headphones were invented for a reason, Betty. Besides,” he’d laughed. “It’s not like it’d last long anyhow.”

“Very funny.”

“I thought so, too.”

She’d frowned in that moment, eyes drawing down to her shoes. “Did I overreact?” she asked quietly.

Yes, he’d thought, and by miles, too.

“Betty, if you’re uncomfortable, then we don’t need to be there for... that,” he’d said instead, taking her hand in his. “It's New York, we can do anything we want.”

“What do you want to do now?”

“We can go to your apartment and be loud there since it's apparently empty,” he’d said suggestively.

“Or we can go to Pinkberry.”

“You know, a man’s ego is a delicate and fragile thing,” he’d quipped. “And to be turned down so dismissively for frozen yogurt no less is-”

She’d rolled her eyes and kissed him to shut him up right there on the street corner for the world to see – the biggest ego boost of all.

He quickly shoves his computer, a few books, and his headphones into his bag, yanks open his door, and stomps out onto the hardwood as loudly as he can.

Informally known as put your clothes on if they’re not on already.

“Jughead,” Veronica calls, still fully clothed. These days, he’s going for small victories.

“I was just leaving.”

“Jughead.”

“Veronica.” He frowns when he turns and notices the rose petals thrown absolutely everywhere – Archie doesn’t clean and there’s a one-hundred percent chance that he’s going to have to deal with that mess tomorrow.
“Where are you going?”

He knows that’s not the question she’s truly asking – she wants to know if he’s going to her apartment to hold a radio over his head, recite crappy love poetry at her locked door, or do something else equally embarrassing to win the girl back.

He’s not.

“Library. I have a paper due next week.”

He’s not lying *per se*. He does have a paper due next week for one of his Creative Writing seminars, it’s just that it’s already been written. That’s the one good thing to come out of this break-up, he thinks, that he hasn’t procrastinated an assignment since. Or been late to class because he’s gotten stuck on the subway on the way downtown from Betty and Veronica’s uptown apartment. Two good things.

But Veronica seems to accept his explanation, dismissing him with a slight nod and something that looks a little like pity which is completely irritating. He’s nobody’s pity case – he wasn’t one when he was sixteen, bumping around from couch to couch, and he’s not one now when he’s dealing with something as commonplace as a break-up.

But he lets it slide, because he figures her intentions are good as annoying as they may be.

It’s still cold out for February, nowhere near as cold as the truly frigid winters Riverdale would bring, lasting for months on end, but enough for him to draw his jacket tightly around himself. He watches his breath cloud in front of him as he walks and hears her voice so clearly in his head, soft and lilting, with just a hint of worry.

“You need a better coat, Jug.”

Her voice comes to him often enough that it has him wondering if there’s something very wrong with – how could there not be if something as simple as a semi-colon or his alarm going off in the morning is enough to trigger her voice inside his head? ‘*Jug, you don’t need a semi-colon here,*’ she’d say, tapping her pen on the page, or ‘*Juggie, stop hitting snooze, your class starts in an hour and you need to get downtown.*’

He thinks that for now, maybe the voices in his head are okay for where he is in the breaking-up-and-moving-on timeline; he’ll give himself a little more time before broaching the question of whether or not he’s seriously gone insane. But he also does wonder when he’ll stop hearing it – her voice – wonders when it’ll be his own again telling him he’s gone overboard with his semi-colon use again instead of hers.

“*Jugaroo!*”

He almost takes off running like a maniac down the empty street, because there’s only one person in the world who has the audacity to call him that and he absolutely does not want to see him right now.

He wonders what he’s done in his past life to deserve this karmic retribution, because running into Reggie “this is my favorite day of the year because I can pick up sad women” Mantle must be
some kind of cosmic joke.

“Hey, man,” Jughead says as congenially as he can, grunting with surprise as Reggie crushes him into a hug. The guy is by no means his favorite person, not by the longest of stretches, but even he’ll admit that Reggie has gotten better since leaving Riverdale and performance enhancers behind. Less rage does wonders for the personality.

He’s run into Reggie a handful of times since moving to New York, and mostly in this neighborhood because apparently there’s “no place better to meet girls who are into the whole hipster-chic movement.”

Not that he would know about any of that because it’s not as if he’s been on the scene and paying attention to the hipster-chic movement recently, but Jughead figures at least in this arena, Reggie knows best.

“’Sup, my dude!” Reggie says loudly, arms flung out wide, and Jughead realizes then that he’s drunk, or at least on a very promising path towards getting there. “Where’s the missus?”

Now he remembers. Reggie had absolutely no problem conveniently forgetting Jughead’s existence and hitting on his girlfriend in the six years they’d been together, but now he remembers.

“Oh,” Jughead says slowly. “She’s, uh, that’s not a – she’s not around anymore.”

He really needs to find a better way to explain himself because the way he’s been saying it makes it sound like Betty has straight up died, and he’s sure that there’s only going to be more people asking him where she is or how she’s doing as time goes on; he shouldn’t be out there peddling the wrong idea.

“Shit, man,” Reggie says, and Jughead thinks that if Reggie’s next comment is anything even remotely related to the idea of tapping that next, no amount of self-control would stop him from in clocking the guy square in the nose. “Come on,” he says instead. “Brewskies on me.”

He’s about to tell Reggie that he’s really in no mood for brewskies regardless of who pays for them, but the fact of the matter is that even though Reggie’s long left football behind, he’s still the stronger man, physically at least, and there’s no escaping the arm clamped around his shoulder and pushing him towards the nearest bar.

“So you’re a man of the night now!” Reggie announces, and Jughead would be embarrassed if the street weren’t so empty. He’s not sure that Reggie gets that he’s using the phrase completely incorrectly on so many levels.

“I wouldn’t put it quite like that.”

“Well, from one free agent to another, let me be the first to welcome you to the club.”

He doesn’t particularly want to be a part of any club that lists Reggie Mantle on its roster but there’s also no point in being a wet blanket about it; it’s not like it isn’t true – he is a part of the free agents, the sad bachelors, the masses of lonely hearts whether he likes it or not, whether Reggie Mantle is also a part of that Venn diagram or not.

“Thanks,” he says for lack of anything better.

“Sorry you got cheated on, man.”

“Oh. So you cheated on her? Dude, that’s so not cool, like-”

“I didn’t,” he interrupts.

It’s on the tip of his tongue to bite back that on planet earth it’s not in fact unheard of, it’s actually common for two people to break up for reasons besides cheating, but he remembers that he’s supposed to be fostering good will right now.

“No one cheated,” he says simply. “It just didn’t work out.”

He doesn’t know what to make of Reggie’s confusion. “Oh. I just thought it’d have to be something like, super major to break you two up. You guys seemed pretty solid for whatever it’s worth.”

He thinks that maybe Reggie is finally growing up.

At the bar, he realizes he’s given Reggie too much credit and far too fast.

“This is Sarah and Crystal,” Reggie announces, after leaving him alone to nurse his beer for the better part of an hour.

“Krista,” she corrects flatly.

“That’s what I said.” Reggie says, and with so much confidence that it has Jughead wondering if he’d actually had said it correctly. ‘She’s for you,’ Reggie mouths in plain view, and he has half a mind to just get up and leave. Sitting in a crappy bar with crappy beer is one thing – this is a whole other thing, a thing he has no interest in dealing with.

“You look like you don’t want to be here, either,” the one ‘for him’ says, claiming the empty barstool to his left.

Don’t be rude, he thinks. Don’t be rude. “You don’t necessarily look like you don’t want to be here.”

“I don’t,” she says, but he still thinks her decidedly jovial tone begs otherwise. “My friend on the other hand and yours – they seem to want to be.”

Reggie has his tongue down her throat, so he thinks she’s probably right.

“After this, he’s downgraded to an acquaintance at best.”

“The name he made up for you was Jughead, so I think you’re justified there.” He just raises his eyebrows at her; in another life, he thinks he might’ve been offended, but he’s used to it at this point. “Come on,” she says laughing, tossing an empty peanut shell behind the bar top. “You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

“And suddenly Crystal’s not sounding so bad.”

“What’s so wrong with Crystal?”
She shrugs. “Stripper name.”

“Wow. We just met and you’re already talking about strippers?”

“Hey, you asked.”

He laughs shortly, once, not because it’s particularly funny but just because in his wildest nightmares, he’d never have expected to be here with Krista-Crystal on this night of all nights. “So, Krista,” he says. “If you don’t want to be here, where do you want to be?”

“Is that a proposition?”

“No offense – really, none meant at all, but furthest thing from a proposition.”

She smiles. She’s not unattractive, he thinks. She’s just fine, a brunette but fine, and she’s definitely a much better conversation partner than Reggie, who’s currently two small steps away from bunny bumping against his back. But even the mere thought of thinking of her as anything more than just a transient nobody to cross his path has him lost because he simply doesn’t know how to think of anyone else in that way.

He’s never known, and he sure as hell doesn’t want to start learning tonight.

“If the Hallmark cards are right,” she says. “Then I should be with the person I love. That’s where I want to be.”

“Then why aren’t you?”

“For the same reason I think you’re here. I can’t be there.”

Statistically, he knows he isn’t the only one in the world feeling the way he feels. He knows that there are millions of broken hearts and lost souls in this very city alone, and that he isn’t special in any sense of the word, at least not in that particular regard.

But still. It’s nice to have someone to commiserate with in the flesh, nice to have someone who isn’t his best friend who as much as he says he understands simply can’t.

“Do you think it gets better?” he hears himself asking.

She shrugs. “Everyone says it will.”

What a non-answer. “When?”

“I’ll let you know when I find out.”

He sighs and glances around the bar. He’s been here before once or twice – it’s one of the NYU watering holes notoriously known for turning a blind eye to the worst of the worst fake IDs, a truly well-earned and deserved distinction because he’s seen Archie saunter in with his name and ‘age 21+’ scribbled on a piece of scrap paper on several occasions, back when they were all ‘twenty-one-minus.’

He feels horrendously out of place here now that he’s twenty-one-plus.

“Do you want this?” he asks, nudging his tumbler over. “I’m heading out.”

“Sure,” she says. “I’ll keep an eye out for them.”
He snorts. Like anyone needs to keep an eye out for Reggie. “I hope it gets better for you,” he says sincerely, slinging his bag across his shoulders.

There isn’t much he knows about this girl other than her name, but he knows enough of people in general, knows enough of what he himself is feeling right now to know that she’s hurt and that she’s really and truly sad. He hopes that he doesn’t look the way she does, with his sadness and his pain written so plainly across his face for the world to see, but he figures he’s not doing the best job of masking it because she’d diagnosed his problem within minutes.

“I hope it gets better for you, too,” she says over her shoulder.

He seriously doubts it will, but he thanks her anyhow.

The NYU library is within walking distance but he can’t quite bring himself to go there tonight. He doesn’t really give a damn about what other people think of him, but he also just doesn’t want to deal with the eyes tonight, the ones that will follow him and wonder why he’s alone on this day and if there’s something fundamentally unlovable about him.

He hops on the uptown train instead, deciding his destination only when he’s halfway there. There are many things he likes about New York, including the fact that he can feed himself for six dollars and actually be full a quarter of the way through a street-cart chicken and rice plate; but one of the things he loves best is that he can actually wander the streets alone, headphones plugged in and staring at his shoes, without disapproving eyes following him and wondering where he’s going and if he has a can of spray paint in his back pocket.

Correction – he can wander the streets alone without judgment except tonight, apparently.

It’s probably all in his head, he thinks, because he’s sure these loved-up couples have better things to think about than the guy in the crown beanie leaning against the door alone without part number two. Like, for instance, each other.

She’d snatched her hand away from his when he reached for it. “What?” he’d asked, frowning.

“You were just on the subway.”

“Yeah, so?”

“There’s a girl in my American Lit class who told me that she knows a friend of a friend who touched something slimy on the subway, forgot to wash her hands and rubbed her eye. She almost had to have the whole thing removed because some kind of parasite grew there.”

“That’s truly revolting.”

“Yeah, I know. Purell?” she’d asked, holding the bottle out to him with a hopeful smile.

“Purell” had been a loose term because he’d been pretty sure that Purell was odorless and whatever hand sanitizer she had smelled like some odd combination of celery and watermelon. With glitter.

“Fine,” he’d said holding out his hand. “Doing this for you.”
“And they say chivalry is dead.”

*His hand had sparkled in hers, but it'd been worth it.*

He’s not bitter.

He’s not, he’s really not.

But he also can’t help but wonder how many of the pairs of two with linked hands and arms around shoulders will make it in the long run.

He wishes sometimes that they had a more concrete reason for breaking up other than just a feeling, just an inherent knowing that they weren’t right for each other anymore. If someone cheated, if someone moved, there’d be a reason - a real and concrete reason - that he could at least wrap his head around. Not that he in any way wanted either of those scenarios to happen, but that would at least be easier to come to terms with.

He could hate her, then, if she had cheated, or hate himself if he had. He could mourn the loss of her moving away, and blame the universe for keeping them apart, a modern-day Romeo and Juliet, star-crossed and just never meant to be no matter how hard they fought.

But that’s all it was, no warring families both alike in dignity, no Romeo and Juliet. All there had been was that feeling. A knowing. A really, really horrible feeling.

It hadn’t been about love. It’s what had surprised him most after all that’d been said and done, that it hadn’t been about love. It’d been about love with his parents, and more specifically, the lack thereof – his mother never really loved his father and that was no foundation to build a marriage on. It’d been about love for Archie’s parents because even though Mary Andrews loved her little red-haired freckled monster, she’d loved her job so much more, and she hadn’t loved Fred enough.

But it’s not about love for him, he’s realizing – he had loved her when she sat across from him on the couch telling him that they weren’t them anymore, and he loves her now leaning against the grimy subway door a month later.

It’s a feeling he doesn’t know what to do with one way or the other, the love he still holds for her still so open and obvious in his upturned palms. He knows full well that he’s meant to let go of it, to send it off into the ether holding on to only the lessons and memories he can bear to keep, but for the life of him, he’s just not sure how to.

He’s not sure that he wants to, either.

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He’s never been at the Public Library when it’s been this empty, and he thinks that it’s probably because he’s never been here this late, or on a day where the world deigns the fact that he’s a party of one. It’s nice, though, he thinks – quiet like a good library should be, a little lonely, and full of memories and stories that aren’t the ones stacked neatly on the shelves.

“Remind me again why we couldn’t go to my library? Or your library? Or you know, your room?” he’d said, trudging up the stairs behind her.

“Because,” she’d responded, eyes wide with wonderment, ponytail bouncing on either shoulder as
she scanned the painted ceiling. “Cubicles are claustrophobic and this place is beautiful. And you end up napping every time we try to study in my room. Or watching The Bachelor with Veronica.”

“Unfair characterization,” he’d said quickly over her laugh to herself. “That’s happened twice, maybe three times, and only when you told me to go outside because my typing was too loud.”

“If that’s your story.”

“It is, and I’m sticking to it,” he’d said, voice dropping to a whisper as they scanned the Reading Room for empty seats.

“Fine,” she’d said with an eye roll. “I take full responsibility for the fact that I heard you and Archie placing bets on who would win last night.”

“What? When did you hear that?”

“Last night,” she’d repeated. “You went to get water and you guys were screaming in the kitchen – you think Becca M. is going to win and Archie thinks Lauren. Or Laura, honestly, I have no idea what her name is.”

He’d thought she’d been sleeping.

“Okay,” he’d tried to defend. “Screaming is something of an overstatement. We were talking with... enthusiasm.”

“Sure,” she’d snorted. “But look at this place,” she’d said, shaking his arm with unbridled excitement. “It’s so beautiful.”

What he’d wanted to say to her then was that the room didn’t hold a candle to her, that nothing ever could. But he didn’t – the line was a little cheesy – and he was in a room full of some of the most eloquently penned books in history, for god’s sake.

He hopes now that she’d known, though, even if he didn’t say it outright.

Unlike the last time he’d been here, there are rows full of empty tables in the Reading Room and he feels a little giddy at the thought that he can choose from any one of them. He picks one far away from where they’d once sat, happy and too caught up in staring at each other to get any work done at all, and fills the empty space around him with his bag on the seat opposite, his stack of books on the one on his right, and his headphones and the cup of lukewarm, burnt coffee he’d bought from a street-cart on the left.

At ten-thirty on Valentine’s Day, he flips open his computer and starts writing for himself again.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics From "Landslide" by Fleetwood Mac.
March

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I am not done changing, out on the run, changing.

She’s been running.

She’s been running because she has a list.

She has The List, because lists are easy to follow. Lists have steps. Lists can even be customized into different sub-lists, color-coded according to theme or section, and if there’s one thing she’s good at in life it’s following directions, it’s following steps. So she’d sat down one sleepless night in January and typed out a list with headers and sub-headers of things she wanted to do. Things she thought she might be interested in, things she wanted to accomplish, things she just wanted to do because she, Betty Cooper, wanted to do them for just for herself.

Run a 10K race had come somewhere near the end of the list, long after ‘find job’ and ‘under no circumstances move back home,’ and she’d backspaced it after second thought and replaced 10K with half-marathon because she’d heard something about going big or going home and sports.

And she was not going home. Metaphorically or to Riverdale, that was simply not an option.

“I hate this,” Veronica wheezes, shoes scuffing against the gravel. “I hate this so much.”

Betty kind of hates it, too. She reluctantly admits that she hasn’t layered up as well as she should have – she thought she’d warm up once she started running, and when she exercises she sweats. Like a hog.

The problem is that there hasn’t been much running of so to speak, and it’s not even Veronica’s fault that they’ve powerwalked a quarter of the way around the park watching women maybe even three times their age sprint straight past them.

She’s not as in shape as she thought.

She supposes that it really shouldn’t be all that surprising because she doesn’t have the invincibility of her seventeen-year-old self anymore, or have mandatory River Vixens practice at four on the dot every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, either – she actually has to work for it now, and she definitely hasn’t been working for it at all.

“Oh, okay,” she huffs back, crouching over with both her hands on her knees. “Walking break – wait, no, Veronica, what are you doing?”

“Sitting break.”

She wants to say that they really shouldn’t stop, let alone sit out in the middle of the path, because there’s no way they’re going to continue running-slash-walking if they do. But everything hurts, down to her ears, and Veronica has just taken her shoes off in the middle of Central Park.

And she’s making sitting look especially good, too.
“Remind me again why we’re out here killing ourselves in sub-zero temperatures when we’ve never looked better in our lives?” Veronica asks.

“Because,” Betty responds, biting back a hiss at the cold of the ground stinging her skin. “I’m running a half-marathon.”

“Why, exactly?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I just want to. I want to be able to say that I’ve done that, you know, for me.”

“Any chance you want to be able to say you’ve stress shopped the spring line at Bergdorf’s, too?”

“Yeah, not so much.”

“Is it on The List?”

“It’s on The List.”

“Okay,” Veronica says, because she knows all about The List and its import. “Then we’re running a half-marathon.”

“V, you don’t have to run the whole thing with me,” she says. “It’s enough that you’re out here with me now.”

“You’re not talking me out of it. Besides, who else are you going to talk to for a whole ten miles?”

“Actually, it’s thirteen.” Point-one, but semantics.

“What?”

Betty laughs. “You can take it back.”

Veronica frowns, but squares her shoulders just the same. “A Lodge never goes back on her word. So, should we keep going?”

Meh.

“Two more minutes,” she says, stretching her legs out in front of her.

“Speaking of The List,” Veronica continues, shaking out her ponytail. They haven’t really done much running, but she still thinks it’s just categorically unfair that Veronica’s hair can still look that shiny after being whipped about in the elements for the better part of an hour. “How’s it going?”

“Good!” Betty says brightly. “I forgot to tell you, I have an interview next Friday with the Post.”

“The Post? As in the New York Post?”

“Yeah. I know it’s not the New York Times or anything but-”

“B, that’s amazing,” Veronica cuts off, hands fluttering in excitement. “Daddy has a few contacts there – want him to put in a good word?”

It’s tempting. It’s really tempting because she wants this job more than anything she’s wanted in a long time, and if she knows Hiram Lodge – not ‘Daddy,’ because it’s honestly downright creepy
that Veronica still calls her dad that – his contacts will be of the CEO and Editor-in-Chief variety, contacts that can actually make a difference for her.

But, she thinks, if she gets this job, she wants to be able to say that she did it herself.

“That’s okay,” Betty says. “But I’ll let you know after the interview if that changes.”

Connections are the way of the world, at least to some extent, she concedes.

“Just say the word,” Veronica promises. “Daddy would be only too happy to-”

“Hey, what the hell are you doing!”

Betty whips around at the sound and when she registers a bike barreling fast towards them, she instinctively curls up into herself.

So much for self-preservation.

“Oh, like you can’t see us – go around!” Veronica calls, waving her hand absentmindedly.

There are times, Betty thinks, that she wishes she could be more like Veronica, wishes that her instinct hadn’t been to cower and then apologize profusely for being in the way, but to stand up for herself even though she’d clearly been in the wrong.

“You’re made for this city,” she says, taking Veronica’s gloved hand and rising to her feet.

Veronica slips her arm easily through Betty’s and affords her a nudge. “And so are you.”

She wonders how true that is, how much of it is just Veronica being generous and placating her. In her heart, she wants desperately to be the girl who fits seamlessly into this city, the girl who carries her flats to switch out with her heels in her tote, the girl who goes to happy hour drinks after work, the girl from the small town who just makes it in New York.

At eighteen, she’d thought it’d be easy – she’d gotten into Columbia all by herself, so how hard could all the rest be? She’d get a subway map and figure out how to hop from train to train, she’d find a part time job to help with expenses, and that’d be that. Easy solutions, she assumed, nothing she couldn’t handle.

She’d always known she’d been sheltered because there’d been so much that her parents deliberately kept and shielded her from, but she hadn’t realized just how far in the dark she’d been until she’d dived head-first into the bright lights of the big city and realized she had no street savviness to her name whatsoever.

The map she’d studied didn’t help at all because she hadn’t taken into account construction diversions and express trains and gotten lost in Queens the very first time she’d swiped her newly filled MetroCard. Part-time jobs at the library were insanely more coveted than she’d imagined because everyone else had also figured out that those were the best get-paid-to-do-homework jobs on campus.

It hadn’t helped that everyone around her seemed to slip into their lives so comfortably. She’d expected as much from Veronica, who still knew how to rule the City from her parents’ penthouse suite like she’d never left, from Jughead who had street smarts in spades, the only good thing to come from his years of bumping around from couch to closet to trailer park.

But even Archie, the same Archie who’d lived next door to her since she was four, reveled in the
fact that he could walk into a new bar every night, that he could stay over as many nights as he’d
wanted in Veronica’s dorm room, and that had been the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s
back. For all intents and purposes, she and Archie were the same – they’d grown up on the same
picket-fenced street and they’d been in all the same classes; their childhood rooms had been their
only rooms, so shouldn’t he struggle with everything she’d been struggling with, too?

But as far as she knows, it’d only been her fighting the good fight against the New York current.

It’s better now, at twenty-two, she’s better now. But, she thinks, it’d really be the stuff of her
wildest dreams if she could call home someday soon and tell her mother that she’s going to be a
reporter – a real reporter for a real New York newspaper, and that she’s Very Sorry but it’s just too
good an opportunity to pass up over going home and running The Register with her parents for her
old room and terse family dinners as payment.

“So,” Veronica says, gesturing to the road ahead. “There’s the exit. Another lap or…”

The right answer, she knows is yes because they technically haven’t even finished their first lap
yet.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Betty relents. “Real Housewives is on in an hour anyhow.” She’s not
particularly interested in watching it but she figures that since Veronica has just spent an hour
doing something she hates, the rules of fair friendship dictate that she should do the same.

“Oh, thank god.” Veronica says, running towards the exit. “Cab’s on me.”

She follows closely behind, and it’s the best running they’ve done all day.

She’s heard that it takes ten-thousand hours to become a master at something.

She doesn’t necessarily need to be a master at running – being someone that simply gets through a
half-marathon is frankly master enough for her – but she’s acutely aware that the whole ‘getting
through’ it part isn’t going to happen at all if she doesn’t give the ‘preparation’ part of it a good old
college try.

And since she’s not trying especially hard at college anymore because even she’s come down with
a bad case of senioritis, she figures she might as well try a little harder at making the whole half-
marathon thing happen.

The second day out running had been worse than the first because her legs could barely move from
the day before, and she’d almost thrown up her hands, hailed yet another cab home, and called it a
day – she has a whole host of other things she wants to do on The List, and it’d be all too easy to
backspace this particular line-entry and pretend it never existed.

But at the end of the day, she really does want to be someone who can check off ‘ran half-
marathon’ on the bucket list, and so she’d suited up on day three, four, and ten – tired but
determined, sweaty, but slowly getting stronger.

On day seventeen, she makes it all the way downtown before realizing with a horrible lurch of her
stomach that she has no way of getting back home because she’s left her MetroCard in the back
pocket of yesterday’s leggings.
“Crap,” Betty mutters, feeling around herself again, digging through her pockets for any hint of spare change.

She sighs and moves off to the corner of the street to think through the problem – there’s a solution, there always is. She could walk, she thinks, but it’ll take her hours. She could suck it up and just run back, but she quickly dismisses the idea because her legs are already burning and according to her training plan, she doesn’t have to even think about running twelve miles until July.

Betty looks around at the street signs and admits with half a groan and a childish stomp of her foot that there’s a very obvious solution that she’s actively avoiding.

She doesn’t want to go there, she really, really doesn’t. But she also has absolutely no interest in walking home or paying for a forty-dollar cab ride either.

It’s Tuesday, she rationalizes, and it’s almost ten, which means that Jughead should’ve left for class already. In all likelihood, she won’t run into him. But it’s also Senior year and because even she’s been convinced to skip a class or five just for the hell of it, she calls Archie.

Her call is about two rings away from being transferred to Archie’s already full voicemail when he picks up.

“What is it, Betty?” he mumbles, voice heavy with sleep.

“Are you not up yet? You know you have class at eleven, right?”

“I’m skipping,” he says and she’s unsurprised – senioritis has come down harder on no one than Archie Andrews. “I’m too hungover.”

Classic.

“I forgot my subway card and I’m all the way downtown,” she explains quickly. “Can I come over and grab one?”

She thinks hears Archie shifting around his bed and something that sounds a lot like the clock on his nightstand falling off the table. “Sure,” he says eventually.

“Is he there?” Betty rolls her eyes up into her head at her own question.

“Jughead? What time is it? He probably left for class already.”

“Well, can you check?” It feels so juvenile, she thinks; it makes her sound as if she’s in junior high all over again, peeking around the corners of the hall to Archie’s locker so that she can strategically bump into him on the walk home. “Please, Arch,” she throws in for good measure.

She hears Archie groan a few more times before calling out loudly, “Jughead! Hey, Juggie, you here?”

It’s so juvenile, she thinks. It’s so, so juvenile.

“Nah, I think you’re good, Betty.”

“Okay,” she breathes out. “I’ll see you soon. And thanks, Arch.”
She stays rooted in place, sweat drying on her skin even after she hangs up, trying to find the courage to actually move in the direction of their apartment.

It’s a strange feeling of déjà vu. It’s a walk she’s done hundreds of times, now darkened with an unfamiliar urgency, a completely unpleasant feeling that has settled around the entire neighborhood like a blanket, around each street, each corner, a cloud over the plains just waiting for the right moment to crack the skies wide open. She doesn’t belong here anymore, as much as she’d always loved this neighborhood and its cobblestone streets. It’s his now, just like the invisible circle she’d drawn around the Upper West Side is hers, and each step she takes towards his home base feels alarmingly like slinking into enemy territory.

“Hurry, Jug,” she’d whined, buoying herself on her toes for warmth. “How long does it take to protect a sandwich?”

“Hey, when the food’s this good, you take all precautions.”

“And I’m leaving you in this deluge in five... four... three-”

“Okay,” he’d cut in, hand buried deep under the side of his jacket. “Let’s go. You get the soggy part of the sandwich if it gets wet.”

“It looks like you have a weapon stashed there, just so you know,” she’d called to him over the rumble of the rain.

“Trust me, this thing’s way more valuable than - Betty, stop!”

She hadn’t seen it. She’d been lost in teasing him, she hadn’t been looking, and her hood had been draped low over her eyes; a perfect storm for disaster in the torrential downpour.

She hadn’t seen it, but she had felt it, just barely, the jet of cold air across her face as the cab sped by her, the yellow door brushing the fabric of her jacket as he yanked her away in the nick of time, arm firm around her waist as she crashed back hard into him.

He’d turned her to face him just as quickly as the car had passed her by, eyes wide and scanning her up and down. “Jesus, Betty, what were you thinking?”

“I... I wasn’t,” she’d stammered. She hadn’t seen it.

He’d sighed then, straight into her ear and folded her into him, hugging the breath right out of her. “I mean, I didn’t look. I wasn’t looking.”

“Are you okay?” he’d asked, both hands cupping her face firmly. “Did-”

“I’m fine,” she’d interrupted, nodding furiously. “It didn’t – I mean, you were – I’m fine.”

He’d sighed then, straight into her ear and folded her into him, hugging the breath right out of her. “I’m sorry about your sandwich,” she’d mumbled, eyeing the dropped deli package floating in a miserable puddle. She hadn’t known what else to say – she’d been embarrassed that she’d apparently couldn’t even cross a street without brushing with death, and he’d been holding her so closely, so tenderly in the middle of the pouring rain; he’d never been the public affection type, and she hadn’t really known what else to say or do other than to hug him back and apologize.
“Forget the stupid sandwich,” he’d murmured into her hair, hand curled in her dripping ponytail. “That’s not what’s important.”

On the steps of his walk-up, she almost calls the whole thing off. It doesn’t feel right. He’s not there and she has absolutely no permission other than Archie’s to walk right into his home like nothing’s happened at all.

But the door is already buzzing when she stands in front of it – Archie must’ve seen her all but crawling towards the apartment from the window – and she tells herself that it’ll take thirty seconds tops for her to get in, grab a card, and get out. No lingering, no hanging around.

“I think I’m dying,” Archie says by way of greeting, leaning heavily on the doorframe and rubbing at his temples, red hair sticking up in all directions possible.

“Really? I think you look great,” she responds, hands on hips and smirk on her face; he makes it too easy, sometimes.

“Don’t even start, Betty,” Archie mutters, leaving her to shut the door behind herself and collapsing onto one of the barstools, head pillowed in a circle of his arms on the kitchen counter. “Help yourself. You know where they are.”

She does.

“Thanks,” she says, pocketing the cards.

_Get in, get out._

_Don’t linger._

She looks around the apartment.

As far as she can tell, it’s all the same. Archie’s guitar still takes up the majority of the space on the couch she used to nap on every Thursday after *Spec’s* distribution, Jughead’s stacks and stacks of papers cover every inch of the coffee table, and there are hoodies draped and thrown across almost every piece of furniture in the living room.

What is missing is the photo on the windowsill, the same photo now missing from her computer’s desktop; the one of them on her twenty-first birthday, the one he’d framed because he’d said looking at her look so purely and completely happy made him happy, too.

Betty doubts any of that is true anymore, but she wonders the photo is still somewhere in the apartment, maybe in Archie’s room, maybe hidden in a drawer or in the back of a closet. She could ask Archie, she thinks, but she’s also not that interested in the answer, partly because she knows it will just plain _hurt_ if the photo had really gone out with last month’s trash, even though she’d more or less done the same with hers.

“Didn’t you bring any money with you?” Archie asks, still face down on the counter.

“I don’t work out with money. It’s not like I’m stopping to shop while I’m running.”

“Betty, that sounds really unsafe. Also, can you make coffee? I can’t move.” Betty doesn’t have an answer to the first part because it’s not like Archie isn’t right, so she starts moving around the kitchen instead, pulling down mugs for coffee and the sad can of Folgers from the shelf. Coffee, then she’ll go.
“What was the occasion?” she asks, waving her hand in his general direction.

“I don’t know, Monday night? Ronnie was busy yesterday.” That she knows because Veronica had been up until three a.m. finishing a paper and blasting Best of the 90s to keep herself, and consequently Betty’s self, awake. She had been a little irritated at Veronica, but when she had woken up her roommate this morning, who had fallen asleep face down in a textbook and laptop perched precariously on her ass, Veronica had looked beyond surprised to see her at home.

She’s never been home for one of Veronica’s all-nighters before, and she desperately hopes there aren’t too many more in both their futures.

“She finished the paper,” Betty says simply, placing one of the mugs in front of Archie’s face.

“She told me. This sucks, by the way.”

“You’re so welcome.”

“It’s the coffee, not you,” Archie says, holding his nose over the mug and inhaling deeply. Then, quietly - “I miss the Keurig.”

“You guys could always get one,” Betty tries to offer, but she knows that isn’t what he meant.

“Jug doesn’t want to.”

“You should get one,” she insists. “Don’t drink bad coffee because of me.” Betty slides the mug out from under Archie and takes a tentative sip – maybe it isn’t that bad and he’s exaggerating because of the hangover.

It’s terrible.

“How is he?” she asks quietly, focusing her gaze down on her warped reflection staring back at her in the mug. Her ponytail is, kindly put, a disastrous mess.

“Jughead?”

“Arch, come on.”

“He’s okay, Betty. I mean, he’s moody and broody all of the time, but that’s kind of the same as before. He’s writing more now, though.”

That makes her smile. He’d stopped writing in the months leading up to the end, and only ever offered short excuses or outright dismissals every time she had asked about it – “I’m busy with other assignments right now, Betty,” or “I’ll write when I have something to write about.” She wonders now if she had been the one standing in his way, a literal roadblock to his writer’s block.

“That’s good,” she admits. “He should be-”

Her voice catches and stops dead in her throat when she hears a key in the lock, and her last thought before the door swings open, her last very stupid thought, is whether or not she can fit into the cabinet below the sink in under two seconds.

“Betty.”

The sound of her own breathing is like gunfire in her ears.

“Jug. Hey.”
In that moment, she starts thinking about death and how it couldn’t come too soon, how if a hole to hell opened up at her feet, she’d jump right in and willingly.

This is so wrong of her, she thinks. Here she is at his apartment, a sacred space completely off limits to her now, drinking his bad coffee from his mismatched mugs, stealing his MetroCards.

She has so crossed a line.

She has so crossed multiple lines.

“I forgot my subway card,” Betty offers lamely. *Why didn’t she leave when she had the chance?*

“Oh,” he says. She’s never seen him blink so much, like he can’t quite believe she's there in front of him. “There’s a ton in the drawer. Here, I’ll-”

“I got one,” she interrupts quickly. “But thanks.”

She’s painfully aware of Archie’s eyes swinging to him, then her, then back to him again, a car crash he can’t look away from.

“It’s, uh, nice. To see you,” Jughead says, shifting his bag across his shoulders. A nervous tick, she recognizes.

“Oh, you too. You look good.” Betty closes her eyes and wishes back the words, not because he doesn’t look good, he always does, but because he looks so far from thrilled to see her. “I’m sorry,” she blurts out loudly. “I should go; I shouldn’t have come-”

“No,” he interrupts, holding up his hand to stop her. “No, really – stay. Hang out. I just forgot a book.” She’s in the middle of insisting on leaving but he’s in and out of his room, forgotten book in hand, and straight out the door before she has a chance to finish her thought.

Well.

That essentially answered the question of when she’d see him again and what it would be like: she’d see him again after a six-mile run, sweaty, out of breath, and ponytail on the side of her head, and it would be more horrible than she’d ever imagined.

“Are you okay?” Archie asks quietly.

“Did you know about this?” she snaps, turning on him. *This is so unfair of you,* she thinks, but the words fall out of her mouth before she can even stop them. Of course he didn’t know. But she’s also not thinking straight. “If this is one of yours or his or Veronica’s schemes to, I don’t know, fix this-”

“Betty, I swear I had no idea he was coming back. You heard him – he forgot a book.”

She takes a deep breath, placing both her hands on the counter in an attempt to level herself, to get some kind of grip on her emotions that she knows are spiraling quickly out of control. “I’m sorry, Arch,” she says eventually. “I just... god, I don’t know what the hell is wrong with me.”

“Betty, there’s nothing wrong with you.”

“I feel like I’m going crazy sometimes,” she whispers.

“You’re not crazy,” Archie tells her firmly. “You guys are just... I don’t know, you guys are just going through a lot.”
“I never wanted to take it out on you. You know, we talked about it,” she says, affording a scoff to herself. “About how we didn’t want to make it weird for you and Veronica. Mostly you.”

It hangs in the air, it doesn’t need to be said – she’s failing miserably.

“Is there something to fix?” Archie asks.

“What?”

“Just now - you said ‘fix this.’ Is there something to fix?”

She hadn’t even realized that she had said that until Archie pointed it out to her. “No,” Betty says. “There’s nothing to fix because nothing was broken. It just wasn’t right anymore.”

“Do you want there to be something to fix?”

“What?”

“Like, theoretically. If there was something to fix and you guys could fix it, would you want to?”

Betty sighs, drumming her fingertips against the counter. “No,” she concludes again and the minute she does, she knows that she’s just lied right to Archie Andrews’ face.

But she also knows that she wasn’t lying when she said there hadn’t been anything to fix in the first place. They were just two people drifting apart and becoming less of themselves the longer they stayed in each other’s orbit, and she doesn’t think that there’s anything to fix about that. And there shouldn’t be – they should both be able to evolve into and become the people they’re meant to be; they shouldn’t have to fix and twist themselves into some strange, contorted version of “Betty” and “Jughead” in order to fix them.

If there was something to fix, maybe she’d want to. Maybe she – maybe they – would try. But the whole point is moot because there simply isn’t.

“I’m sorry, Arch,” she says again, and she means it from the bottom of her heart. She’s sorry she’s here making his hangover worse, she’s sorry that she’s being difficult and mean and rude, and she’s sorry that she’s inevitably positioning him in between a rock and a hard place better known as ‘Betty and Jughead, my idiot friends who can’t quite sort their shit out.’

Archie reaches his hand across the counter, wraps his fingers around her palm, and squeezes.

She sticks strictly to Central Park after the Unfortunate Encounter. The park is just as nice as running down Fifth Avenue and window shopping, Betty convinces herself, and this way, there’s no room for any unwanted run-ins. And, there’s better air in the park. The park is her new safe space – it is hers and she belongs to it.

At the end of the month, she feels brave enough to try running after dark in spite of Veronica’s hemming and hawing about hooligans and ruffians that emerge with the night, in spite of her threats that she’s going to ‘tell Archie on her.’ She wants to be ready for every eventuality this race might throw at her, and what if there’s a solar eclipse that day?

She should be prepared for that.
The darkness settles in fast after sunset, much faster than she’d anticipated, but she’s only on her second mile out of four and so far, there’ve been no ruffians of which to speak.

It’s all Veronica being Veronica, Betty thinks, moving off the path to re-lace her shoe.

“Holy crap,” she blurts out when she stands back up, her hand rushing straight to her heart. There’s a man right in her face, nose almost touching hers, and immediately, then and there, she decides that if she makes it out of this alive she’s never not listening to Veronica again.

“Sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I saw you running around the Reservoir.”

“Oh,” she stammers.

As in oh god, this is it. This is the moment her mom has been training her for – go for the groin, Betty, she’d said, and run while screaming as loud as you can. “You didn’t. Scare me, I mean.”

Show no fear.

She should've brought her pepper spray.

“I’m Brian.”

Wait, what?


“I haven’t seen you around here. I run on this path every day around this time,” he adds quickly, hand held out in front of him in what she thinks is an effort to curb her runaway thoughts.

“I normally run in the morning.” It already feels like too much information.

“That would explain it. Are you training for something?”

“Half-marathon.”

“Ambitious,” he laughs. “So at risk of freaking you out further and getting even fewer syllables out of you, I’m just going to come out with it – I was wondering if you wanted to get a cup of coffee?”

“Oh!” Betty exclaims. He’s asking her out.

He’s asking her out, right?

“You’re asking me out.”

“That’s the general idea, yeah.”

“You’re asking me out and you don’t even know my name?”

“What’s your name?”

“I’m, uh,” Betty starts. It hits her then that she’s truly never done this before; she’s only ever dated one person and they’d more or less just fallen together. There’d been no asking out, no white linens and wine glasses, just a town mystery, a boy brave enough to climb through her bedroom window and risk the wrath of Alice Cooper, and Veronica, who had first defined their relationship for them.
“I’m Elizabeth,” she concludes unconvincingly. It comes out question-like, cadence rising with the syllables, and she’s sure that he thinks she’s giving a fake name. Technically, she isn’t, but she doesn’t feel comfortable enough with going through the whole Elizabeth-but-everyone-calls-me Betty rigmarole with a stranger right now.

He nods, and she takes the interlude to look him up and down as inconspicuously as possible. He’s not unattractive, not by a long shot, and the longer she looks at him, the more she’s reminded of Archie with brown hair. That’d been her thing once, she thinks, so maybe she should say yes now in the name of picking herself up and moving on; it could be her thing again.

“So, Elizabeth,” he says, name mockingly rolling off his tongue. “What do you-”

“Wait,” Betty interrupts, slinking behind him with narrowed eyes. She knows she’s being rude, she knows that she’s being the actual height of rudeness right now, but there’s a playing card turned face down near the bushes and she just has to know.

There are fifty-two cards, she calculates, just shy of a two-percent chance that this card here is the same one as the one she misses so much, although even if this is that card, it would still never replace the one she’d lost. Probability-wise, it’s completely more likely than not that this is an entirely different card with no meaning whatsoever, and she feels something like relief wash over her when she sees that it’s not the two of hearts.

But it’s close, she notes, twirling the thin card between her fingers – the two of spades, black like the sky around her, double arrows piercing right through the middle of the inverted twin hearts.

“Hi.”

She’d jumped at the voice booming right into her ear, milk sloshing noisily in thermos with her movement. “Hi,” she’d responded dubiously, slowly, extending the non-fat milk in front of her. “Do you need this?”

“Nah,” he’d said. “But thanks. I think you’re in my Intro to Fiction class.”

“Oh,” she’d said. She’d though the whole head-down, headphones-in look had been the universal sign for ‘don’t bother me,’ but apparently not. “Maybe,” she’d said politely, tugging out her headphones. “I have that class with Rothchild.”

“Hey, same. We could be study partners – I have a single, no roommates or anything.”

She’d heard him before she’d felt his arm slip around her shoulders, voice friendly, joking even, but with the hint of an edge. “Hey, babe,” he’d said, tipping his head against hers. “Get your coffee okay?”

She’d held back a laugh. “Perfect every time. I was just talking to-” she’d gestured, paper cup in hand towards her nameless classmate – ‘Connor’, he’d supplied – “Connor, about Intro to Fiction.”

“Mmm,” he’d hummed back, making a show of reaching for her cup for a sip. “Well, Betty’s read almost every book on the syllabus already, so if you ever need homework help – Connor, was it – my girl’s got your back.”

“Oh,” he’d said uncomfortably, hands digging hard into pockets. “I’ll keep that in mind – thanks – thanks, man.”

She’d waited until they were well on the road to her dorm room before turning to him, twisting
awkwardly under his arm still lazily slung over her shoulder. “What was that?” she’d asked.

“What was what?”

“My girl? Babe? I didn’t even know you knew that word.”

“Please, I share a room with Archie.”

“Jug.”

“I don’t know,” he’d said, gaze tracking down to her. “I just wanted to mess with him a bit. He was such an easy target.”

“Target for what? What am I missing?”

“He was about to hit on you, Betty, if he wasn’t already.”

“What? No he wasn’t.”

“Trust me – he was.”

She’d frowned, replaying the conversation over again in her mind. She hadn’t actively picked up on anything untoward – he’d been friendly, sure, but that didn’t necessarily mean he’d been thinking about her with her clothes all over the floor of his no-roommates single.

“I don’t think so,” she’d dismissed casually. “I think he was just being nice.”

He’d snorted. “Sure.”

“If he ever talks to me again and if you haven’t scared him off for life with... whatever that was back there, I’ll buy you a coffee.”

“Deal,” he’d said, pressing a kiss on her temple. She didn’t know how she felt about the primordial chest beating competition she’d just witnessed, but she liked his sweet side – she always had. And, she admitted, the whole protective vibe was kind of sexy.

Late on a Tuesday night, well past what she deemed appropriate communications hours, she’d sighed and passed her phone over to him with a scowl – she hated when she misjudged the human race.

“Hey, Betty. It's Connor,” he’d read out loudly, dramatically enunciating each word. “Nice meeting you the other day. If you ever break up with your boyfriend, let me know. I’d love to take you out for coffee.” He’d passed her phone back to her with a satisfied smirk. “Ballsy,” he’d said, laughing. “More so than I gave him credit for.”

“It’s not funny.”

“Come on, Betty. It’s a little funny.”

“He seemed nice,” she’d commented, lip twisting in confusion – she’d normally been so good at judging people, their motives, their endgames, and she’d completely missed this. “How did you know?”

“What, that he was hitting on you?”

“Yeah.”
He’d shrugged, thumb stroking idle circles on the top of her hand. “I don’t know – intuition, I guess. He wasn’t being subtle.”

“Am I giving off some kind of open for business vibe? I don’t want to be.”

“What? No,” he’d assured her quickly. “I didn’t mean anything like that. But Betty, you can’t be that surprised,” he’d said gently, voice soft and sweet. “You’re so brilliant. You’re so beautiful. It’s not at all out of this world to think that other people would want to date you, too.”

She’d felt the heat rise to her cheeks; he’d told her what he thought about her often enough, but it never failed to make her blush, it never failed to make her heart so full that someone thought the entire world of her the way he did.

“Well, I’m not interested in dating them.” She’d kissed him then, just in case he’d been thinking that there could be anyone else out there for her but him. “Let me know when you want that coffee.”

He’d smiled against her. “I just want you.”

“Playing card,” she says in explanation.

“They’re all over the city. I’ve found a few,” Brian offers. “All jokers, whatever that means.”

“Hey, maybe it has something to do with that movie.” Betty narrows her eyes in thought; she knows she’s seen it. She remembers the memory of watching it perfectly well – flanked on either side by Jughead and Archie while Veronica snored away in the armchair – and she knows it has something to do with a superhero. “Superman?” she guesses. It’s the only one that comes to mind, probably because she’s borne her fair share of Lois Lane jokes since her Blue & Gold days.

“Batman,” he corrects.

Whatever.

“So, Elizabeth,” he says. “Coffee sometime?”

It’s the right thing to do, she thinks, the healthy thing. It’s not like she’s agreeing to marry the guy, all she has to do is spend an hour sipping weak coffee with him, and think about thinking about moving on.

But, at the end of the day, Brian’s not him, and she’s not ready for it to be someone else other than him just yet.

“You know, I think I’m going to have to say no,” Betty says slowly, her mouth wrapping strangely around the unfamiliar word – no. It’s foreign on her tongue; it’s a foreign feeling all together – she can’t remember the last time she’s said no to something, to someone. “I just got out of a-”

“Hey,” he says, holding up a hand to stop her ramble of excuses. “Say no more. What are the chances, right?”

Betty looks down at the card in her hand – really, what are the chances. “Hey, you never know,” she says because she doesn’t want to be the reason this guy doesn’t take that chance again, the one he’d just taken with her. “Maybe the next half-marathoner will have less baggage than I do.”

He smiles at her, and it’ll have to do – love’s got her down right now, but she doesn’t want to project that onto anyone else because deep down, she’s still a lover of love and she thinks that he
should find it; it’s just not with her.

“Good luck training, Elizabeth.”

Maybe she’ll get there soon, she thinks as he waves to her and takes off down the lap path. Maybe she’ll wake up one day and suddenly feel ready to let him go, to let her past stay firmly rooted there once and for all as she marches forward without it, brave and willing, eyes wide open, and arms outstretched in acceptance of the future and all its glorious uncertainty.

But for now, she has the power of no in her back pocket and a new playing card to slip into her wallet. And it feels good, she thinks, to say no because she doesn’t want to do something.

It feels really good.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from "Changing" by John Mayer.
April

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_I spend my time thinking about you, and it’s almost driving me wild._

He hasn’t been this nervous about anything in years.

He also hasn’t had to wear a suit for anything in years, so he supposes that has something to do with it. He tries to tell himself that nerves are a good thing, that they’re there because this actually _means_ something to him. He tries to channel them into productivity by going over mock answers in his head, he tries his best to internalize Veronica’s shrill voice chastising him to “_for the love of God, Jughead, just suppress the broodiness for this one hour, okay?_”

In hindsight, getting a pep talk from Veronica had not been the greatest of ideas although in his defense, he hadn’t really had a choice in the matter. He had infinitely preferred Archie’s laid back _if they don’t like you, they don’t know what they’re missing_ speech, but Veronica had quite literally pushed Archie out of the way as he was in the middle of waxing philosophical and told him point blank that all of that was wrong. That he needed to rein in all of his _‘sullen shit’_ and come off much less like the love child of Holden Caulfield and Donnie Darko and more like, well, anyone else but that.

He wishes that there was some happy medium between Archie’s anything goes, flowers-in-my-hair attitude and Veronica’s entirely over-the-top, high-strung one. Grudgingly, he admits that he knows _exactly_ where that middle ground is, and he’s irritated that she’s invading his thoughts and distracting him at this particular moment of his life.

“So who is this guy again?” she’d asked, alternating looking up at him and down at her computer screen.

_He’d blown out a frustrated sigh as he looked down at his shirt – he’d been off by two buttons. Again. “Blumenthal, he’s one of the advanced level seminar professors,” he’d explained. “Only seniors take his class.”_

“But he’s interviewing juniors to be his research assistant?”

“Apparently.”

“Hmm,” she’d said, flipping onto her back, her ponytail fanning out like a crown of old gold above her head. “Interesting. Well, that’s great for you!”

“Betty, I wouldn’t read too much into it,” he’d said. “It’s probably just a courtesy interview to suck up to the administration or something.”

“Why would you say that?”

_He’d shrugged. Because he’d been shockingly under qualified compared to the other candidates, because there’d been a whole class of people a year older and wiser than him gunning for the position, too. Because what bestselling New York Times author would really pick him of all people to be his research assistant?_
Someone like her on the other hand – bright eyed, bushy tailed, and always eager, always smiling – that made a hell of a lot more sense.

“He’s interviewing a lot of people,” he’d said simply. “Some seniors, too.”

She’d mirrored his shrug back to him. “So? He’s talking to you now for a reason. Besides, if he’s researching for a book, he probably wants someone who isn’t about to graduate in the next six months.”

He hadn’t thought of that.

“Jug,” she’d said, rising up off up the bed, her hands making quick work of the buttons he’d managed to mismatch once again. “You sell yourself short more often than not. You’re a beautiful writer, and you have good instincts – and not just about writing and books, but about the world, too.”

“I know,” he’d said in placation, his words, his heart lacking every ounce of conviction he’d known she’d been searching for.

“Would I have asked you to help me track down my unwed pregnant sister if I thought you didn’t?” she’d asked.

“And here I was thinking that you were just looking for a way to spend more time with me,” he’d said, brushing an errant strand of loose ponytail from her eyes.

“Actually, I’m pretty sure that was you.”

She hadn’t been wrong.

“Just be yourself,” she’d said. “Trust your own instincts – I promise you, they’re good.”

He hadn’t been sure about trusting his instincts, because they’d led him astray more than once. But he trusted her.

“Any other tips? By the way, that’s insanely distracting,” he’d said, feeling himself slowly but surely getting lost in the slow track of her fingertips down his chest.

“What? Oh, sorry.”

“I didn’t mean distracting in a bad way. Feel free to keep doing that.”

He’d loved that he could still make her blush, he’d loved that he could still get completely lost in nothing else but them when her hands were on him. “I don’t know. Just remember why you’re in there, bring it back to the job description if you can. Show him you’re prepared. Oh!” she’d said, tapping her hand lightly on his arm. “Don’t repeat the question back when you’re answering, okay?”

She’d straightened his collar, pressed a kiss to his cheek – for luck, she’d said, and given his shoulder a gentle squeeze. You’re ready, he intuited, you’ll be just fine.

“Are you leaving?” he’d asked as she folded her books over each other, marking the pages.

“I’m just going to nap here. Do you mind?”

“You do realize you’ve described every man’s fantasy, right? Beautiful girl waiting for him in his bed when he comes home?”
“Every man?” she’d asked, lips quirking up as she busied herself with rearranging the pillows to just the right height; she’d always been particular about that.

“Maybe not every man’s fantasy,” he’d corrected, hand paused on the door just to steal a few more seconds of her. “But it’s definitely mine.”

She’d tipped her smile down into herself, but he’d caught it just the same. “Good luck, Jug.”

He’s beginning to forget – what her hands feel like in his, the exact timbre of her voice when she says his name, the sound of her laugh when she finds something really and truly funny – and it’s petrifying. He remembers the morning he rolled over onto her side of the bed and realized that the pillow, her pillow, no longer smelled like the fruity, very pink conditioner she liked to use. It had been one of the worst mornings in his life, possibly even worse than the morning his mom had taken off with his sister and left him with nothing more than a quick kiss on the forehead, because as sporadically she enters it, his mom still texts him few weeks or so to tell him what the weather is like in Toledo or how his grandmother’s dogs are doing, and he talks to JB in varying degrees at least once a day. His mom and JB, they’re both still in his life.

Betty isn’t anymore.

That morning, he’d realized that he was losing the few, very small, very pitiful scraps of pieces he had left of her, and that whether he liked it or not he’d soon be left with only the memories he had of them, memories fading as fast as quicksand through an hourglass even as his mind did the utmost to hold onto and store them in the nether reaches of his brain that time and human frailty could never get to.

“Jughead Jones?” At his name, Jughead jumps to his feet and clears his throat. He can tell that the receptionist or assistant or whatever hat she wears – he doesn’t want to presume – is having a difficult time believing that his name is actually Jughead and that she hasn’t written down the wrong name. He contemplates going through the wait-until-you-hear-the-real-thing song and dance but he figures that right now is not the time to say something self-deprecating and thus potentially come off as ‘not a team player’.

He just barely remembers to mumble a ‘thank you’ the receptionist’s way before she closes the door to the office and a man who might as well be the brother of Fred Andrews is upon him, holding out his hand for his.

“Jughead. It’s nice to meet you. I like the suit,” he says.

He hates the suit. It’s a necessary evil, but he hates it.

“Thanks, sir,” Jughead says with a smile that he’s sure is coming out something more like a grimace because unlike Veronica, he doesn’t spend an hour a day facing the mirror and practicing. “I’m glad to be here.”

Jesus, that’s a strong handshake, he thinks, although he’s no stranger to those; he’s dealt with Hal Cooper’s grip fusing his knuckles into themselves enough times now that he can hold his own. Sort of. Looking back, he can’t even blame the guy - he had been dating his daughter at the time and he’d worn a leather jacket, rode a beat-up Ducati, kept her out past curfew, and generally scoffed at anything bearing the Ralph Lauren logo, better known as Hal’s mothership.

“Sit, sit,” Archie’s not-uncle instructs, and so he does. “So, tell me about what you’ve been doing since we last talked on the phone.”
You know, perfecting my beer pong throws, fratting out in my boat shoes, setting the record for most classed missed by a graduating senior.

He doesn’t know who he’s kidding – he isn’t Archie.

“Well, sir, I’ve been—”

“Hold on,” he says adjusting in his seat, and Jughead immediately thinks that he’s officially won the record for shortest time in which one has tanked an interview. “Just call me Bill.”

Oh, thank god and Jesus, too.

“Got it... Bill.” He says the name slowly and deliberately, watching for the man’s reaction - it could be some kind of test. He’s not even on a first name basis with Fred Andrews yet and Fred Andrews has seen him on a baby leash, so he’s is a little skeptical of ‘just call me Bill.’

But Bill simply nods along and gestures for him to continue. “I’ve spent a lot of my time working on West 10th, that’s NYU’s literary magazine,” Jughead starts again, drawing in a breath. “The last issue of the year is coming out next month, so it’s been all hands-on deck. School-wise, I’ve been working on my final portfolios for my seminar classes. I brought some of my pieces with me if want to see them,” he offers quickly, Betty’s voice telling him to “be prepared, and show him you’re prepared,” ringing loudly and so clearly in his head.

“Thanks,” Bill responds, sliding the folder over with a chubby pointer finger. “Richard, or I guess Professor Blumenthal to you, told me you were an immense help in researching his latest book. We go way back to West 10th too, you know.”

It takes nearly all of Jughead’s will power to not reply back with the smart aleck retort of “damn straight, I know. How do you think I got this interview in the first place, my good looks?”

“I think he mentioned something to that effect,” he says instead and as diplomatically as possible. “It’s a great place to make connections.”

“It is, it is at that,” Bill says and Jughead allows him the moment he’s so obviously lost in to bask in his glory days. Personally, he doesn’t get it. He likes college just fine, and he’ll miss having nothing to do all day but learn and write, but he thinks that there has to be more out of life than just writing piece after piece based off someone else’s prompt, but that's just him. “Anyhow,” Bill continues. "I was impressed with the work you sent me.”

Jughead lets out a huge breath that he didn’t know he had been holding. “Thank you, sir – Bill,” he corrects quickly. “That really means a lot. I spent more time than usual on those latest pieces.”

“Well, it definitely shows. Talk to me about your editing process.”

He had anticipated this question and even practiced various iterations of it out loud to himself, to Archie who’d looked like he’d been falling asleep, but he might as well have not because he can’t remember any of his talking points if his life depended on it.

“My editing process,” Jughead begins slowly, holding back a cringe. She’s in his head again – don’t repeat the question. “I’m more of a get-it-all-out on paper first kind of writer than an edit-as-you-go type. Not that I don’t make edits as I go, you know, quick grammar ones here and there,” he says. He’s rambling - stop rambling. “I personally think that editing can get in the way of the creative train of thought if one focuses too much on it while writing, so I tend not to do that.”
Bill nods at him thoughtfully, and he thinks then and there how he can’t wait to update the ‘Skills’ section of his resume to include clairvoyance because he’s positive he’s about to be thanked for his time and shown the door.

“Right,” Bill says instead. “I only ask because some of your more recent pieces read a little differently than your older ones. For example... Prayer for Relief,” he says, shaking out a hard copy from of the stack of his work. “This was extremely well edited and constructed – love the flow of this one.”

He feels his shoulders tense at the title.

He can’t take credit.

“Stop,” she’d whined, only halfway to playful, curling the pages on her lap to her chest and out of eyesight. “I can’t focus when you’re watching me.”

“I’m just curious,” he’d said, peeking over her hands.

“That’s what you always say.”

“And it’s always true.”

“Fine,” she’d said, crawling towards the other end of the bed and stacking the pillows around her defensively. “For the sake of editorial integrity.”

“What are you doing? You look ridiculous,” he’d said, laughing.

“I do love it when he’s so appreciative of my hard work,” she’d quipped to no one in particular.

“Hey,” he’d said seriously, waiting for her eyes to meet his. “Thank you, Betty. You have no idea how much you help.”

She’d smiled at him softly then, all play and pretense falling from her face – you’re welcome, he’d read; she hadn’t needed to say it.

He’d kept up a poor show of reading, his eyes darting over to her after every sentence, watching as she chewed the back of her pen in thought, watching as her eyebrows knitted together, as her lips twisted as she nodded along with his words on the page.

He’d wondered if she knew how brilliant he thought she was. Smart was one thing; she had to know she was smart – no one went to the school that she did without having a cup that runnethed all the way over in smarts.

But brilliance, at least he’d thought, brilliance was something a bit more undefined and nuanced, something a bit more amorphous than just plain old smart. And she was brilliant in every sense of the word; in the way that she understood him, understood his mind with such depth and clarity that he never once had to explain to her what he was trying to convey – she just knew. In the way that she plucked out threads of themes and symbols hidden his words when he hadn’t even found them there himself, in the way that she saw value in even his most vague, incoherent 2 a.m. ramblings written in scraps of paper in broken English.

He’d wanted so much for the world to see what he saw, that brilliance he thought was so synonymous with her name, with the very essence of her being. She’d been type that could change the world because she’d already changed his in every way possible; she’d made it better. She’d made it brighter. She could be anything and everything she wanted to be, and even in the complete
and utter ordinariness of his room, surrounded by secondhand Ikea furniture that in no way matched and a single desk lamp tilted off its axis, bringing the darkness that surrounded them to a mere dimness, she had already looked so much bigger, she had already been so much more luminescent than space itself; she transcended it just by virtue of being her.

“What?” she’d asked with a small laugh when she caught his eyes on her.

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

You are so brilliant, he’d thought.

“Okay,” she’d announced, toppling the pillow barrier and crawling on her hands and knees to sidle back next to him. “I think the flow’s the main issue right now, so I’d move this paragraph here and-”

“Hold on,” he’d said, laughing and bringing the page she’d nudged on hip lap closer to his face. “Did you draw smiley faces over all the semi-colons?”

“Oh,” she’d said softly, sheepishly. “It’s an alternative learning method?”

Smiley faces had been an understatement – she’d drawn the rainbow of facial expression, not with any great artistic prowess – that’d never really been her forte – but with detail enough that he could tell that each of the many, many faces staring back at him had been painstakingly and carefully curated.

“Alright,” he’d said, voice still shaking with remnants of his amusement. “Point made – I use a lot of them.”

“If the smiley-faces don’t work, you could get one of those swear jars and throw a dollar in for every time you use one.”

“A dollar? Highway robbery.”

“A penny then.”

“Or a kiss.”

“Ew,” she’d said.

“What?”

“Nothing, that was just so cheesy.” He’d poked her once in the ribs as retribution, and she’d squealed so loudly and kicked so hard into the air that he’d thought for a moment he’d actually hurt her instead of simply tickle her.

But, with laughter still on her lips, she’d kissed him anyhow.

“Yes,” he agrees slowly, not knowing where he’s conducting this particular train of thought. “I’ve been more focused on thought-based, emotive writing as it happens in the moment recently and my whole process has been different because of the style. I think formalistic narrative arcs would more or less disrupt that stream of consciousness spirit.”

“I understand,” Bill says. “I’m not saying either approach is right or wrong, I just wanted to hear your justification.”

He is Jughead Jones: master liar, master bullshitter.
“I’m also more objective when it comes to other writers’ work,” Jughead adds quickly. *Bring it back to the job description,* he hears her saying to him, fingers turning down and straightening his shirt collar. *Remind him why you’re there.* “I think it’s hard sometimes to go through your own work with a fine-tooth comb because you’re so close to it, but I’ve had a lot of experience with editing and objectively picking apart other people’s work from *West 10th*.”

“You were the editor-in-chief of the high-school newspaper, too, correct?”

Did he send in Betty’s resume by accident?

No, he confirms quickly, holding back a frown at his completely offensive given name staring back at him, upside down, on the page.

“Oh, um, no. I wasn’t. I was a staff writer there and an investigator, and basically anything else the paper needed me to be – we had a small staff. But I worked closely with her – that is, the editor-in-chief, so I know what the process is like.”

*Very closely,* he thinks. *I know what it tastes like when she kisses me, and I know the sounds she makes when I push her up against the door of the Blue & Gold’s office and run my tongue up and down her neck.*

“Well, that was all a long time ago,” Bill says dismissively. *It feels like yesterday,* he thinks. “I was just curious. So, Jughead, when do you graduate again?”

Jughead clears his throat, trying to push all thoughts of her out of his mind. “Next month,” he answers. “Barring any surprises.” He regrets the last comment the minute it’s out of his mouth, but Bill seems to appreciate it and offers him a small chuckle.

“I think you’ll be okay,” Bill says. “I was, how should we put this – *enjoying myself* – even during the graduation ceremony, and I still made it to the other side. Just don’t fall when you walk across the stage. Anyhow, Jughead – we’re a small literary magazine, and I can’t make you any promises that your work will definitely get published because I wouldn’t want to seem disingenuous if it doesn’t materialize. But, I will say that you’re one of the better writers to have walked through these doors in a while, and those “better writers” have all been published here numerous times. You’ll start with editing submissions and working with the writers on how to improve the pieces we’re interested in publishing, and we’ll go from there; it’s not glamorous. But the job is yours if you want it.”


“Good,” Bill says, rising and holding out his hand for another crushing handshake. “I’ll have Natasha send you the paperwork and brief you on what to bring when you start.”

“Thank you, sir – *Bill,*” he says. “You have no idea how much this means to me.” He’s not lying about that, it means the world; he had truly been afraid of landing on the unemployed section of NYU’s *Where Are They Now* newsletter instead of the employed one. He’d been terrified to his core that he’d be the only one picking up his diploma in a month with that be the sum total of his achievements while everyone else around him moved up to better and brighter futures.

“You can relax, Jughead, although I do have one more question.”

*Why won’t it end?*

“Is your real name really Jughead?”
“Oh,” he says, a breath of relief and half a laugh whooshing out with the oh. “No, my real name is Forsythe – old name. Family name. It’s on my resume, admittedly in pretty small print, but I’m happy to go by either.”

He’s definitely not happy to go by either, not by any stretch of the imagination, but if this is what this job turns on then he’ll suffer through someone calling him Forsythe a few times a day.

“Huh,” Bill says, giving him a clap on the back that he thinks is a little too familiar for someone who’d just hired him not two minutes ago. “I’ve never met a Forsythe before. I’ll see you soon, Jughead. Remember, don’t fall at graduation.”

He barely manages another thank you before he’s out the door and tapping at the down button on the elevator frantically. When he’s officially out of the building and around the block, because he doesn’t know for sure who might still be watching him, he immediately shrugs out of his suit jacket and places both hands on his knees, breathing deeply.

He did it.

He’s not going to be homeless again, he’s not going to be out on the streets when the savings he’s made checking out books at the library runs dry. Someone is going to pay him to make editorial decisions about themes and the Oxford Comma, and he’s actually going to have a real shot at getting published somewhere that doesn’t have a school or the colors blue, gold, or purple affiliated with it at all.

Today is a good day, he thinks. It’s a really, really good day.

He pulls out his phone then, his hands, his mind instinctively navigating his screen and so impatient to tell her that the confidence she’d once placed in him hadn’t been misplaced after all. He kind of owes her, too, he thinks, because she’d been in his head during the entire interview, calming him, reminding him of just what he needed to do, and maybe just this once he can break social and societal norms if only to tell her that he’s so thankful she’d been there with him, even in spirit.

But all it takes is a half a second, a quarter of a heartbeat – and then there’s reality, seeping like water through cupped palms, raining down his euphoria.

No.

He can’t do this to her.

Shell-shocked would be euphemism for what he felt that day he’d swung open his door and found her standing there sipping coffee with Archie, cheeks perfectly pink and long legs looking more toned than he’d remembered, even hidden under black leggings. He’d forgotten for a moment he needed to be shocked, because it’d felt just so normal, a scene he’d come home to hundreds of times before.

But there Archie had been there gaping at him like a fish, mouth pursed in a round ‘o’ as he’d looked between the both of them for some kind of cue for what to do next, and he then remembered – she wasn’t supposed to be there anymore. He doesn’t think it’d really been anything more than what she’d said – coincidence, bad timing, and a goddamn unfunny cosmic joke. But still – it hadn’t been a great feeling to see her because he’d known then and there that any and all pretenses he’d made of moving on had been delusions of the grandest order.

She’ll pick up if he calls her because that’s who she is, and she’ll be overjoyed for him, maybe a
bit awkward, but above all else, overjoyed.

That’s who she is.

But at the end of the day, calling her is selfish; it’s selfish because he wants to talk to her. He wants to tell her that she’d been right to believe in him, he wants to impose himself on her life, he wants to hear her voice, really and truly hear her voice, and not just the poor substitute he’s been carrying around in his mind.

He wants, he wants, he wants.

But he doesn’t want to hurt her, he doesn’t want to leave her as confused and frustrated as he’d been when he’d seen her at his apartment.

No, he concludes. No.

He can’t tell her. He can’t hurt her, not after everything. That’s not who he wants to be.

“To Jughead Jones,” Veronica says, swirling her wine glass in the air. “And his newfound ability to support his burger habit post-graduation.”

He hadn’t meant to tell Veronica.

He had meant to tell Archie, who he tracked down to a bar very ironically on West 10th and 6th, and Veronica had – unfortunately for him and fortunately for her – been there having a very bizarre lunch with Archie at four in the afternoon. Bizarre less because of the time and more because dive bars were very much not the girl with the cape’s scene, but there she’d been anyhow, curled up against his best friend on a torn vinyl bench with its stuffing falling out, perched primly on her cashmere cape. He thinks it has something to do with graduation and some inexplicable need on her part to do collegiate-like thinks before it becomes completely inappropriate, and to Veronica, hanging at a dive bar in the hipster part of town just shy of happy hour probably qualifies.

She had slapped her hand on the table when he’d told them, congratulated herself on her interview tips which she’d been sure sealed the deal, and immediately ordered a round of drinks before he could make up an excuse about how he had class or a paper due.

But, not wanting to stomp on her good will, he caught the Blue Moon she slid his way and clinked his bottle neck with the rim of her glass.

“Thanks, Veronica,” he says, tipping a small sip of the liquid into his mouth. He’s not really a drinker, and he’s definitely not a drinker while the sun’s still high in the sky, even if he is in the final anything-goes countdown of his college career. But Veronica is a drinker anytime she sees the occasion for it, whether the occasion in question is a friend’s almost unbelievable employment or that just it’s Tuesday.

Correction – Tipsy Tuesday.

“So, Jughead, tell me about the interview,” Veronica says, folding her hands on the tabletop and pulling a face of the greatest disgust when her palm brushes something sticky.
Jughead shrugs. “The guy looked like Archie’s dad.”

“A little eye-candy during the interview,” Veronica muses. “Always a plus.”

“Ronnie, I’m right here,”

“What?” she says. “It’s a compliment by proxy.”

“It’s also his dad,” Jughead defends.

“Did he ask why all your recent stories are so depressing and make you want to lie in a darkened room all day?” Archie asks through a sip of beer.

Jughead scoffs. “No, but thanks for that.”

“Sorry?” Archie says with a laugh and a shrug. “It’s not like it isn’t true.”

“Please, if we want to talk about repetitive art, no one needs to look any further than you singing song after song about one raven-haired goddess.”

A part of him hates that his own words have made Veronica look that pleased with herself.

“Hey, at least my stuff is upbeat,” Archie says.

Jughead begs to differ because he’s thought about thumping Archie over the head with his guitar a time or twenty, and he’s pretty sure that’s not the definition of ‘upbeat,’ but he lets it slide; he’s in a good mood right now, and it’s not like Archie is wrong about the decidedly fatalist direction his writing is veering towards these days.

It hits him then that at least for the foreseeable future, or at least until Veronica and Betty relent to the idea of a third, extremely messy, but admittedly lovable roommate, that he won’t have to give up his apartment or living with Archie anytime soon. It’s a comforting thought, he thinks, that when so much else is changing around him, that at least that can stay the same.

He won’t be the first or even the last to admit it but he likes living with Archie, as many faults as Archie has as a roommate – the messiness, the crooning into the early morning hours about his undying, never ending love for Veronica, his inability to keep a shirt on for more than the length of a movie. Jughead doesn’t make friends easily, and the thought of sharing his personal, private space with a stranger, with someone other than his best friend who he’d more or less moved in with three separate occasions in high school is slightly terrifying. Archie has his quirks, some of them very big quirks, but the guy is also for all intents and purposes his brother, and that means Archie gets him – he knows when to back off and give him space, most of the time, and he knows how to be there for him in a way that only years of playground defense and teenage angst could afford.

“This is so exciting,” Veronica sing-songs, because really, it’s never not all about her - “My friends taking over the New York literary world – connections at the Empire, connections at the Post.”

“Hold up – who do you know at the Post?”

Veronica’s eyes start to bug out, and he’s surprised that this particular moment is one of the once-in-a-blue-moon times he’s caught Veronica out on something. She’s careful to a fault with her words, and he’d thought he’d asked a perfectly reasonable question.

“Oh,” she says, waving her hand in dismissal. “Just some of Daddy’s friends, no one you know.”
But Archie’s looking at Veronica like she’s revealed his most treasured, time honored, and well-kept secret, and because it doesn’t take a genius to read between those lines, especially since Archie’s easier to read than an open book, he clues right in.

So she had applied after all.

“Tell her congratulations for me,” he says simply.

“Sorry,” Veronica says softly, and to her credit, she does look genuinely sorry.

“Why? I’m happy for her.” His words come out emphatically to the point of affected, but he really is happy for her; he’s never not wanted her to succeed in life, he’s never not wanted her to have exactly everything she’s ever wanted, and if this is what she wants then he’s happy for her. No questions asked.

“You could be a little more helpful about all of this,” she’d said, staring down daggers at him from his desk.

He’d sighed and closed his computer with slow deliberation. “How am I not being helpful?” he’d asked with slow deliberation.

“I don’t know, Jughead,” she’d said, frustrated hands coming down hard on the tabletop. “Have more of an opinion than ‘whatever you think is best, Betts?’”

She’d used ‘Jughead,’ she was angry.

“What do you want me to say? If you want to work for the Post, then apply for the job at the Post. Done. Simple. If you want that job in LA, then apply for that. How is that not helpful?”

“What about you?” she’d asked, jumping out of the chair so fast that it’d visibly rattled the lamp on the nightstand when it’d crashed into it.

“What about me?” He’d risen off his bed, too, in a vain attempt to gain some ground or level footing with her in a conversation quickly spiraling out of control.

“How do I factor you into all of this?”

“You don’t,” he’d said simply.

She’d looked like he’d just slapped her across the face.

“Hey, Betty, come on,” he’d backtracked as she’d started wildly grabbing at her things – her computer, her scarf, her pink earmuffs that he’d found strangely sexy on her. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“After all this time, Jug,” she’d said, poking a finger hard into his chest. “Why are we back here again? After all this time, how could you expect me to walk away from this – from you?

“That’s not what I said!” he’d bit back, running a frustrated hand through his hair. “Don’t twist my words – you know that’s not what I meant.”

“Then tell me what you meant! Because from where I’m standing, it sounds like you couldn’t give more of a damn if I wake up and decide I want to wander the four corners of the Earth tomorrow.”

“If that’s what will make you happy, then do it. I don’t want to stop you.”
“Do you even know what you’re saying?” she’d asked, hands falling in defeat to her sides. “If I packed up and left tomorrow would you care? At all? Don’t I mean more than that to you?”

“Don’t make this about how much I care. Don’t make this about love, Betty. You know how much I do, and this isn’t about that.”

But she’d stared him down with a quivering lip and a trembling chin, signs that told him that in that moment, no – she had no idea just how much she meant to him, no idea the kind of destruction she’d wreck on him if she did pick up and leave, vanishing without a trace.

“I’m sorry,” he’d sighed, closing the space between them and flattening her palm against his heart; she was there, always, and she had to know that. “I’m sorry. I just meant that I want you to do whatever you think is right for you without the burden of worrying and wondering about me hanging over your head. I don’t want to be the reason you miss out on any opportunity you want – you’re too good for that, and I couldn’t live with myself if you missed out on anything great because of me. That’s all I meant, Betty.” He’d sighed straight into her hair, hoping she’d understand. That he only wanted the absolute best for her, that he’d only wanted her to have everything and more life could give her. “That’s all I meant.”

“How isn’t this about love, Jug?” The fight had fallen away from her voice, then. “If I end up moving to LA, or San Francisco, or Anchorage, wouldn’t I still be walking away from you?”

“You’re looking at jobs in Alaska?” he’d said, trying to lighten the mood. He hated being the one to cement that downtrodden look in her eyes.

“Be serious.”

“We’d figure it out,” he’d said quietly, stepping closer to her. “Maybe I’ll move to Anchorage and finally buy that parka. Or we’ll do the long-distance thing for a while,” he’d said.

Even the thought had near killed him – her anywhere else but right there in his room, right there in his arms.

“And then what?”

“Do we have to know now?”

“Don’t we?”

It’d been a horrible feeling, the beginning in a long line of stomach churning, headache inducing horrible feelings – how she already felt a million miles away right standing right there front of him, forehead pressed against his.

“I just know I want to be with you, Betty,” he’d whispered. “We’ve made it this far – we’ll figure out the rest. We always have.”

She’d breathed in once, twice, and then slowly slipped her hand out from under his. “I believe you,” she’d said.

He knew she didn’t.

“You’re still going?” he’d asked as she’d adjusted the straps of her tote on her shoulder, wincing at the weight.

“Yeah, early class tomorrow.”
She hadn’t been lying – on Tuesdays and Thursdays she had Advance Comparative Lit at nine a.m., but she had absolutely no qualms about staying the night before their fight, or any other night, either.

“Stay,” he’d pleaded, because it’d worked once before, because just like back then, it’d meant so much more than just a simple word. “Don’t go, not like this – just... just stay.”

She’d brushed her lips over his, her soft exhale on him a blanket of misspoken and misunderstood words, of a world left unsaid and undecided, uncertain.

“I can’t.”

He thinks that if he’d known back then that night had been the first chapter in the beginning of the end, he would’ve fought harder for her to stay instead of giving her the space he’d thought she’d needed. He would’ve done more to convince her that he didn’t mean that he’d wanted her to run off into the world without him, that he’d only wanted her to be whatever version of herself she’d wanted to be, without him bringing her down in any way because there was – is – so much for her to be.

But he also thinks that the whole one door closes and another one opens school of thought is applicable here. Maybe if they hadn’t had that fight as often as they did, maybe if he hadn’t pushed her away in the name of doing what he thought was best for her, she wouldn’t now be ‘Betty Cooper, Staff Writer’ at the New York Post.

It has to be true, he thinks, because there just has to be some silver lining to come out of all those fights, all the wasted energy, all the pain.

“So,” Archie says, brushing off a drop of condensation his hand dripped on Veronica’s cape with wide, worried eyes. Jughead sends back the slightest of nods – you’re good, she didn’t notice he tries to say. “I guess that settles it.”

“Settles what?”

“Us. All of us,” Archie says like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “We’re all going to be here in New York after graduation.”

Jughead nods slowly. So they are. In some bizarre twist of fate, fate being the more romantically inclined term for ‘college admissions officers,’ the four of them had all landed here once; it really shouldn’t surprise him that they’d all find some way, by hell or high water, to pull it off again.

He doesn’t know what to call fate this time, though, other than by its real name.

“To the New Riverdale,” Veronica announces, lifting her half-empty glass in expectation of their two beer bottles.

He repeats her words back to her, and as the glass of their three drinks tip and clink together, he thinks then that his betrayal is truly complete. They may have switched out milkshakes for beer and wine, but it’d always been four of them tucked away in a booth at Pop’s, skin eerily painted red by the neon lights, their drinks, their own selves coming together to form a perfect square, the four corners of their universe – the Old Riverdale.

He remembers once how she’d called Archie, called Veronica, called him the very heart and souls of Riverdale.

She’d been wrong, he knows now, because he can so acutely and so violently feel the absence of
her next to him, hear the loss of her laugh and the soft swing of her voice.

There is no Riverdale, old or new, without her.

She’d been the soul all along.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from "Missing You by John Waite – oldie but so good."
Tonight, we are young.

There isn’t an inch of her body that isn’t covered in sweat. It’s making her cranky and agitated, and while she feels a bit like a child for squirming in her seat and blowing up puffs of air to try to cool her forehead, she just can’t help it because it is so damn hot.

“This can’t be school sanctioned,” Veronica whispers to her, fanning herself with a purple program. “We’re seriously all going to die of heatstroke from sitting out here in the middle of a baseball field and baking like this.”

“Well, at least they aren’t calling up every single person that’s graduating,” Betty whispers back. That had been Columbia’s policy, and every single moment of it spent in her own personal sauna of a baby blue robe and a mortarboard under the midday sun had been just awful.

“Don’t even remind me.”

Betty looks around into the stands at the proud families jostling one another politely with faux smiles and gritted teeth to ‘just move over an inch so I can get a photo of my daughter, see, she’s right there.’ Graduation, she’d realized quickly at her own ceremony, wasn’t really for the graduates so much as it was for the parents, the photo ops, and their bragging rights.

She doesn’t even know why she’s here. She certainly doesn’t want to be.

She’s also thinking that wearing white was a huge mistake because she’s ten sweat soaked minutes away from becoming a huge fashion faux pas in a see-through dress around everyone and their grandmothers – their literal grandmothers. And she’s pretty sure that no one’s grandmother wants to take note of the fact that she chose to forgo wearing a bra today because she doesn’t really have one that goes with her dress.

What a mistake.

“Oh, good, Archie’s wearing the tie I bought him,” Veronica says, eyes hidden behind a pair of binoculars. She follows the line of Veronica’s gaze, but even under the black mortarboard, Archie’s flaming hair sticks out like the eye sore its always been. He’s probably napping, she thinks, taking note of the Wayfarers perched on his nose because that’s what she wants to be doing right now. She’s had enough of uplifting speeches from her own ceremony earlier in the week, and they’re all starting to sound the same.

So much for academic integrity and the plague that is plagiarism.

She looks at her best friend sitting out in the mass of purple robes on the field, admittedly looking very bored, and she’s suddenly very glad that she’s here in her sweat-soaked glory. This is Archie, her Archie, her best friend since she was four years old. This is the same Archie that had trouble reading in second grade, the one that she thought she could never not be in the same class as, never mind the same grade, the one that she had tutored every day and had been so happy for when he’d finally been able to read Superfudge all the way through without any of her help and gentle
encouragement.

And now he’s here in front of her - tassel on head, diploma soon to be in hand - graduating from college in the same year as her, and she’s so proud of him. She’s so glad that she’s seeing this moment with her very own eyes.

“He looks great, V,” Betty says, giving Veronica a sticky nudge. “It’s a great tie.”

It’s also a two-hundred-dollar tie, but that’s neither here nor there.

“Jughead looks nice, too,” Veronica says carefully, handing over the binoculars. Betty doesn’t take them.

“Does he? I hadn’t noticed.”

She’s lying – she’d noticed him the minute he’d walked out onto the field wearing his only tie with a slightly lopsided knot and the same sunglasses as Archie, most likely a coordinated affair to sleep through the whole thing.

Betty is also pretty sure Veronica knows full well she’s lying because while flipping through the program in a poorly veiled attempt to look for Archie’s name, Veronica had caught her nose-deep in the last-name-J section and knowingly tapped a perfectly manicured finger on Jughead’s name smack-dab in the middle of the page.

Which she had missed because she had been looking for Jughead Jones, and not Forsythe Pendleton Jones III.

She’d stared at the unfamiliar name and the words that came below it - major in Creative Writing, minor in English, Honors – words that she always knew would be printed there, exactly like that, but words that she had been so proud to see regardless.

Betty makes a show of tracking a bird flying across the stadium and lets her gaze fall back on Jughead. She knows his tells – head tipped back, legs stretched out in front of him, arms crossed – he’d rather be anywhere but here. But graduation looks good on him, she thinks – he looks smart and a little like the pompous ass she knows he can be, and just like that, she’s sweating even more than she was before.

Betty bails right after the ceremony ends and after cold shower, she spends the better part of the day lying flat on the couch, blasting the air conditioner on high. She’s normally conservative about that kind of thing because she’d gotten the shock of her life the day she’d received her very first electric bill and realized that three hundred dollars was what it cost to keep the apartment at a breezy sixty-five degrees. But today, she just doesn’t feel like using her dinky box fan, which, as much as she tries to convince herself is basically the same as the air conditioner, really isn’t.

She’s about seven episodes and two commercial breaks deep into a Law and Order marathon when Veronica interrupts her otherwise peaceful, solitary afternoon of lying in the cold and doing nothing at all, slightly wobbly on her heels and very pink in the cheeks. ‘Come to the graduation party,’ Veronica tries to convince her. Archie is so excited about it and he’d asked Veronica no less than twelve times at his graduation lunch to please ask if Veronica could do her very best to just try to get Betty out to have one night of fun because they did it, the four of them all graduated, and
Betty deserves to celebrate that with her friends, too.

But she throws every excuse in the book at Veronica – she’s not feeling well, she’s incredibly tired, it’ll be awkward – and eventually, Veronica stops trying and Betty goes back to *Law and Order* when Veronica and her crop top leave for the night.

After her take-out arrives, she turns off her phone for good measure.

It’s better this way, she thinks. This is the mature thing to do because even though Archie is right – she *does* deserve to celebrate with her friends – she also doesn’t think that celebrating with her ex-boyfriend is right, or even necessary, either. Because at the end of the day, this is their day – Archie and Jughead’s – not hers, and she should respect that by not showing up and having all sorts of drama revolve around her.

It’s definitely right, she concludes as she raids the freezer for the good ice cream, trying her best to ignore the fact that she’s been watching TV for long enough that even the daytime crime-marathon has come to an end.

She’s halfway through what had been a brand-new pint of Chubby Hubby when the rap on her door comes, and it startles her so much that she drops her loaded spoon right on her chest.

“Betty. It’s me.”

She freezes at the sound of Archie’s voice, and for a fleeting moment she thinks about running to her room, bolting the door, and pretending that she’s not home, or at the very least, that she’s sick or sleeping or in some other state of indisposed. She has absolutely no idea what he’s doing here and why he’s not downtown, well on his way to blacking out with his shirt tied around his head. She’s not sure that she wants to know.

“I can hear the movie, Betty.”

With a sigh and with more effort than she really wants to own up to, she pushes herself off the couch and fluffs out the indented grooves her curled up self has left there, glaring evidence of her day of hedonism. *PMS*, she grasps wildly as she pulls the door open with her most winning smile plastered across her face. She can use *PMS* as an excuse if he asks.

“What’s up, Arch?”

Archie looks her up and down, his frown etching in hard on his face – he’s thoroughly unimpressed with her. “Seriously?”

“What?” she asks innocently because if she pretends that she has no idea what he’s talking about then maybe he’ll drop the subject.

Admittedly, she’s looked better - pajama shorts, her hair thrown up in a messy top knot, and a large ice cream stain on her right boob isn’t a look that’s about to turn heads, and especially not Archie’s head if he’s so much as peeked at the midriff-bearing top Veronica breezed out the door in. In another life, she thinks she might’ve been embarrassed to let Archie see her like this, but then again, he’s also seen her throw up after one too many Lemon Drops and sleep it off on the tub while his best friend sat up all night making sure she stayed flat on her side lest she choke on her
“Give me the ice cream and get dressed,” Archie says, inviting himself into the apartment and shaking his head at her take-out spread enough to feed at least three on the coffee table. “You’re not spending my graduation night watching *Pretty Woman* alone.”

“Arch, come on,” she pushes back. “I’m tired. And I just started the movie.”

“You’ve seen this movie a hundred times!” he says, flinging his arm out, dangerously close to knocking the TV off its stand.

“Not a hundred,” she says quietly.

Archie crosses his arms and his face starts to turn pink, then red. *Angry Archie*, she used to call him when they were kids, a name that she knew would only serve to make him angrier.

“Why won’t you come to the party? And if you say Jughead, I swear I’m—” Archie’s voice is firm but Betty can tell he’s frustrated and above all, deeply disappointed in her.

She hates that. She hates disappointing anyone, but especially Archie who’s so rarely let her down, Archie, who’s always been there for her no matter what. She hates that up until he said it, her answer had actually been ‘*Jughead*’ and that flaking on the party, sitting at home, and wallowing by herself is just so much easier than the alternative.

“We didn’t even get a picture together at graduation,” Archie says quietly. There’s defeat in his voice now, and that’s one more thing she hates – herself, for being the one to have put that tinge of sadness there, on his graduation night no less. “You’re my best friend, Betty. You taught me how to read, and you weren’t even there.”

“I was there,” she defends poorly. “I was *right there* with Veronica – you can ask her. I left because it was hot and I had, uh, I had a headache. But I was there.”

*But that’s not good enough*, and she knows that the moment the words have left her mouth. Archie had been there for her, his red head popping up from the crowd like a jack-in-the-box and whooping loudly, so embarrassingly loudly, when she’d crossed the stage, and he hadn’t even known that she’d been there for him, too. On his graduation day, he’d wanted his best friend there, she’d let him down, and all her rational, well thought out reasons morph instantly into pathetic excuses.

“I’m sorry, Arch,” she says, digging the palms of her hands into her eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

Archie sighs, tugs her hands from her face, and folds them around himself in a hug. She can’t remember the last time she’s actually hugged Archie and there’s an uncanny sort of unfamiliar familiarity to it all. “Betty, it’s okay,” he says. “Look, I know it’s been hard for both of you. Just – just come to the party. Tons of people are coming, Jug’s probably not going to notice that you’re there – JB’s here and you know how he gets.”

She does know – he gets protective and parent-like; he becomes completely overbearing to the point where he forgets to pay attention to anything else, maybe even to an ex-girlfriend showing up unannounced to his party.

Even so, she doesn’t want to go. She doesn’t want to leave the cold cocoon of comfort she’s created by herself and only for herself. But, she counterpoints internally, there’s not a lot that
Archie’s ever asked her to do for him besides let him copy off her Algebra homework in ninth grade, and if he wants his two best and oldest friends to make nice at his graduation party, then she’s going to smile, nurse a warm, flat beer, and endure all the behind the back whispers about how it’s just ‘so wrong’ for her to be there.

“Okay,” she says, straightening her shoulders. She can do this – it’s just a party, and she’s been to parties before. Maybe this one will be no different. “I’ll go change and we can go.”

Archie hugs her then, so genuinely that her heels lift off the ground, and she tells herself to hold on tight to that feeling of comfort for the rest of what she’s already sure is going to be a horrible night.

She’s never before been to a party where the nausea sets in before any drinking has been done, but as she climbs the steps towards the thumping music and shaking floorboards, she figures there’s a first time for everything.

“Relax,” Archie says, anticipating her worry and squeezing her shoulders. “Go find Ronnie, she’s around here somewhere. I’ll get you a drink.”

Before she can tell him very childishly to not leave her alone in this godforsaken mosh pit, he’s lost to the crowd and edging his way into the kitchen without her.

Betty scans the crowd hopelessly for Veronica; she hadn’t known Archie and Jughead had so many friends. Admittedly, it’s a small apartment and she’d felt a pointed lack of space even back when they’d do movie nights and take-out with just the four of them spread out over all the furniture, but this is on a whole other level – she can barely move now. Or breathe.

*It’s for Archie,* she repeats to herself. This is for Archie.

She’s in the middle of shrugging off her jacket in a vain attempt to cool herself off because her destiny for this day is apparently to be as unattractive as possible by sweating, when she feels a pair of sticky arms hug her from behind.

“B! You made it!”

Betty doesn’t think she’s ever been so happy to see Veronica before.

“I made it,” she says back, blowing out a labored breath and shaking out the tension in her hands.

Veronica rolls her eyes and guides them both into a corner. “Oh, don’t look like that, I haven’t seen him all night. He’s probably hiding out on the fire escape. Here,” she says, passing her lipstick-stained cup. “Drink. You’ll feel better.”

“What’s in it?”

“Vodka, tequila, rum, Midori-”

“I’ll pass,” she says quickly.

Veronica shrugs and brings the plastic cup to her lips. It’s a completely unnatural sight, Betty thinks, like a dog walking on its hind legs, or rain falling upwards back into the sky. She doesn’t think she’s ever seen Veronica with anything less than crystal and finely spun Venetian glass
touching her lips, and graduation night seems like a strange place to start the habit.

But, there’s a first time for everything, she reminds herself.

“I know this is hard, B, but it’s good that you’re here,” Veronica says, swaying gently with the beat of a song Betty has never heard before. “Archie missed you today after the ceremony.”

Betty sighs. She loves that she and Veronica can now talk about the monumental, loaded subject of ‘Archie’ without any doublespeak and underhand comments, they wouldn’t be able to live together if they couldn’t, but she absolutely doesn’t love that everyone had noticed how she’d all but run away screaming after the ceremony before she could even throw a congratulations Archie’s way.

That’d been wrong of her, she internalizes now. That’d been very, very wrong of her.

“I know,” Betty admits. “I shouldn’t have left. I should’ve –”

She hears the death of her own voice in her throat, like the sharp creak of wood screaming out from a misplaced footfall in the night; it’s sudden and it’s cutting. There’s no fanfare to it, no ceremony, no warning, nothing at all – just a group of guys she vaguely recognizes from one of Archie’s music theory classes moving away from the window, and him suddenly in her view, right there in front of her.

It’s entirely different from graduation, she realizes immediately. He’d been wearing sunglasses then. He’d been half a baseball field away, too.

But now, he’s less than half a Manhattan apartment’s length away from her, and she can read his eyes with perfect clarity, the way they crinkle at the corners when he smiles, the way they shine when he laughs – she thinks he looks happy. He’s sitting out on the fire escape, red cup dangling from his fingers, and he looks relaxed, at home, and just happy.

He’s also surrounded by no less than four girls, none of which are her, and one of which has her arm draped casually over his knee.

She’s been so stupid, she thinks, so utterly stupid, so completely childish, so wrapped up in herself and her own notions of romantic daydreams. There she’d been, locked up like a hermit in her apartment with her face buried in a tub of Ben and Jerry’s. There she’d been worried and fretting over what he’d do when he saw her, how he’d react when she showed up unannounced at his house.

And there he is looking like he more or less wouldn’t even remember her name if she’d walked right up to him became the fifth girl out on the fire escape.

Screw it.

“You know what? I do need a drink.” She watches as Veronica’s eyes track to where hers had just been, as they glaze over in understanding and sympathy, as they soften in a way that only a best friend’s could.

“Jungle juice is in the kitchen,” Veronica says.
Betty all but pushes her way to the kitchen, dips what might be a used cup directly into the punch bowl, and drinks deeply until she feels like gagging.

It’s terrible and wonderful all at once – it tastes like college, it tastes like no good, awful, very bad decisions, and it tastes like the mash-up of wayward, incoherent and completely uncontrollable thoughts rattling around her pounding head.

Ideally, she’d leave right now because she has no idea where Archie has wandered off to, and he has Veronica and the rest of the party to keep him company. The whole day has been nothing but a draining exercise in feeling completely out of place and she’s tired of the emotional whiplash; she doesn’t want to deal with it anymore.

“Hi, Betty.”

She spins on her heel at the voice addressing her – it’s not his, but she recognizes it.

“JB,” she says, wiping off a drop of her neon-colored drink from the corner of her mouth – what she must look like right now. “It’s so good to see– are you drinking?”

“Oh,” JB says through a nervous laugh. “No. This is just juice.”

“Mmm,” Betty says, cracking the smallest of smiles because JB is just an absolutely terrible liar, at least about this. “It sure smells like it.”

“Okay, it’s juice of the fermented wheat variety. Please don’t tell-”

“I won’t tell your brother,” Betty promises, because one, that would mean actually talking to ‘the brother,’ and she’s not sure she wants to open with ‘I caught your kid sister drinking,’ and two, because she doesn’t think that she needs to start that fire over a sixteen-year-old having one beer at a house party, regardless.

“Speaking of,” JB treads slowly, eyes darting down to her boots and back up again. “I’m really sorry about what happened with you and Jug. And I’m sorry if it was all his fault.”

“It wasn’t,” Betty assures quickly, and she throws in a small laugh for good measure because she doesn’t think she’s ever seen JB look more forlorn. “It really wasn’t. It just kind of... happened. It wasn’t anyone’s fault.”

JB nods slowly like she doesn’t quite believe her, but Betty can’t blame the kid. Because as tall as she’s gotten – JB’s even an inch or two taller than her, now – and as mature as the dark eyeliner and eyeshadow makes her look, JB is still just a kid; at sixteen, Betty herself had thought that the only thing powerful enough to break love was the absence, the loss of love itself.

She knows that’s not true now, but she doesn’t expect a kid to be able to understand that, either.

“Listen, JB,” Betty says quickly, in an overwhelming and sudden need to reach out to the girl who in another life might’ve been her sister. “If you ever need anything, or if you ever want someone to talk to, you can come to me. I’ll always be your friend, regardless of whatever’s going on with me and Jug. I want you to know that.”

The small smile on JB’s face only makes her feel marginally better, because at the core of it, JB is a kid who knows all about loss and broken relationships, broken homes, and Betty never wanted to be the one to add to that long list.

“He misses you,” JB says, just barely audible over the wailing synth beat pounding right into her
eardrum. “He won’t say it, but I know him. He does.”

Betty doesn’t really know what to do with that information one way or the other. From what she just saw, it definitely doesn’t seem like he misses her, or even remembers her, but she also trusts the source.

“I miss him, too,” she admits. “I-”

“Come on, JB, really? This is the one thing I asked you not to do tonight.”

It’s loud – everything around her is loud, from the steady rhythm of the music to the crash of her heartbeat thumping in her ears, but she knows his voice maybe better than she knows her own, and it comes to her like a single chord echoing in a silent room, like a song through blaring white noise.

“I’m just holding this for Betty,” JB says, voice dripping with feigned innocence.

Jughead scoffs, easily intercepting the contraband that JB tries to pass off. “Know your audience,” he says. “You think I don’t know that Betty doesn’t like beer?”

She thinks that her name in his voice is the most beautiful melody she’s ever heard.

JB’s wiry shoulders sag and she heaves out a sigh, caught and very red-handed. “That’s not beer?” she asks, peeking into Betty’s cup.

Betty shrugs in apology. She doesn’t necessarily want the kid to get toasted tonight, but the bonds of sisterhood and womanhood and all that. “It’s jungle juice,” she admits reluctantly.

“Wait, what? What is jungle juice?”

“Something to look forward to when you’re in college. When you’re a junior and legal in college,” Jughead corrects quickly, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Betty takes the moment of brother-sister back and forth to study him closely, and what she sees is shockingly heartbreaking. She’d been wrong earlier at graduation. He looks good in the way that he’ll always look good to her – his is the face that has loved and comforted her countless times, his are the eyes that have looked on her with nothing but kindness, his are the hands that have worshipped her body like she’d been made of porcelain and the finest spun silk. He’ll always look good to her.

But he looks so tired, and the dark circles that have always underlined his eyes are set in with such rigidity that she thinks they’ve now been permanently chiseled and grooved onto his face; she’d completely missed that before. He’s always been on the lanky side despite his strict burger and junk food diet, but now he’s just plain thin in a way she’s never known him to be before. He’d been smiling just now when she’d first caught a glimpse of him, and his smile has always done a magnificent job of hiding his pain because he so rarely does it – but the signs are all there and painted so plainly on him.

He’s exhausted. He’s not okay.

She fights everything within her screaming to just reach up and smudge the dark lines off his face, to close the distance and hold him until he, or she, or both of them both feel better because every part of her aches to see him like this.

But JB moves instead, laying a soft hand on Betty’s arm. “Thanks for trying, Betty,” JB says. “And thanks, you know, for what you said earlier.”
“I really meant it, JB.” Despite her better judgment, because Betty doesn’t really know how Jughead feels about his sister having a heart-to-heart with the girl who’d stomped on his heart, she throws a hug around JB and holds tight. In all likelihood, she won’t see JB again for a long while, if ever, and a hug seems like the right way to part. It’s how she wants JB to remember her.

“Good luck with everything, Betty,” JB says softly into her ear. “I think everything will be okay.”

She doesn’t have time to ask JB what she really means by that before the kid so expertly and completely like her brother disappears into the crowd.

“Stop drinking,” Jughead calls after her. “ Seriously, JB, if you go within ten feet of the keg, you can spend the rest of the night with the coats.”

Then, it’s just them standing completely alone, surrounded by strangers.

After shoving his hands deep into his pockets and several false starts from her, then him, then her again, he plunges first. “You’d think with my family’s history, she’d stay far away from alcohol, but no. She’s been sneaking drinks all night.”

Betty shrugs, unsure of what else to do with her body, afraid of moving any more than she can carefully control. “Just be glad she didn’t get into the jungle juice. It’s pretty lethal.”

“Yeah, everyone has been dumping their leftover alcohol in there,” he says, hand rubbing behind his neck. She hadn’t been aware that there was such a thing as ‘leftover alcohol,’ but she supposes that getting rid of the bottom shelf liquor in one’s collection is all part and parcel of the congratulations, graduates, you’re an adult now process. “I could find you a better drink, if you want,” he offers. “I don’t know what’s really around but I’m sure there’s something that isn’t Kool Aid infused. If.”

She gives a curt shake of her head and brings the cup to her lips for emphasis. In another time she might’ve said yes, but he’s not supposed to be her white knight anymore. “This is fine,” she says, holding back a gag. “It really isn’t bad.”

It’s worse than bad.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

She feels an overwhelming urge to say something profound right now, to come to some grand realization as she stands here with him in an apartment full of people she doesn’t know, him, the person she’d once shared an intimacy like no other with. There’s so much she wants to know – if he’s okay, if he looks the way he does now because of her, and if he does, if there’s anything she can do to make it better, because she’ll do anything.

“Some party,” is what she comes up with instead, hiding her lips in her cup to mask the shakiness in her voice.

“Yeah,” he says, examining the crowd. “I can’t take credit. It was all-”

“Archie.” They speak in time and she thinks it’s funny that the once-taboo topic of Archie Andrews is now one of their only safe ones.
“Who else?”

“Congratulations, by the way,” she tries again. “For graduating. Oh, and also for having the longest ceremony known to mankind.”

A little better.

He laughs even though she hadn’t thought her lame joke had been particularly funny. “Thanks. I didn’t know you were there. I must’ve missed you after.”

“Oh,” she starts. This again. “I was sitting with Veronica but I left when it ended. I had a, uh, headache. From the heat.”

She’s never been one to be brought down by something as delicate and frou-frou as a ‘headache from the heat’ and Betty can tell by the way he tilts his head ever so slightly, by the way his eyes examine hers, that he’s doing his utmost to hide the fact he doesn’t believe her at all. The normal him, the him that she knows, would poke and prod until he unearthed the real reason under her white lie, and she wonders if he still will.

“How was yours?” he asks instead.

There’s so much she could tell him about ‘how hers was.’ She could tell him about how she’d ripped up his ticket to the ceremony the morning of, how she focused on nothing but the empty seat next to Archie throughout, the seat that Archie had used instead to hold what looked like an entire rose bush for ‘his Ronnie,’ the accompanying card’s words, not hers. She could tell him about how she’d plastered a smile on her face as she posed with her proud parents, but not quite proud enough to put away their differences and arguments even during their daughter’s graduation, and she could tell him about how she’d told Archie and Veronica to smile as she followed and clicked photo after photo of them around the campus as she held back the overwhelming desire to throw the camera on the ground and stomp on it with her heel.

She could tell him about how she convinced herself to not spend the day steeped in self-pity, because she’d done something amazing all on her own and she absolutely didn’t need any bells and whistles like flowers or a card or anyone telling her that they were proud of her for her to feel proud of her own self.

And, she could absolutely tell him about how, amidst all that pride she felt for herself and throughout all the relief that it was finally over, she’d still at the very end of the day just missed him there; she’d just missed her best friend.

“My mom went crazy collecting programs,” she settles on. “I think she grabbed about fifty of them, so I’m sure your dad and the rest of Riverdale can expect one in the mail any day now.”

Another uneasy laugh. “I’ll tell him to keep an eye out.”

When she’s unceremoniously jostled from behind, her shoulder jutting forward nearly into his arm and her neon green drink sloshing precariously in her cup, she’s suddenly very aware of how extremely exposed she is, at least in a physical sense. They’re swarmed, like ants descending on a scrap of forgotten food, they’re in the middle of a party celebrating of one the greatest milestones of life, and she’s standing here thinking instead about love.

It isn’t the right time to come to any revelations about that, she decides, or about them either. Maybe they’ll get a chance in the future, in some far-off version of someday, or maybe that time has already come and gone, but it’s definitely not right here and right now.
“I should probably go find Archie,” she says, scanning the crowd. “And, uh, your friends are probably waiting for you.”

“Oh,” Jughead says slowly, and she only realizes when he steps back from her how close he’d actually been. “Yeah, of course, go do your thing. I think Archie went on some kind of wine-run for Veronica, but he’s probably back by now.”

She’s not at all surprised – she knew Veronica wouldn’t be able to put up with the everything-on-the-bottom-shelf punch for long.

“Great,” she says for lack of anything better. “So I guess I’ll see you-”

“I can take that for you,” he interrupts, motioning to her jacket and the purse she’s wrapped up in it.

It’s an out-of-character moment for him, she thinks, in what had otherwise been a very carefully calculated conversation of bookended back and forths; she wonders what prompted his sudden outburst of chivalry.

“It’s really no big-” Betty begins, but as she looks down at her ball of crap, she admits that she doesn’t really want to spend the rest of the night carting it around. “Okay,” she relents. “Thank you.”

“I’ll stick it in my closet, on that wire drawer thing.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls you put away their jackets for.”

Her words make her own heart stop – she’d been thinking it – she actually hasn’t stopped thinking about it – but she had in no way intended to say it out loud. There’s a flicker of what she thinks is hurt that crosses his face, but it’s masked so swiftly and so expertly that she wonders if she’d just seen what she hoped to see, what she’d wanted to see.

“No,” he says, his voice firm. “Just you.”

Betty hates admitting it because she doesn’t like being wrong, but the night isn’t going as badly as she thought it would. She hasn’t raised her voice, he hasn’t raised his voice, she hasn’t broken down in tears. She hasn’t done much of anything other than catch up with the handful of Riverdale High kids that’d managed to find their way to New York, too, and drink one too many cups of the Miserable Midori Mix.

“How’re you holding up, B?” Veronica asks, legs swinging against the cabinets from her own throne on the countertop, and at her name, Archie’s head pops up from her lap.

“Bett-eee,” he greets through a drunken grin, elongating the ‘e’ syllables of her name.

“Archi-eee,” she mimics back, smile on her face.

“We didn’t shotgun a beer yet,” he says, head swinging wildly around in search of any unopened cans. “We have to! It’s graduation.”

“No, no,” she says, holding out a hand to stop him. “We did, remember?”
They didn’t, but she knows he doesn’t know that.

“We did?”

“Absolutely,” she says easily. The lies are coming too easily these days. “When I first got here. Out on the fire escape.”

She really needs to stop thinking about the fire escape.

“Oh,” Archie says, confused. “I guess we did. Jug’s out there being sad about you.”

“And that’s my cue to leave,” she says to Veronica, sparing Archie a pat on the head – he hadn’t meant anything by it and she shouldn’t hold it against him. “You’re staying here tonight?”

“Unfortunately,” Veronica sighs, gesturing with both hands to Archie face down in her lap again. “Enjoy the clean, quiet apartment for me?”

“I have the rest of my Chubby Hubby and Pretty Woman to finish,” she says by way of goodbye. “But call me if you need anything?”

She has no intention of coming back once she’s peaced the hell out, but she figures it’s the sentiment that counts.

When she pushes and shoves her way to it, his door is closed but nevertheless, she knocks for good measure – he’s still outside entertaining but she doesn’t know who else might be in there doing god knows what on the bed that had once been, unofficially, half hers.

“Hello?” Betty calls, peaking her head around.

It’s empty.

She takes a tentative step in, then another, and it’s like walking back through time right into the past. Nothing is different. She doesn’t know why anything would be, because it’s not like her room had undergone any kind of radical make over either, but it’s all exactly as she remembers it; same blue bedspread, same tilted lamp, same mess of papers strewn in organized chaos all over his desk, save for a new collection of magazines occupying dead center and stacked high.

Her curiosity wins over her reason this time, and she crosses the room in a few quick strides, the roundabout way to his closet to get her jacket. The Empire, she reads, brushing her fingers across the cover’s matte print and idly flicking through the pages. She’s heard of the magazine – small but up and coming, and incredibly selective about who and what it publishes. It’s a good aspiration for him, she thinks, and a good fit for his voice, too, if he can ever get his writing published there one day.

She slams her hand down over the magazine’s title, covering the words from her own view. She shouldn’t linger any longer, she tells herself, crossing the room quickly and throwing open his closet door. She’s already breaching the boundaries of personal space by being in here of all places - his room - and she really shouldn’t abuse that privilege any more than she already has.

Almost all of her knows that her faded denim jacket that she’d long ago raided from Polly’s closet
will be the only item of women’s clothing hidden beyond the closet door, but there’s a part of her that feels something not unlike relief when she discovers he really hadn’t been lying – her jacket is the only one on top of the wire rack, just like he’d said, neatly folded out of the rumpled ball she’d handed it to him in, too.

Betty sighs and softly bumps her head against closet’s doorframe – her comment about ‘all the other jackets’ had been snide and way below the belt, something she absolutely shouldn’t have said, not when he’d been nothing but pleasant to her.

Yet another lapse in judgment in this overall horrible day.

“Hey.”

Betty jumps at his voice – she doesn’t expect it, and it echoes loudly against the eerie quiet of his room. “Oh my god,” she rushes out, her hand cradling the thump of her heart beating in overtime. “Sorry. I didn’t hear you.”

“I saw you come in here,” he explains, slowly stepping into his room and tapping the door shut with his heel. “I just – I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

There’s such a difficulty that comes with his admittance, she can tell, and at least on her part, there’s such a biting sting, too. There’d been a time where his concern for her had been written so openly on every part of him, a time when he’d done nothing at all to hide it, and that it takes him so much effort now to get back to that same place undeniably hurts.

She can’t even blame him because it’s not like she’s made any outward indication whatsoever that she still gives one, let alone two straws about him, even if she really does give all the straws in the expressional haystack.

“I’m fine,” she assures him. “I was just getting my jacket. It’s late and I should probably head home.”

“Oh,” he responds slowly, and she thinks for a moment that her answer might’ve disappointed him. Does he want her to stay? “Yeah, I guess it is. Thanks for coming.”

It’s the right thing for him to say, and it’s perfectly polite, too, but his thanking her while she’s still standing in the middle of the room where they’d once spent nights curled up in each other’s arms feels almost dirty in a way, cheap, even.

“I didn’t know you liked the Empire so much,” she says, because a change in subject right now is so much more preferable than any internal analysis of her volatile emotions; she’ll deal with those later, at home, alone, and away from any potential scrutiny.

“I don’t,” he says, following the track of her gaze over to the stack of magazines. “I mean, I do now but I didn’t back then.” Then, almost shyly, “I got a job there so I figured I’d better learn what it’s all about.”

“You got a job there,” she repeats incredulously. “At the Empire. Jug, that’s so-”

It’s so what? Amazing? Incredible? Everything she’s ever wanted for him?

“I’m so proud of you,” she finishes simply.

And she is – from the bottom of her heart, she really is. As horrible as this whole day has been, she is nothing but proud of him. She’d been proud of him when he’d sat there looking bored at
graduation because unlike her, it’d never been a given or a guarantee that he’d one day don a cap and gown with a diploma in hand, and she’s proud of him now because she knows a little something about how hard chasing a dream can be, and yet, here he is doing it anyhow.

“Oh, look,” Veronica had said flatly and only half mockingly. “He’s here to steal you from me again.” She didn’t need to spare a glance to the bottom of the steps to know who the ‘he’ was Veronica had been referring to, because ‘he’ had been there at five-thirty on the dot after every River Vixens practice, waiting to walk her home – an unbroken pattern since senior year had started.

“I think it’s sweet,” she’d defended.

“What’s sweet?” he’d asked.

“You,” Veronica had sighed straight at him, frustrated. “Usurping my company home every chance you get.”

“Hey,” he’d said, arm falling across her shoulders. “You get to live with her next year. This is all I get.”

She’d frowned – it’d been her absolute least favorite conversation topic but also the one that everyone in the senior class just couldn’t shut up about – the unknown, uncharted, undefined next year.

“Fine,” Veronica had relented, turning back up the front steps of the building. “Call me later, B!” It’d been a request, a command, and not at all a question.

“You know, you don’t have to walk me home every day,” she’d reminded him as they’d started down the path. “Or carry my gym bag for me either.”

He’d shrugged. “I don’t mind. I know this may be shocking but I actually like walking you home.”

“And the River Vixens bag?” she’d quipped back.

“It goes with my sunny disposition.”

She’d laughed and linked her arm through his. This is what she’d miss most in a few months, she’d thought – talking to him, walking with him, being able to just hold him, feel him, and know he was really right there with her.

“Hey,” he’d said, breaking the silence first. “You know how you’re moving to New York?”

“Jug, please, I don’t want to talk about this right-”

“Just hear me out, I-”

“No,” she’d insisted, pulling her arm from his and walking ahead with her hands cupped over her ears. It’d been childish, but according to her calendar, she still had a few more months of being childish left to her name. “It’s all anyone talks about anymore, and I don’t want to talk about it now. New York is still far away, it’s ages away, and we have a lot time, and-”

“Mind if I join?”

She’d stopped in her tracks, one pom-pom decorated shoe raised halfway in the air, afraid to move, afraid to breathe. Afraid to turn back around and even look at him.
“What?” she’d asked.

He’d done a poor job of holding back his smile as he reached into his pocket and held out to her a folded piece of paper. “Mind if I join?” he’d asked again.

She hadn’t needed to open the letter to know what it’d said, to know that the single fifteen-letter word the entire senior class had been anxiously waiting for was right there, hidden beneath the folds. She knew that smile well enough to know that it’d said exactly what she’d – what they’d – been waiting for months to hear.

It’d said everything she wanted it to say, it’d said everything that she didn’t dare hope for because there’s no way life could simply be that good to both of them.

It had been early evening, there’d been a rush of cars on the street inching their way to home to the open arms of empty garages and tables set for four, but in that moment, the world could’ve watched her like a live picture show and she would’ve been okay with it.

She’d launched herself into him so hard that she’d knocked her River Vixens bag right off his shoulder, wrapped her legs tightly around him with her skirt riding up incredibly indecently on her thighs, and buried her face and subsequent squeal into his neck.

“Really?” she’d asked, her words catching on his skin.

“Really.”

“Jug,” she’d said, setting herself back on the ground. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“There’s still a bunch of financial aid stuff I need to figure out but-”

“But,” she’d finished. “Let’s not think about that right now – we’ll figure it out later.” She’d reached her hand up to his face, just needing to feel him in her hands, the him who’d break her heart every time she thought about leaving behind in a few short months. “I’m so happy for you,” she’d whispered. “I’m so proud of you.”

“We’ll be together,” he’d said, leaning into her and tipping his forehead against hers. It’d sounded like a question, like he still wasn’t sure if it was okay that her dream was his dream, too, that it was okay that they dreamed, together.

“We’ll be together,” she said back to him firmly as her arms circled him, drawing him close. Then, in whispered tones meant only for them because if the rest of the world heard, it’d surely break the illusion, the dream, the magnificent grandeur of it all – “We’re going to make it.”

“I heard about the Post, Veronica,” he says by way of explanation. “I’m really happy for you, Betty.”

“Oh!” She hadn’t known that Veronica had been out there spreading updates about her and her life, but she supposes she doesn’t mind. It’s a little insensitive of Veronica, Betty thinks; he’s so clearly moving on now, and saddling him with information about her and her life doesn’t feel fair at all. But at the end of the day, she doesn’t mind it – it’s unfair, but she doesn’t mind it. “Thanks,” she says. “You have no idea how good it felt to turn down the Register job with my parents.”

“And you’re happy?” he presses with searching eyes. “This is what you wanted, right?”

Yes, she tells herself immediately, reflexively. This is what she’d wanted.
Is this what she’d wanted?

“I’m happy.”

“Good,” he says, nodding. “That’s really good. That’s all I want, you know, for you to be happy.”

She knows, because it’s all he’s ever wanted for her and he’d always made damn sure that she knew that; it touches her so deeply and breaks her heart all at once that at the end of it all, it’s still true.

“Jug,” she murmurs, reaching to cup his face in the palm of her hand. It’s an involuntary, almost out-of-body movement, so instinctual and ingrained in her that she completely forgets she’s supposed to be unlearning the habit – the habit of the action, the habit of him.

“Just be happy, Betts,” he whispers back, brushing an errant strand of hair out of her eyes. “Just be happy, okay?”

He leans into her hand like he’s always done, closes the distance between them, and she knows then that he’s about to kiss her – or she’s about to kiss him, she can’t tell at this point and right now, she doesn’t care enough to make the distinction.

All that she knows is that she wants to kiss him. That’s what will make her happy right now.

It’s okay, she thinks. Just tonight, because even though they’ve just graduated, she’s been stuck in a continuous, near sickening round of déjà vu and clutching a red solo cup for the better part of the evening, and if there’s any night to make stupid, regrettable mistakes, it’s this one. They started college together, and maybe it’s only right that they end it together, too.

Just tonight, she tells herself again as she leans into him. He smells so good, he smells like him. Just tonight. He feels so good, too, the heat of his skin under her fingertips, the dull thrum of his pulse under her pinky finger, the weight of his arm around her waist, the press of his palm against her back, still steady as ever, still strong.

She can almost taste him, taste the lingering remnants of beer and something sweet she can’t quite place her finger on, taste the deeply rooted memories of them doing exactly this thousands of times before.

Just tonight.

Just tonight, she thinks as she lets her eyelids flutter shut, as she lets her body do the rest, moving closer to him, moving in time with him.

Just tonight, because she’s missed him so much.

Just tonight, because she knows now standing here with him that every part of her mind, body, every part of her very soul still loves him with everything in her that knows how to love.

Just to –

She jumps back, breaking out of the cradle of his arms when his doorknob crashes loudly against the wall.

“Hey, Juggie – oh shit, sorry. Sorry!”

Not tonight.
“What, Archie?” Jughead bites out, and only then does she remember to let her hand fall from his face.

“Sorry,” Archie says again, slurred, but slowly. “I didn’t mean to – sorry. It’s just that... JB’s next in line to do a keg stand and I thought that -”

Archie backs away in a flurry of ungracefulness and unfinished thoughts, his snooping gaze lingering far too long on both of them, his hands fumbling and grasping far too much as tries to pull the door close before giving up entirely.

And just like that, the distance that they’d bridged so seamlessly before like an old, ancient dance, is back and so severely present, too, a rapidly rushing river between two banks, two shores.

“I should probably see what’s going on out there;” he says, looking from the open door and back to her. He’s waiting for her move, he’s waiting for her to fold and show her hand.

But she has no winning hand, and she has no moves; all that she has are questions.

You were about to kiss me, or I was about to kiss you – does that mean anything? Do you still love me like I still love you, or did we just get caught up in the romance of the story of us?

Does this mean anything? At all? Should it?

Do you want it to?

Do I?

“Go,” she says.

Stay, she thinks.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from "We Are Young" by Fun.
June

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

I’d break the back of love for you.

It’s like this every morning now.

He’ll be midway through his cup of crappy, watered-down coffee, about a third of the way through manically spinning circles around the apartment, desperately trying to gather up the right papers he needs for the day when he simply won’t be able to take the inane, constant ringing of Archie’s alarm anymore, and he’ll have to do something about it.

Today is no different.

“Archie!” he yells, pounding his whole forearm against the closed door because anything less is simply ineffective. “Get up now!” He knocks once more for good measure before he’s all but assaulted by red hair pointing up to the sun in every direction possible and only one open, bleary eye. Jughead won’t admit it if his life depended on it, but there’s a part of him that misses Veronica’s constant, overbearing presence in the apartment if only because she’d once worn the mantle of Archie’s second, more foolproof alarm.

But it’s not an observation that he’s ever going to bring up because he doesn’t want to get involved in the ‘I can’t stay here tonight Archie, because I’m an assistant for a fashion designer now and it takes time for me to look like this’ debate, even though he doesn’t think he’s ever once seen Veronica look anything less than calculatingly put together regardless of wherever she’s spent the night.

“I’m up,” Archie mumbles, waving him off and pushing past him to the kitchen, straight to the lone mug sitting on the counter top. “Is that for me?”

Jughead sips from his own. “It’s not for me.”

He watches as Archie pulls a face and Jughead is already tired of this conversation before it’s even started. “We really should get a coffee maker or a Keu-”

“No,” Jughead dismisses firmly. “I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

Truthfully, he has no idea. He doesn’t know why he’s short circuiting on this particular issue, because at the end of the day a coffee maker is just a coffee maker. But a coffee maker where hers had once been is also just simply unacceptable to him; it feels too much like he’s replacing her, even if she’s already long gone.

“Because it’s a waste of money when we have perfectly good coffee for two dollars a can.”

He’s a terrible liar, it’s never been his strong suit.

“Jug,” Archie sighs. “What’s going on with you and Betty?”
There’s a lot he wants to say right now – that he can’t take Archie or this conversation seriously when his hair looks like the bird’s nest that it is, that if this is the thanks he’s going to get for selflessly making a second cup of coffee every morning, he’s not going to anymore, that whether anything is going on or not is really none of Archie’s business.

“Nothing,” Jughead says with a shrug that he thinks, or at the very least hopes, conveys some semblance of nonchalance. “We haven’t talked since your great idea to drag her to the graduation party from hell.”

“Are you kidding?” Archie scoffs. “That party was amazing.”

“Someone threw up on my bed.”

“Okay, but besides that part, it was amazing.”

Jughead doesn’t know which way he cuts yet one way or the other. Frankly, he’d been bored out of his mind at the party, so much so that he’d relegated himself to sitting outside and simply watching everyone else have fun around him. He’s never really known what to do with himself at events like those because he’s definitely not into getting plastered off flat, warm beer, he’s in no way a guy that busts a move on the dance floor, and having a conversation with someone while trying to shout over the music is just not his idea of a good time. But she’d also been there and he’d actually gotten the chance to see her for the first time in months, he’d gotten the chance to finally hear her voice, which had been infinitely so much more satisfying than the ghost of a version he’d carried around in his head and heart, and that in and of itself had been pretty great.

He’d also almost kissed her, or she’d almost kissed him, and he’s definitely not sure what to do with that yet.

“You should talk to her,” Archie suggests. “You guys almost kissed. And she gave you a graduation gift.”

He has no defense for the first accusation, so he goes straight for the second. “She didn’t give me a graduation gift,” he corrects. “I found it on the floor of my closet – it probably fell out of her pocket.”

“Yeah but she brought it to the party,” Archie counters, and it’s not a point completely without merit. “She obviously meant to give it to you.”

“But she didn’t. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Then,” Archie says, reaching for the pen lying out on the counter as glaring as a scarlet letter on white. “Why do you carry it around with you everywhere if it doesn’t mean anything?”

“We’re not having this conversation right now.”

Because he’s losing at it and losing fast, and none of this is his ideal way of starting a Monday morning.

“I just think it means something,” Archie forges on. “Did you read it?” he asks, turning the ballpoint pen over in his hands and bringing it closer to his face. “It definitely means something.”

Jughead sighs. Maybe he should’ve just let Archie sleep through his alarm. “Of course I read it,” he admits. It’s all he’s done is read it, over and over again while running his fingers along the inscription. Because as much as he doesn’t like playing the what does this mean and why game, it’s not like he can help it.
“To J.J., love always, B.C.,” Archie reads aloud, regardless.

“Don’t worry, those are the right initials,” Jughead says, in a vain hope that like some kind of puppy dog, Archie will be distracted by the joke and drop the subject.

No such luck.

“Jug, it says ‘always,’ like, you know, always.”

“I know what always means.”

When Archie relinquishes possession of the pen and tosses it back, Jughead releases a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. Despite years of football, which Jughead thought would eradicate the tendency, Archie is a Dropper and the pen is not something he wants dropped. “You should call her,” Archie decides for him. “Pen plus almost kiss means that you should.”

“Archie, I know it’s been a beat since we were in Algebra, but life doesn’t work that way.”

“It could.”

Jughead slings his bag over his shoulders, inhales, then exhales deeply. Of course in a purely simple world, the pen, the almost-kiss, the fact that he hadn’t felt more alive than in those few moments he’d spent talking to her again all could mean something.

But it could just as easily not. He could simply write up the pen as a moment of pure happenstance, and the almost-kiss as just a moment of alcohol-induced nostalgia.

“I’ll think about it,” he concedes, even though all he’s done since graduation night is think about it, think about her.

“Do you want me to talk to her?” Archie asks, and the underlying thread of eagerness there doesn’t escape him.

“No,” Jughead says quickly – the last thing he needs is Archie meddling in his already messy state of affairs; this is his web to untangle because he’s the one that weaved it. “No. Just – just go deal your hair before a goddamn bird flies in and makes a home there. And by the way,” he adds, because once he’s opened floodgates of sardonic humor, he just can’t help but roll hard with it. “Whose bright idea was it to play Afternoon Delight at four-twenty on your station yesterday?”

The smile on Archie’s face is one he can only describe as wicked with a dash of mischief and it’s all he needs to know. “Genius,” Jughead laughs, pulling the front door open.

“Same time tomorrow morning?” Archie calls as he’s one foot out the door.

“See you there.”

True to his word, he does think about it – he thinks about it all through Monday as his hand, clasped and closed around the pen, burn and scorch her words into his palm like a brand, and he thinks about it as he tosses and turns on Tuesday night, kicking at his new, uncomfortable bedspread that smells absolutely nothing like her, but on the upside, nothing like vomit either. On Wednesday night, when he’s sure he’s in for yet another sleepless night that has nothing to do with
Archie and the new song he can’t stop singing, he plainly decides that yes, he is going to do something about it, but just a small something. Whatever the circumstances in which it’d actually made its way to him, he’s now the proud owner of a ballpoint pen that she’d thoughtfully picked out and inscribed for him, and he can at the very least be polite and thank her for that.

Tomorrow, though, and sometime during the day when the hour isn’t so suspect, when it doesn’t look like he’s spent all night, multiple nights at that, thinking about how to say a simple thank you. Blowing out a labored breath, he sets his phone down on the pillow next to his, and reaches for the stack of submissions he’d delegated out for himself. Technically, there’s really no rush for him to get through any of the work he’s put on himself tonight, let alone the whole stack because these have no chance of even making it into the next issue, but he knows himself, he knows sleep is a far-off friend, and he may as well channel his insomnia into something productive.

He’s halfway through reading the third submission and making no headway in parsing out anything remotely profound or even creative in the very aptly titled poem ‘Ode to my Cookie Jar’ when his phone buzzes next to him.

Maybe it’s metaphorical in some way, he thinks desperately as he reaches and fumbles blindly for his phone, maybe the cookie is some symbol of capitalism eating away at the heart of society, but when he sees the five letters of her name printed starkly across his screen, all thoughts of metaphorical desserts instantly fly out of his head.

Betty.

He takes a moment before navigating to his messages to stare dumbly at his screen and to check and check again that it really is her, that he hasn’t fallen asleep and into some lucid fever dream, that his mind hasn’t started playing sadistic tricks on him, showing him only what he wants to see but what isn’t actually there.

But it really is her name there, it really is her sitting somewhere across town, probably curled up in her own bed with her hair finally down for the day wanting to talk to him.

He holds his breath as he reads.

*I need your help.*

Instantly, he’s ungracefully tumbling of bed and crashing into the nightstand, the stack of papers on his lap fluttering and fanning out across the floor as he cradles his phone between his ear and his shoulder, willing her to answer, willing the gods to let her answer.

The irony isn’t lost on him, that he’d been debating and tearing his hair out for days, weeks even, over whether he should call her or not and what he should say, and that all it took was four simple words from her for him to make up his mind in less the span of a heartbeat.

“Jug?” she questions, and even though the strain of complete and utter confusion in her voice confuses him, too, he breathes out a sigh of relief.

“Hey,” he breathes out. No screaming, no voice telling him to bring ransom money that he doesn’t have to some shipping container to the docks, no terror, no tears. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I – oh, *sh*t*, sorry,” she rushes quickly. “I’m fine. I didn’t mean that I needed your help right now.”

“Oh,” he says, collapsing back on the bed, one shoe still dangling halfway on his foot.
“Sorry. That was a poor choice of words, and... sorry.”

“It’s fine,” he says. “I just... I thought you were in trouble. Or something.”

It’s a fair assessment, he thinks, because his heart has caught in his throat countless times for this girl before; she’s been in harm’s way so many times because of him, whether she knows it or not, and it’s fair that he’d assume the worst when she asked for his help because Betty Cooper asks for help from no one, least of all, him.

“No, not in trouble, not in danger,” she confirms. “But I do need your help with something.” The breath that she draws in before answering is ferocious – it’s so deep and so loud across the line, and he knows then that whatever she’s about to ask for from him is not going to be something he’s going to be particularly pleased about.

“I’m writing an article on spec, but I think it could be big,” she says, her voice calculated but shaky. “I’ve done a lot of the research, about as much as I can, actually.”

“And,” he supplies when her voice trails off.

“Are you free on Friday night?”

“Yeah, but Betty, what-”

“Okay, good,” she says. “I’ll let you know more when I have everything figured out. I’m sorry I can’t say more right now.”

“It’s okay,” he offers, even though everything feels incredibly far from okay.

“Oh,” she cuts in suddenly. “And bring the jacket if you can.”

The phone clicks dead, but he knows exactly which jacket she means.

She tells him where to meet her a few hours before he’s supposed to and reminds him again to wear the jacket, but minutes before he’s meant to leave with it on and walk out into the night with the brand on his back he’s long since shed, he still can’t make up his mind one way or the other.

He doesn’t think she’d ask him to wear it if it wasn’t important, he reasons, reaching out and feeling the familiar, soft leather between his fingers. But she also knows the grizzly, complicated history behind it, too, and that she’s actually asking him to put it back on when she knows what taking it off meant to him is deeply unsettling.

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“Jug, you have to be descriptive when you label the boxes,” she’d chastised gently, vigorously scrubbing out the apparently insufficient label off the cardboard as she sat cross-legged on the trailer floor.

“How is ‘clothes’ not descriptive?”

“It is, but you have to be more descriptive. What types of clothes are they? Pants? Shirts? Jackets?”

“Betty, how many clothes do you think I have?” he’d countered. “They’re literally all in that one
She’d twisted her lip as she tapped her Sharpie against the edge of the box in thought. “I guess so,” she’d relented, holding out her hand for him to help pull her to her feet. “Is that everything?”

He’d looked around the trailer, at small stack of boxes holding every worldly possession he owned, at the places marked with emptiness where his things had once been. “I think so. It’s not like there was a lot to begin with.”

“Well, wait a minute,” she’d said, brushing past him to the closet with now only his father’s clothes hanging there. “What about this?”

He’d stiffened at the sight of the jacket she’d unearthed from between his father’s flannels; he’d hid it in there in hopes of avoiding this exact conversation with her, but he hadn’t been surprised that she’d found it. He’d seen the meticulous way she’d packed up her own room, the way she’d neatly folded each pastel cardigan before placing it in suitcases organized by a system he didn’t understand at all – she’d been nothing but not completely thorough, and he’d expected nothing less when she’d offered to help him pack his things.

“I’m not taking that,” he’d said simply.

“Why not?”

“I don’t need it in New York,” he’d tried to sidestep. “It’s not like the Serpents are coming with me.”

“Yeah, but-”

“Betty, it’s not who I am anymore, he’d said, trying to pry the jacket she held onto firmly from her hands. “It’s not who I want to be. Going to NYU, moving to a new city, it’s a chance for me, for us to leave this all behind, all the crap that Riverdale put us through. Don’t you want that?”

“I do,” she’d said quietly. “But I don’t want you to forget who you were, either, or where you came from. For better or worse, Jug, the Serpents were a huge part of your life here, and they had a big part in shaping who you are. The man that I love,” she’d reminded him, with a comforting hand on his cheek.

He’d sighed, but through the smallest of smiles because any reassurance of the way she loved him never not had him grinning, whatever the situation, whatever the circumstance. “I’ve done so much I’m not proud of,” he’d admitted.

“And yet, here you are, with the world in front of you, still,” she’d argued. “Jug, of course this is your decision. But at the end of the day, it’s just a jacket. It didn’t define you then, and it doesn’t define you now. It’s a part of you, but it doesn’t define you. Who you want to be and who you’re going to be is still entirely up to you.”

He’d searched her eyes then for some hint of untruth or pity, anything indicating she didn’t believe her own words, but the only thing he’d been able to find was confidence – confidence in him, confidence in them.

“Okay,” he’d said, letting the jacket fall from her hands into his and tossing it on top of the lone box of clothes. “It comes, too.”

He lets the jacket’s sleeve fall from his hand and pushes his closet door shut with force. No, he thinks, shrugging on a flannel shirt instead. She had given him the wear it but ‘only if you can’ out,
and he’s going to cash in on that – it may be dramatic, but he thinks she understands better than anyone the gravity of what she’s asking him to do, and he thinks that she’ll understand when he tells her, no, he can’t wear it tonight, or really, ever again.

Not even for her.

She tells him to meet her at a street corner in Hudson Yards, and when he gets there, he doesn’t realize it’s her at first because her back is turned to him, and there’s nothing about her to recognize. There’s a black leather jacket draped on her shoulders, new, he can tell from the way that it still catches the moonlight and shines in a way that his doesn’t anymore and black boots on her feet instead of pretty ballet flats with bows and scalloped trimmed edges.

“Betty?” he questions, and when she turns to face him, he feels his frown set in deeply across his face – she looks like she’s dressed for Halloween or a costume party. Dark eyeshadow, deep blood-red lipstick, tousled, messy hair – none of it looks like her. “What’s going on?”

“Hey,” she says, bottom lip tucked between her teeth. “Thanks for coming.”

“You didn’t really leave me with much of a choice.”

He doesn’t intend for the hard edge in his voice to actually manifest towards her, but it’s there regardless. It’s unsettling seeing her like this, seeing her blend in so seamlessly with the night around them with only the street lamps mutely highlighting the parts of her he knows so well, seeing her so far removed from the memories of her he holds on to so tightly in his mind’s eye.

“You don’t have to stay,” she tells him, and he swears that there’s even something in her voice that sounds different. “I could use your help because you know more about this than I do, but I know I’m asking a lot of you. If you don’t want to do this, I get it. No hard feelings or anything.”

“It’s the ‘this’ I’m interested in learning more about first,” he presses.

Her words when they come tumble quickly from her mouth, mincing closely together, and he leans into her, just slightly, in a vain attempt to hear her better. “Okay, so this piece I’m working on is purely on spec and it’s the first one my editor’s letting me take a real crack at. It’s a little different, but I think it could be good.” She takes a breath then, one that shakes her entire body, one that gears her up for the revelation he’s not ready to hear, the revelation he doesn’t think he’ll ever be ready to hear from her. “I’ve been going to bars with seedy reputations, you know, looking for the human-interest story behind it – why they’re popular, what’s their mission, who goes there, that kind of thing. I want to turn it into a feature, eventually, the stories behind the bad reputations.”

He doesn’t really know what he expected of her or of this night, but it absolutely hadn’t been that. ‘It’s a little different,’ she’d said, and he thinks that might be the understatement of the year. The name ‘Betty Cooper’ so closely alongside the words ‘seedy bars’ is surely something from a parallel or alternate universe, he thinks, one where Veronica doesn’t wear pearls, where Archie doesn’t play the guitar, one where they’re not standing here having this conversation, and instead, they're having the one he actually wants to have with her.

“Oh, okay,” he responds, unsure of what else he really can say. “And you need me because?”

“Well,” she says slowly, treading through the waters carefully. “This one is apparently known as a
biker bar.”

It’s as stinging as a slap to his face, her words and their implication.

A biker bar.

She called him, not because she was in any way interested in talking about them, but because ‘this one’ is known as a biker bar.

Meaning that she still thinks that this is his world. This is still who he is to her; when she thinks of gangs and unsavory, rough-around-the-edges characters, when she thinks of sticky floors coated with grime, of darkness and grunge, she thinks of him – he’s her first call. He’s her go-to guy – it’s not Archie and his muscle and brawn, and it’s definitely not Veronica. It’s him.

He hadn’t known she still thought of him like that. He doesn’t think of himself like that anymore, and they’ve always been on the same page about so much – he’d just assumed that this was one of the things they’d seen eye-to-eye on, too.

But, he concedes, she is right – he does know all this better than her. And what he knows, what he’s always known even right now standing in front of this twilight zone version of her, is that there’s so much danger in his world that she could fall prey and victim to. There’s still so much that he wants to protect her and keep her safe from regardless of whatever label they’re currently slapping on the amorphous, undefined mess of him and her – so, if she needs his help, she’s going to get it.

“I’m guessing that you’re going to do this whether I’m in or not?” he asks, just in case there’s a shadow of a possibility that she doesn’t really want to do this, and that he can change her mind.

“Yes,” she says simply, resolutely.

“Then lead the way.”

They walk in silence, but his thoughts are loud, they’re as loud as they were the day he sat across from her on the couch and failed to say all the things he wishes now he had the courage to say. He doesn’t want to fall victim to that cycle again. Right now, even as he steps in time with her boot-clad feet, he still wants to thank her for the pen that she didn’t really give to him, and he wants to ask her if she felt it too, if, like him, she’d felt that rush of untamed energy, of uncontrollable desire when they’d almost kissed.

He wants to ask her if it’d meant anything to her, and if maybe she’d like it to mean something because at least for him, his longing and desire for are still there, his love is for her is still there, and maybe that’s enough for them to start building some kind of foundation for them to try again, or at least to think about trying again.

He wants to ask her what she’s thinking about right now, here while walking in silence next to him; he wants to know if she’s thinking about him the way he’s thinking about her.

But there’s nothing in her look of pure focus on the dark, dimly-lit road ahead of her, nothing in her eyes fixed on anywhere but him that makes him want to drum up the courage and ask her the questions he’s having a hard time coming to terms with himself.

This is not the right time, he decides. He knows how she gets when there’s an important assignment or mission on her agenda, she’s so single-minded about it and dismissive of everything else, and if he’s going to broach the behemoth subject of them with her, he wants to do it when she doesn’t have bikers and bars and leather jackets on the forefront of her mind.
He doesn’t know when the right time will spring into existence, and maybe he’s been deluding himself into thinking there ever will be a right time with her again, but what he does know is that it’s definitely not now.

He keeps his mouth shut and lets her lead the way.

At the bar, there are parts of it feel familiar – the girl at his side, the heavy, metallic stench of spilled beer sticky under his shoes. It’s an almost sickening kind of familiarity, one that he doesn’t want or care to remember at all, but it’s there, activated with such clarity as she leads them further and further into the neon-lit bar – each scent, each murky lit visual hitting him like a gust of wind directly in the face.

But, there’s more that’s completely unfamiliar, and all of it has to do with her. The way she navigates and weaves through the crowds like she’s found a home, the way she breezes up to the bar, carving out a space for herself in between men almost twice her height, the way she throws back a tequila shot, then a second without so much as flinching, licking salt off the back of her hand and tipping back her whole head in an elaborate show for an audience that isn’t him.

But, he reminds himself, he’s just here to observe and lend a helping hand if she so beckons, even though in his opinion, she looks like she’s handling herself just fine.

He wonders if this is what it felt like for her, the first, the second, the hundredth time he’d shrugged on the jacket and left her to pick up the pieces of the past self he had shed and left behind; he wonders if it had felt this disconcerting and dizzying for her as he twisted and turned into a shadow of his former self, as he’d allowed himself to be consumed into something dark and dangerous that she could do nothing about.

If this how she felt, then it’s yet another thing he has to be sorry for, because this strange amalgam of sheer helplessness, of almost impotence, is a horrible feeling; it’s one that he wishes he could take back if he’d ever caused her to suffer through. Even so, it’s still taking every ounce of will power he has in him to not tell her simply ‘enough,’ pry the shot glass from her hand, and march her right back out the door. He wants so much to hold her by the shoulders, squarely facing him and tell clearly that her that this isn’t her – none of this is her. But he doesn’t have that right to tell her who she is or how to live her life – he never has – and she’s stood by him once before as he danced with darkness.

He should do the same.

So he orders a beer he has no intention of drinking and lets her take the lead.

Which she does, with her chest and a couple of folded dollar bills stuffed into the tip jar.

“What kind of crowd do you usually get in here?” she calls across the bar, her arms creating a deep and pronounced valley between her breasts, one that he’s sure that he and every other man, and possibly woman, will absolutely not fail to notice.

He does his best to avert his gaze and look away, but she definitely catches the eye of a bartender who hadn’t even been serving them.

He turns his back against the bar and leans against it, listening but not looking, partly because he’s
not interested in watching her use her wiles, and partly because he knows that any hovering that can be misconstrued as boyfriend-like behavior won’t curry her any favor with the bartender or anyone else.

“Bikers, mostly,” the bartender says, and he’s surprised by how high pitched his voice is for someone with a beard in desperate need of a trim and a cutoff jean vest. “Mostly heading out west. Don’t really see anyone like you around here much, you’re too pretty for this crowd.”

_Jesus._ What a line.

“What do they do here?”

“You a cop or something?”

She laughs airily and flips her hair so widely that it ends up smacking him in the face. “Do I look like a cop?”

_No_, he thinks. _But you don’t look like you belong here, either, as much as you think you do._

Him, on the other hand; well, according to her, he still belongs right here in the thick of it.

“Your boyfriend here a cop?”

“Oh he’s-”

“Not her boyfriend,” he interrupts flatly, turning just enough so that his voice carries.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a flicker of hurt cross hers, which surprises him because he’d been positive that she’d been about to say the same thing. But her affront and surprise stays only for a moment, and it’s replaced with something that looks a lot like challenge as she slides onto the ripped, worn barstool.

“No,” she confirms, and when she speaks, she’s looking right at him. “No, he’s not.”

He’s on his fifth or sixth beer, he’s lost count, and he hates this night.

He hates the feeling of being drunk because it reminds him of his father and of how easily he could slip into the annals of his sad family history as just another cautionary tale. He hates this bar because it’s so loud and everything – the neon lights, the pounding heavy metal because god forbid bikers branch out and listen to anything else – is giving him a headache of unrivaled proportions.

He thinks he kind of hates _her_ right now, and he absolutely hates that he feels that way. He’s never hated her, he’s never come close to it – not even after she told him that she, in a parade of sad, kissed his best friend but ‘_it meant nothing, Jug, I swear,’_ not after she’d told him, ‘_sorry, I’m done with you, but best of luck with the rest of your life, hope it works out._’ He’s never wanted to hate her and he never has, but she’s doing a damn good job of getting him there.

Now, she’s at the pool table, leaning against her cue in a way that fully accentuates her assets, and by assets, he means ass. Like her exposed cleavage at the bar, it’s not going unnoticed; he just hopes she’s getting some good quotes or whatever information she’s looking for out of all this.
He’s relegated himself to wall-flowering, to keeping a watchful eye but otherwise staying out of it. He has no idea what in the world or universe possessed her to string him along for this nightmarish roller coaster ride, and he’s toyed with the idea that she’s doing this as some kind of payback. Maybe she’s pissed at him about the break-up or the almost-kiss even though he’d thought both had been mutual, maybe she’s trying to show him what he’s missing.

He watches as she lines up her cue, and in another life and another time, he might’ve sidled up next to her and adjusted her hands and hips, maybe stolen a kiss while he was at it, because she’s doing it completely wrong.

But he thinks she clues in pretty quickly when she sends the ball flying straight off the table when her arm shoots forward.

“She can’t shoot for shit.”

“Nope,” he agrees.

“She your girl?”

He’s never understood the deep-seated rules of possession that underlie biker and gang laws, but he knows that they’re sacred and that they’re respected. If he says yes right now, he’s almost sure that the throng of leather and frayed-denim clad men will fall away from her side like Moses parting the Red Sea, because that’s simply the law. It’s how it works.

But if he says no, they’ll encroach like ants on a piece of dropped food, squabbling and posturing, beating their chests, possibly literally, in some insane show in the name of masculinity.

He takes a swig of his beer before answering, even though he knows he really should just put the bottle down and leave it be. “No,” he says, because it isn’t his place to make this choice for her. “Not my girl.”

“You’re looking at her like you want her to be.”

Oh hell no. If he doesn’t wax poetic with Archie about his goddamn feelings, he’s sure as hell not going to do it with this – this character he doesn’t know from Adam.

“Listen, man,” he says, holding both his hands up. “She does what she wants. It doesn’t matter to me.”

He hears the lie in his own voice, and if he’d said it to anyone who knows him even a fraction better, it’d be grounds to call him out on because it does matter to him, she still matters to him as much as he tries to convince the world that she doesn’t.

“Hey, me and my boys were just wondering.”

“And now you know.” Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knows that he shouldn’t really be talking this flippantly to a man easily more than twice his body weight, but taking out his frustration on someone also just feels so damn good right now.

He needs to leave, he thinks, he needs to leave before he falls too far back down the rabbit hole he’d spent so much time and effort clawing his way out of. He needs to leave before he does something that exposes him for who he really is, before he says something that he regrets.

But when he brings his gaze back to where she’d just been, she’s gone.
As he pushes his way through the crowds overlooking the pool table, the crowds lining the bar, the crowds, the goddamn crowds, he curses the fact that it’s nearly midnight on a Friday night, in Archie’s words, *prime party time*, and that she’d picked an outfit that every other woman in the bar is wearing some variation of.

He can barely move or see through the dimmed lights, and every moment that she’s not there standing directly in front of him and practicing the most bizarre form of journalism he’s ever witnessed from her in his life has his heart beating faster and faster, to the point of deathly uncomfortable.

Where the hell is she, he thinks moving towards the stairs to the bar’s upper level in desperate hope of a better vantage point. Where would and could she have run off to?

He’s almost knocked right back down the stairs by a group of far-too eager beer enthusiasts looking for a refill, but when he makes his way to the top, he scans with narrowed eyes for a girl who looks every inch like she doesn’t belong wearing an all too shiny and new leather jacket, for the face that he knows and loves so well.

Why is it so loud?

And why is it so goddamn dark?

He presses his thumb and middle finger to his temple in a futile attempt to push away his headache. He still can’t see her, and from where he’s standing he has a pretty solid vantage point of the entire place. He forces himself to take a deep breath, then another, and to step back and think. Maybe she left without telling him, put herself in a cab and escorted herself home, or maybe she –

“Stop.”

He freezes and everything in him from his thoughts to his blood runs icily cold, so cold that he almost shivers. He freezes, but only for half of a perceptible moment, because it’s her voice, panicked and desperate, calling out for help. Sonically, it’s faint, almost a whisper brushing by his ear, and it’s coming from somewhere far from him; but he knows her voice like he knows his own, and in less than a span of a heartbeat, he’s pushing through the crowds again and so lawlessly this time because she’d said ‘stop’ and what if he doesn’t get to her in time before it’s too late, what if she’s hurt, what if she’s not okay, what if, what if.

He doesn’t know if he’s ever felt his stomach turn quite so violently before or had his heart beat as fast as this. Everything he’s ever wanted to keep her from unfolds hauntingly and mockingly in his mind, and if there’s even a hair on her head harmed, he’s failed every promise he’s ever made to himself to keep her safe.

At the very back of the bar and hidden away in a corner, there’s a flash of blonde behind a man blocking his view of her, save for a hand – a pudgy, swollen, red hand – on her shoulder, dangerously close to the column of her neck.

There’s a hand. On her.

There’s a hand on the shoulder he’d once draped his arm around as he held her close when she needed comforting, there’s a hand near the neck he’d once buried his face into, breathing her in like
oxygen as he slept. There’s a hand on the girl he couldn’t protect.

“Hey!” He moves without thought but only with pure instinct, a rush of blood to his head as he breaks the bridge of a fat, leather-clad arm on her neon-shaded skin. “Get the hell off her.”

He doesn’t recognize the timbre of his own voice – he hasn’t heard it in years; he didn’t even know himself to still be capable of it. But it’s there, unused but there, cutting through his throat like the edge of a knife, sharp and painful. He doesn’t recognize the surge of unbridled anger that courses and thrums through his every vein, all the way down to his bones, and he doesn’t recognize the mass of violence his own mind conjures up because he’s buried it all and moved on from it all so long ago.

The only thing he does recognize is the feel of her hand in his, nails pushed into his palm, and the whites of her eyes bordering green irises – she’s scared, she’s terrified.

“Hey, we were just-”

“Just what? Just what?” His forearm is digging into the man’s thick lower neck, and he’s aware, he’s so aware of just how bad an idea this is because the way he’s always survived in this world has been through his words and his wit, not force. He’s not Archie, and he’s not deluded enough to believe that he could survive one well-placed punch to the head.

“She said no,” he bites out, throwing his full weight behind his arm on the man’s chest. “She said stop. I heard it from down the goddamn stairs, so I’m assuming you did too.” His voice is not his own. His thoughts are not his own. His head is swimming. This is not him. “Did you?”

He doesn’t get the response he’s looking for because right now, silence isn’t good enough, so he tries again. “Answer. Me.”

“I heard.”

It’s the answer he’s looking for and the one he expects, but it spirals up every thread of anger and hate in him just the same. “If you so much as sniff or even breathe in her general direction again, I will kill you.”

He doesn’t mean it. It’s all talk.

It’s all talk.

“Think I’m joking? Just try me – I’ve done it before. I’ll do it again.”

He hasn’t, but he’s done a whole of a hell lot.

It takes her hand squeezing his to draw him back out of his clouded rage, and even though he has so much more to say, so much more brewing in him he wishes he could do, he steps back into the cradle of her grasping tightly onto him, and with an arm around her tensed shoulders hunched closely together, he ushers her down the stairs and out of the bar.

“Thank you, Jug.” she mumbles into his ear over the roar of the crowd.

The heaviness in the air falls away once they’re outside, but it’s only when he looks her up and
down and sees for himself that every part of her is still intact, that there are no cuts and bruises lining her unmarked skin, that the look of terror in her eyes is finally gone, that he feels like he can really breathe.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

She nods violently, her hand coming up to her shoulder to rub absentmindedly at where the unwanted one had been. “I’m fine. I thought he’d be a good source. He said he’d been to the bar a few times,” she explains softly. “It was stupid.”

It’s the last word he latches on to—*stupid*. It was stupid of her to wander off with someone she doesn’t know, to let herself get cornered in a crowded bar by someone twice both their sizes. It’s a stupid concept for an article, it’s stupid for her to willingly throw herself into danger because doesn’t she know just how much he’s done, how much he’d still give up to keep her from all of that?

This whole night has been an exercise in sheer stupidity, on her part and his, and while he’s used to making less than well thought out decisions for himself, he’s never known that to be true of her, ever.

It makes him angry then, it fills him with fury that comes on so suddenly and so acutely that, like a punch in the gut, nearly knocks the wind right out of him. This is not who she is because *Betty Cooper is never* stupid, she’s never less than completely thoughtful and rational even in the worst of situations, and she’d been anything but who he knows her to be tonight.

But, he realizes with a sinking heart and a sinking stomach, this *is* apparently who he is still, and even worse is that he had no idea up until now. He had no idea that the anger he thought he’d left behind in his past self, in his past life had really just come along with him, dormant and buried, but there. He had no idea that even though he’d done everything in him that he could to mask and shed the parts of him that were—*are*—so flawed, that the world, that the most important person in his world, still saw them there as obvious and as glaring as the serpent branded on his arm.

It was stupid of him to think that he really could leave that all behind.

Mostly, it was stupid of him to think that the pen, the almost-kiss had meant anything at all, and it was so incredibly stupid of him to come here tonight with the hope that they did.

“You’re right,” he echoes back to her, telling himself to just ignore her shocked, wide eyes. “It was stupid.”

*And so was I.*

He’s never really understood the concept of seeing red. It’s a hyperbole—as angry as he’s ever been, he’s never really seen anything akin to the blanket of blood drawn over his vision like the phrase suggests. The red he’s seeing now is spotty at best. There are pockets of it—the neon of the twenty-four-hour diner sign, the strobe light of the ambulance siren, her lips—those reds are brighter than he’s ever seen them. But the rest is just as dull, just as muted and as dark it’s always been.

Then, there’s her voice. It’s ringing and rattling around in his head, and it’s *so loud* swirling with
the anger and drunkenness he can’t control.

“Jug, would you just slow down? Jug!”

He doesn’t.

“Jughead!”

He rounds on her then, so suddenly and abruptly, that when she stops short just shy of crashing right into him, the jerk of her movement whips her hair right into his face.

“I don’t want to talk to you right now, Betty.”

But that’s not good enough for her because that isn’t what she wants - she wants to talk. Now she wants to talk. She grasps and holds firmly to the lapels of his flannel, keeping him in place and facing her.

“Jug, please,” she says. “Just talk to me. Tell me why you’re so mad.”

Oh, he can go on and on about why ‘he’s so mad.’

He hadn’t, though, wanted to get into all of this with her, and up until she’d stared blankly up at him with her wide, innocent eyes, he’d been perfectly happy with the idea of going home and sitting and stewing in his own fury by himself. But, she’s looking at him like she just has absolutely no clue as to why he, or anyone else in the world could be angry at do-no-wrong Betty Cooper, that in and of itself is so incredibly infuriating.

He’s not apologizing to her, he’s not placating her, and he’s not going to let her get away with it – not this time.

“Why would you throw me back in there, Betty?” he starts, and he already knows it’s going to be a fight for the books because the momentum he’s getting from that one simple question is an energy like no other he’s felt before. “Why would you do that?”

“What are you talking about?”

“This, Betty,” he says, throwing his hand back towards the direction of the bar. “You know how much I hate this – this tattoo, this life, this part of me. You know this is not who I am.”

But does she, he wonders, does she really?

“I know that!” she says, tugging her fisted hands firmly on his shirt. “Don’t you think that of all people I would know that?”

“This was goddamn selfish of you.”

“What?” He can’t stand her doe-eyed look right now. “What did I do that was so selfish?”

Even more, he can’t stand that she can’t see her wrongs. “You dragged me back into this,” he bites out. “You know how much I hate this and you dragged me back in anyhow. And for what? Some dumb story? A few shitty quotes?”

“I told you to go home if you didn’t want to do this! No one forced you!” She’s yelling now, and his head is pounding with new, revitalized force. “You didn’t have to do this.”

But yes, I did, he thinks, because how could I not drop everything for the girl I still love when she
dives head first into the snake pit?

“Right, because from what I saw, you were doing such a stand-up job of taking care of yourself in there,” he accuses instead.

“I already said that was stupid!” she screams back at him, frustrated hands slapping down hard at her sides. “God! What else do you want me to say?”

“It was selfish, Betty,” he repeats because he’s still not sure that she’s getting it. “You didn’t need to do this. You didn’t need to drag me back to the version of myself that I hate. You did this for you.”

“I needed to do this for work!”

“That’s my point! You needed this for your work, because you couldn’t deal with the fact that you wouldn’t get a byline. God forbid you don’t get something you want for once in your life.”

He doesn’t know if she feels it, but he sees it like the violent approach of a hurricane or a tornado intent on destroying and demolishing everything in its path – in that moment, everything within her snaps, and her face turns hard and stony cold in a way he’s never seen from her before, at least directed at him. Her body tenses and poises for a takedown, and her eyes, the eyes that have never looked at him with anything but adoration, gloss over with rage and all the fight she has in her.

“Unlike you,” she spits, stepping up to him. He’s never heard her voice like this before, dripping with so much distaste and unrestrained malice. “I go after what I want, no matter what it takes. I have things I want to do with my life; I have things I need to do, so if that means throwing you back into the lion’s den you once walked into with open arms for one night, then fine.”

And just like that, like a dropped china vase or burned pages of a book turning to ash, she’s broken them and this time, completely irrevocably and irreparably.

“Who the hell are you?” he breathes out with a shake of his head. She’s not there. His Betty Cooper isn’t there anymore.

It’s not just the get-up, it’s not just the leather and the newfound love for tequila shots – it’s her that’s all wrong. He’s only ever known the version of her that stood behind him and believed in him, that respected him, that put him before herself even when he hadn’t wanted her to, and this isn’t that version of her.

He doesn’t know who this is, but this isn’t the girl he loves. Loved. Because she’s not there anymore.

This is the fallout, he thinks, this is everything they strangely avoided months ago through half-sentences wrapped in apologies wrapped in riddles. This is everything that should’ve been said, the dirty laundry that should’ve been aired that hadn’t been. This is the fallout, and it’s so much worse than anything he’d ever imagined.

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly, and even though he thinks she looks shocked from the gravitas of her own words, like she doesn’t quite believe she’s said them, he’s not buying it. “I just thought-” Her voice trails off, and though he knows she’s looking for a way to walk her words back, he’s not sure if he wants her to.

No – he doesn’t, not like this.
“You’ve always protected me, Jug. You protected me from all of this once before and I needed that tonight,” she admits quietly. “I needed you.”

He can’t take what she’s saying at face value anymore. It’s the first time he’s ever not been able to, but every part of him screams to read between the lines, to pull away the wool that’s always been in front of his eyes when it comes to her and really see, really hear what she’s saying.

_I knew you’d come running if I asked you to, _she tells him, _you tell me to jump and all I do is ask you how high._

_I used you and I was okay with that._

“Call Archie next time.” He can barely hear his own words as he says them, the rush of blood in his head so dizzying and so painfully loud; all that he knows is that he’s speaking from the heart because there’s nothing in his head that’s working right now. “Call anyone else. Because being there for you – _protecting you_ – isn’t my job anymore.” He pauses then to make sure that she’s really listening to him, because if there’s one thing she’s going to understand out of this entire fight, it’s going to be this.

“I don’t want it to be.”

There’s shock and hurt under her painted eyelids, a wounded breath of defeat that escapes from her parted lips, her lipstick now slightly smeared across her cheek like a line of blood as his words take root in her head and her heart. Once, he thinks he might’ve taken her into his arms and gently rubbed the red off her skin, whispered to her that it was okay, that it was all okay, and taken her home to never again talk about the whole terrible night.

Now, he doesn’t want to – he doesn’t even want to look at her like this.

“Jug, please.” She extends her hand out to him, and for the first time in his life, no part of him feels like reaching back.

“Don’t, Betty,” he says, holding up his hands – he’s done. He’s so done. He’s _finally_ done. “Just don’t.”

He leaves her then, standing on the street and staring after him with wide, glossed over eyes, and he wills her to stay put or to go home, or to do whatever else she wants to do – just as long as it’s not following him.

She doesn’t.

Chapter End Notes

_Lyrics from "Post Blue" by Placebo._
She’s heard somewhere, most likely from the annals of American nostalgia that the open road does wonders for healing, so at ten at night July 3rd, she bangs on the window of the nearest Hertz and demands that they give her a car - any car - because her mother is in the hospital, maybe dying, maybe already dead.

Alice Cooper is alive, kicking, and perfectly healthy, but her dramatics and a near showing of crocodile tears gets her a simple blue Prius that reeks of pine-scented air freshener and on the road to Riverdale within fifteen minutes.

She does feel just a little bit guilty about the lie she’s told, and now she’s a little worried that something might actually happen to her mom soon, because karma. But in the interest of being spontaneous, in the interest of healing, and in the interest of knocking off another item on The List, the one that reads ‘spend more time with my family,’ she simply plugs in her phone to the aux cord, turns up the volume, and presses a little harder on the gas, relishing in the sound of the engine revving with her demands.

She hasn’t driven for a while and even though the open window pushes the rushing wind so hard into her face that she feels like she may not be able to breathe, it all just feels good.

Up until she’d started throwing shorts and t-shirts in her overnight, unfolded, too, she’d sullenly resigned herself to staying in the city by herself for the long weekend; there was plenty she could do on her own, and in one of the greatest cities in the world, no less – go for a run, read a book, catch up on her piles of laundry, sleep through America’s boozy birthday.

She could have tons of fun on her own because she’s a fun person. She doesn’t need other people to have fun.

In past years, they had all gone to Reggie’s Indepen-cans Day party at his parents’ Hamptons house, an event she thought was as cringe-inducing as the name. Reggie had made it very clear to her she was still invited regardless of whatever personal drama she wanted to bring, just as long as she brought “cans on cans,” better known as “her cans and beer cans.”

But Archie had made it even clearer to her that she wasn’t welcome through his mumbling and bumbling about how wouldn’t she want to sit this one out because she hadn’t really enjoyed the party every other year they’d gone, how they probably wouldn’t be staying long anyhow so making the journey all the way to the Hamptons when she gets as car sick as she does might not be worth it for her.

Then, despite everything in her telling her to just let it slide and let it go, to be very zen about the whole thing, she’d gone off on Archie. She’d yelled at him that he wasn’t being kind or subtle at all, and that he’d been acting like a jackass. She’d accused him of picking sides, of caring about Jughead more than he did her because it’s not like Jughead is a big fan of Reggie’s stupid party either but of course he gets to go because if Archie Andrews gets to pick one friend to bring along,
it’s going to be him. She’d made an absolute scene at one in the morning, yelled until she was breathless and red in the face, slammed some doors, and thrown some fridge magnets.

And for the first time in her life, Archie doled it out right back to her. He’d yelled right back to her face that she was being completely irrational because throughout this ‘whole goddamn mess,’ his words, not hers, he’d never once picked sides between his two best friends. He’d told her that he was trying his best to look out for her, because like it or not, her ex-boyfriend is now wearing that label more proudly and openly than before, and maybe she doesn’t want to be around to see that at an event where the host’s motto is ‘freedom includes freedom from clothes.’

And, Archie had thrown in for good measure, he really wasn’t happy at all with how it all went down that night because he doesn’t like the idea of her using anyone for her further gain, especially someone who had cared so much for her, who had loved her as much as he did.

‘To be honest, Betty,’ Archie had said to the door she’d slammed shut in his face, ‘I’m just really not happy with you right now.’

She’s not happy with herself, either.

She can’t call that night anything other than an egregious, monumental, soul-sucking mistake, a mistake completely on her and no one else. She’d been turning over and over again in her mind the almost-kiss, the dropped graduation gift that Archie had not so covertly confirmed she’d lost at the party. She still doesn’t know why she’d even brought the pen along with in the first place, because she’d known even as she’d tucked it away in her jacket pocket, that she had nowhere close to the courage she needed to give it to him; but he’d gotten it anyhow simply because fate is a crueler beast than she’d ever imagined her to be.

And, they’d almost kissed.

Then, from him, nothing.

But she didn’t think that it all meant nothing. There was at the very least, a small something to talk about. So, she’d decided that she’d call him and maybe put out some feelers, let him know somehow that she’d been disappointed by Archie’s completely inopportune timing because she’d wanted to kiss him that night, so badly. By the time the second week rolled around, she’d lost her nerve and changed the plan from ‘call’ to ‘text’ because she’s always been better on paper, anyhow; the words come more naturally to her that way.

By the third week, she’d come up with a different idea, one that she thought was either completely genius or completely insane. The story of them had started once, six long years ago with him, her, and a newspaper assignment for a slumbering publication – maybe that could be true again. Lightning doesn’t strike twice, she’d known that as well as anybody else, but what if they were they exception?

She’d known going into that horrible night that she’d been playing a risky game, that she was spinning the wheel, rolling the dice – she had no idea how he really felt about her still, if he felt anything at all, and the whole jacket plus bar plus bikers plus her all remained touchy subjects on their own, let alone grouped together all at once. She doesn’t remember just how many times she’d picked up and put down her phone, how many hours of sleep she’d lost over wondering whether inviting him to walk back into the past that haunted him was the right thing to do.

But he’d come so far from who he’d been at sixteen, she concluded eventually, and even back then, she’d loved him just the way he was – the jacket and tattoo and all – she’d loved the boy he’d been, and she loves the man he’s become now, undefined by his past, forging his own future. He
had to have known that – known that she loves him not in spite of his past, but because his past is a part of him, the entirety of him that she can’t stop thinking about, the entirety of him that she still loves.

And just maybe if he could see, if they could both see how well they worked together like they always had, they could start building again and everything, the past, the present, the insurmountable pain – it’d all be worth it. They’d both found their own ways into staying in New York after graduation, and that had been such a big obstacle before, such a giant roadblock that they just couldn’t overcome – it’s out of the way now, she’d reasoned with herself, so maybe we can be on our way.

Then, he’d said, and so casually too, the three words that had plunged right into her heart, like a knife cutting through her rhymes and reasons, twisting deeply – not the three words she’d been longing to hear from him, the ones that he’d wake her up in the middle of the night just to whisper to her and make sure she really knew, the ones he’d murmur right into her skin as their bodies moved together, as he was lost in her, she lost in him – not those words.

Not her boyfriend, he’d said. Not her boyfriend.

She remembers feeling stupid then, feeling so idiotic dressed in a low-cut shirt that he probably didn’t notice even though she’d worn it just so that he would, just so that he’d look at her. She’d felt downright foolish that she’d thought that something as dumb as working on a story together again would be enough to mend something that was apparently broken beyond repair.

That is, broken beyond repair until her and her big mouth had actually broken everything about them beyond repair.

In hindsight, internally chanting one tequila, two tequila to herself had not been one of her shining, gold-star sticker moments. But, she’d just been so nervous about everything, about him, about the way he’d refused to look at her. He gave her nothing to go on even after she’d dropped the pen, even after she’d been the first one to cross the Great Wall of Them and reach out first.

So she drank, and drank a lot. And predictably, because whenever she’s drunk anything she’s been feeling sober amplifies and dials all the way up to nth degree, she’d gotten sad.

Then she’d gotten mad. Not her boyfriend he’d said, and so casually too, with the same air of aloofness he might use to refuse a slice of pie or pizza. Well, she’d show him just how not his girlfriend she could be, a plan that went well for all of ten minutes, when she’d literally backed herself into a corner, unable to move, unable to breathe, unable to do anything but chastise herself for how stupid she’d truly been – about running off with someone she didn’t know, about her whole dumb plan to work together again, about entertaining the idea he still felt anything for her.

She’d expected his understanding when she’d owned up to her idiocy because he’s never been anything but completely understanding and completely on her side for as long as she’s known him.

But not this time.

This time, he’d let her have it, just like Archie, he’d said everything that she deserved to hear, every truth that she hadn’t wanted to confront but that he’d forced her to anyhow. You did this for you, he’d said. You get everything you want in life because you’re Betty Cooper.

But I didn’t do this all for me, she remembers thinking then, and I don’t get everything I want in life, because what she’d wanted most was for him to meet her halfway and fight for them with her. She’d wanted him to show her some sign – any sign – that he still felt something, that she wasn’t
just the only one going after what she wanted; she’d wanted to know that he wanted her, too, that he wanted them.

*Not her boyfriend.* Three stupid words that she’d let get to her, that she’d let get the better of her; the three stupid words that had led her to ruin everything. Not her boyfriend.

And now, he’s definitely not. And he never will be again.

When she reaches the exit for Riverdale, she turns down her music – New York may be the city that doesn’t sleep, but Riverdale has a before-midnight bed time, and no one in her tired old town will appreciate her announcing her homecoming by blasting *Summer of ’69* while cruising down Elm Street at one in the morning, even if she is Riverdale’s darling.

It’s eerie, she thinks, how much Riverdale hasn’t changed when everything else in her life so radically has. The old oak tree at the end of the block that she and Archie would race to is still there in all its quiet, ancient majesty, there and back, he’d tell her, and up until age seven, she’d always beaten him on the back because Archie, bull-headed and impulsive Archie, always used up his energy far too quickly on the there. There’s her house, her beautiful house with its red front door, still beckoning her home with open arms in the still of the darkest of nights.

Then, there’s the whisper of a memory, always lingering, always ever present, the memory of a younger version of herself walking to school with her fingers gripping his gently, of the nights where she’d fly up the stone steps, fast on her feet in futile attempts of beating the curfew clock, the memory of her younger self that thought that nothing in the world could break them, least of all, her.

“Okay,” he’d said, bringing the bike to a stop beneath them and sliding off. “You're up, Cooper.”

“My turn?” she’d asked.

“Your turn.”

She’d breathed in deeply as she’d claimed the front seat, the weight of his bike under her so much heavier than she anticipated, and even more so when he’d swung his leg over the seat and joined her on the back, his hands holding her steady as she leaned forward and grabbed the handlebars.

“You’re sure no one comes here?” she’d asked over her shoulder. “Maybe we should.”

“Betty, no one’s used this service road since before our parents were born,” he’d said, squeezing at her hips. “But you don’t have to if you don’t want to. This was your idea, remember?”

She’d breathed in deeply and squared her shoulders. It’s just riding a bike, she’d told herself, and she’d learned how to do that years ago on a pretty pink number with a white wicker basket attached to the front – an engine was simply another accoutrement, nothing she couldn’t handle.

“I remember,” she’d said. “Alright, let’s do this.”

“There’s the girl I know,” he’d joked, clicking down the gear once with his foot. “Okay. First – the one on the right is the throttle. Right now, don’t do anything with it.”

“Why not?”
“It’s the accelerator, like the gas pedal in a car,” he’d explained. “So unless you want to go shooting forward-”

“Don’t do anything with it,” she’d repeated. “Got it.”

“The one on the left is the clutch,” he’d said, placing his left hand over hers gently and loosening her death grip on the handlebar. “When you’re ready, just gently release it and just let the bike move with its own weight.”

She’d listened carefully – she’d always been a good student – touched her toes off the ground and with the slightest turn of her left wrist, let the clutch out.

“It’s just like riding a bike, she’d thought, same principles, same balance, same concept.

“Good,” he’d commended, placing a hand on her leg in encouragement after she’d successfully gotten them about a quarter-mile down the road without tipping or stalling. She wouldn’t admit it to him, she still felt shy about it at times, but she adored the extra touches that came with the bike and the handicap of the helmets on both their heads; the way she held him, pressed her whole body up against his as he steered them forward, the way he’d quickly reach a hand behind for her, squeezing at her leg, her arm just to make sure that she was still there, still safe right behind him.

“Now this time,” he’d instructed methodically. “Give a little on the right, too.”

“What, to go faster?” she’d questioned, voice rising in pitch.

“Losing your nerve?”

“No, I just – want to be careful,” she’d answered back, and not at all as firmly as she’d intended. “I don’t want to send your bike careening off the side of a cliff.”

“Discounting the fact that we’re nowhere near any cliffs,” he’d said. “I wouldn’t let anything happen to my bike.”

She’d snorted and rolled her eyes at the road. Boys and their toys. But then, like he’d been privy to her last line of thought – “More importantly, I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.”

And that, as much as he joked around, as much as they’d quip and banter, that she knew without a shadow of a doubt and into the depths of her soul. He’d always kept her safe, he’d always been her fiercest protector, and even if his bike went over the fictional cliff she’d concocted in her mind, every part of her knew that he’d never let her follow after it.

“What you’re going to do,” he’d said, leaning into her. “Is give on the clutch just like you’ve been doing, and turn down just a little with your right hand when you’re ready to go faster – just a little, though.” She’d watched as his hands on hers mimicked the movements, internalized the feel of his fingers gently releasing her left hand and turning down her wrist on her right. “Let this side out, and go with this one.”

With the comfort of him behind her keeping her still and strong – safe – she’d slowly started down the empty road again, and with a deep inhale and focused eyes, gently turned the throttle down with a soft flick of her wrist.

In that moment, as she’d sent both of them speeding forward, she understood with perfect clarity exactly what the bike below them meant to him. He’d spent so much of his life constrained and trapped, in a broken family, in a one room single-wide trailer where he’d shared a pull-out couch in the living room with his sister before she’d moved, in circumstances he had no control over and
that he’d never asked for. His life had been so lacking in space and privacy, the room to grow without burdens on his back. But, with the wind rushing over her knuckles and whipping her ponytail nearly free of its constraints as they’d torn down the road, she’d felt a freedom like she’d never felt before.

I’ve never known a freedom like this, she’d thought then. I’ve never felt so free before.

We’ve never been so free before.

She’d hoped with all her heart then that he’d felt that, too.

At the end of the road, she’d let his hands take over and command and guide hers as he’d slowed them and brought the bike to a standstill. “Well done, Easy Rider,” he’d complimented sincerely, proudly, as he’d tugged off his helmet. “You didn’t even stall once. What did you think?”

She stood, slinging a shaky leg over the bike and grasping onto the hand he’d offered to her. “It’s indescribable,” she’d said, dropping to the ground in an effort to still her racing heart, to gain some kind of grip on the world that had just been moving so quickly around her. “It’s so different than sitting behind you. I felt like I – like we – were flying.”

“Pretty amazing, right?” he’d said sitting down next to her on the road. “There’s nothing like it.”

She’d laid her head down on his lap then, the sudden need to just feel closer than just merely sitting next to him overwhelming and all-consuming. It’d been edging on sundown, she’d noted when she looked up, she hadn’t even realized it while tearing down the road. The sky’s on fire, she’d thought, organic and changing with each blink and heartbeat, warm in orange and red like the summer heat around her, the heat clung to her legs and bare arms, that held them both in a cocoon that she wished was unbreakable by reality surrounding them.

She’d reached her hand to his face, twisting in his lap to avoid the awkward turn of her arm. “There’s nothing like it,” she’d agreed. “And there’s nothing like this either.”

He’d smiled at her then, a real, bona fide smile that she didn’t see nearly as often as she’d liked. “I could stay in this moment forever,” he’d murmured to her. “No school, no crazy parents – just you and me.”

“So let’s stay here,” she’d said with a shrug. “Just like this.”

“You have a curfew, remember? And your mom’s still pissed at me because apparently it’s my fault only you missed your last three.”

But they’d stayed anyhow, quiet and unspeaking, watching as the last day of summer drifted into night.

She tiptoes into the house as expertly as she did at seventeen, careful to sidestep all the creaks and groans she knows will activate with a misplaced footfall. At the window, her window, she smiles when she peeks over at Archie’s house; it’s a force of habit, her tendency to always check in on the Andrews’, and even after all these years away, she’s unsurprised she hasn’t broken it yet. Archie’s window is dark, and there’s a part of her heart that breaks at looking at the pitch black of his room, the room that had once been filled with so much music, friendship, laughter – so much life. She doesn’t like thinking about his room in any way but that, and so she draws her eyes down to the flickering lights from the living room instead, most likely Fred Andrews watching baseball.

Correction: most likely Fred Andrews asleep in front of baseball, given the hour.
She thinks about waking her mother up, giving her a gentle shake on the shoulder to let her know that she’s home because she knows exactly what Alice Cooper will say to her in the morning if she doesn’t – ‘I don’t know why you insist on coming home in the middle of the night like some kind of common thief, Elizabeth’ – but she decides she’ll take the hit in the morning. She doesn’t really want to get into the questions tonight – the ‘why are you home when you said you wouldn’t be,’ ‘how did you get here,’ and the perennial favorite ‘did you eat’ questions, and she opts instead for changing into one of her old River Vixens shirts, and burying herself under the blankets that have survived since high school.

It’s comforting, she thinks as her eyelids grow heavy with exhaustion, it’s so comforting to end the day in a bed that is still completely hers, unlike her bed back in New York that’s still so heavy with memories of them, of their arms and legs entwined, of his skin on her skin, of hers on his, warding off the winter chill, the darkness, the nightmares, whatever danger they were once meant to fight off together.

In the morning, after a hug and a full-body examination – verdict, she’s looking good, thanks to all the running she’s been doing, but she should really be using more sunscreen because of her delicate complexion – her mother sits her down at the table across from her and a full cup of coffee, and makes her way through all the questions she was robbed of the opportunity of asking the night before.

It’s hot by midday, swelteringly so, and as she runs and lunges around the backyard, chasing after two fiery, spirited blurs with red hair, she’s careful to avoid the flower beds because if she, Archie, and Jughead didn’t get a pass for trampling on them when they were seven, she’s definitely not getting one now at twenty-two.

The backs of her legs are slippery with sweat, and there’s a heavy, dull pulse at her temples – it’s much too hot to be running around like this, she decides.

“Okay, guys,” she says, hands on her knees and wheezing in deeply. “Aunt B has to sit down now.” She’d thought that all her half-marathon training meant that she was incredibly in shape, or at least that she was well on her way to getting there.

Apparently not.

“You’re it though!”

“Aunt B is old,” she defends, waving off their protests through deep inhales. “She’s old and tired and needs to sit down.”

“You guys play with each other,” Polly interjects, and Betty throws her sister the best look of gratitude, one that comes naturally from years of practice for silently thanking Polly for covering for her when she’d miss her curfew or sneak snacks up to her room. “Mom wants to talk to Aunt B for a bit.”

“They’re a handful, but they’re the best,” Betty says, half-sitting, half-collapsing on one of the lawn chairs, groaning as she stretches out her tired, sticky legs.

“Here,” Polly says, passing her a glass. “Drink.”
Like the trusting, dutiful sister she is, Betty obliges and takes a healthy gulp, only to splutter, spit, and cough her way through her swallow when what touches her tongue isn’t Alice Cooper’s famous lemonade, half sugar, half-Splenda, like she’d expected.

“Oh my god, Polly. How much vodka is in this?” Betty asks.

Polly smiles and shrugs, and it’s enough to make Betty start feeling like the kid sister she is all over again.

“Enough,” Polly says brazenly, tapping the bottom of the glass – drink up, little sister, she intuits. “Come on, Betty, it’s the Fourth of July. Have some fun.”

She takes another dainty sip in a show of good will and hands the highball glass back. She knows that if she were at Reggie’s Hamptons bash right now, her almost-abstinence from drinking would get her called out on all fronts – *so unpatriotic of you, B. Coop*, Reggie would say to her, *to not celebrate America’s birthday with a beer in each hand, a beer bong at your face, and your top off.* But even the scent of alcohol is enough to bring her back to that terrible night, and it’s just not something she wants to think about right now.

“How are you, Pol?” she asks instead, drawing the attention far away from herself.

Polly shrugs, and Betty marvels at how far away her sister looks sitting here on the lawn chair right next to her. “It’s never an easy day,” she says simply.

No, Betty thinks. *Of course it’s not.* This was the day, years and years ago now, but this was the day that Polly had planned to leave it all behind – the day she had meant to steal out of Riverdale with nothing more than a dream in her head and love in her heart, the day which had dawned so full of hope, and that by sundown, had ended with only death and despair.

“How are you?” Polly asks, in a question that Betty knows is filled with Polly’s desire to not reopen old wounds. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine,” Betty responds immediately.

“Betty.”

“Polly.”

Polly frowns and takes another long sip of her lemonade, gearing and suiting up. *They’re going to do this the hard way,* Betty gathers from her sister’s suffering sigh. “I heard you’ve been working a lot.”

Betty snorts and tugs out the hair-tie from her unkempt ponytail. “Everybody works a lot, Polly. It’s the American way.”

“I heard you came home from work at one in the morning three nights in a row last week. Unless you weren’t actually at work that whole time?”

She rolls her eyes at Polly’s incredible lack of subtlety. They’re sisters, she thinks, so Polly could just ask point blank if she wanted to, and it’s not like she hasn’t before. “Okay one – I was at work the whole time, which you can choose to believe or not. And two – where are you getting all of this anyhow?”

“Veronica,” Polly says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world, and she supposes that it is. It’s not like Archie’s texting her sister, worried about what time she came home from work on
Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

“I didn’t know you and Veronica talk,” Betty responds.

“Mostly about you.” As if that wasn’t already obvious. “She also told me that she hasn’t seen you cry about it yet.”

She’s going to have words with Veronica when they’re both back in the city.

“Yeah, well, that’s neither here nor there,” Betty says.

“Why haven’t you cried about it Betty?”

What a question.

Because I’m Betty Cooper, and I’m too strong for that. Because crying isn’t going to accomplish anything – because I could sit here and cry all day long and that still won’t fix any of the problems in my life, so why cry?

“Because that’s just not how I deal with things. I don’t feel like I have to cry,” Betty settles on. “I have productive ways to channel all my negative energy. Like running.”

There’s a huge part of her that wants to shove her palm right in Polly’s face just so she doesn’t have to keep looking at her ‘I’m so unimpressed with you’ expression any longer.

“I just don’t understand what happened,” Polly continues. “You and Jughead were together longer than Brian and I have been married. You can’t just throw that away.”

Betty doesn’t think the length of Polly’s marriage is a particularly impressive or even useful indicator of anything at all, but she keeps her mouth shut about that. “It just... it wasn’t right, Pol,” she says.

“What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know!” she blurts out, frustrated. “I just didn’t feel like myself anymore. I felt like someone else, someone... not me.”

“Do you feel like yourself now?”

“I think I’m getting there.”

“So what’s the problem, then?”

Betty frowns. She’s been avoiding this question herself, and she really doesn’t want to or know how to answer it right now. For starters, the fallout in June was Big Problem number one. The fact that she’s still unsure of whether she really and truly feels like herself again, someone that she’s happy and proud to look at in the mirror and call Betty Cooper, is Big Problem number two.

“It’s a lot of things,” Betty says eventually. “And it’s not just me. I don’t think he wants anything to do with me right now. I screwed up,” she admits quietly. “Majorly.”

“What happened?”

“I messed up. I messed up so, so badly.”

“You didn’t sleep with Archie, did you?”
“No! God! Why would you say that?”

“Sorry!” Polly says, throwing up her hands before Betty can remind her that she’s still holding the vodka with a hint of lemonade. She’s sure there will be a patch of dead grass by their feet, later, but she’ll be back in New York by then. “You said you messed up, I figured it had something to do with Archie. You were in love with him for so long.”

“I wasn’t,” Betty counters. “I was in love with the idea of him. Anyhow, it has nothing to do with Archie. We had a fight.” A fight is trivial, she thinks, given what actually happened, but Polly doesn’t need to know the gory details. “I said some really horrible things I didn’t mean. I was mad at him because of something he’d said, and I was drunk, and it all just... came out. I didn’t mean it,” she says. “I really didn’t mean any of it, but that doesn’t make any of what I said or did less horrible.”

“Have you tried, I don’t know, talking to him?”

“I can’t.”

She watches for Polly’s reaction, and aside from her sister setting down her glass indicating that something deep and serious is about to follow, Betty can’t read her expression one way or the other.

“You know,” Polly starts, leaning closer over the small wooden deck table. “I’m so grateful for my life. Brian is great with Dag and Juniper, and he really loves them, and they love him – a lot of people have worlds less than I do. But,” she continues, and so quietly that Betty can barely hear over the sound of the twins’ laughter and squeals. “If I ever had even one chance to fix it with Jason, if I had even one chance to do things even a little bit differently-” she leans in further then, and whispers the revelation that Betty knows Polly can barely admit to herself.

“I would already have done it.”

In that moment, she feels her whole heart go out to Polly, not just as her sister, but as a woman hurt in love, just like her. She gets it – Jughead is here, he’s still alive, and Jason isn’t. She has a chance, the most sacred of chances to walk it back, to make things right, or at the very least, to try to; no matter how much she wants it, Polly will never again have that chance. Polly will never get a chance to tell her love just how much she misses him, how sorry she is that everything went so wrong, how mischievous and vivacious their children are, how proud of them he’d be, how much she still holds him with her in her heart all these years later.

It seems unfair, Betty thinks, that a first love should weigh so heavily on the heart, that it should remain so chiseled and etched in there, like a brand never to be wiped away.

“I just want you to be happy, Betty,” Polly tells her, facing her with wide, glossy eyes, and a single line of darkened skin cutting down her face from an errant tear. “You do so much for everyone else, and you deserve to be happy – you deserve to be so happy.”

“I know, Polly,” she says, reaching across the chairs for her sister’s hand and squeezing hard. “I’m getting there. I swear I am.”

She smiles when her sister squeezes back, and for a moment, just a fleeting moment, she feels as young as her niece and nephew playing blissfully in front of her.
“You’re seriously my hero right now,” she says gratefully, taking the large Pop’s take-out cup from Kevin. “I’ve been craving this since Christmas and – did you put something in here?”

“Of course,” Kevin says easily.

“Okay, why does this keep happening to me? This is the second time today.”

“Maybe because everyone thinks you need to have more fun?”

She scoffs at that and kicks out her crossed legs on the truck’s flatbed in some kind of attempt to show him that she can let loose if she wants to – she’s plenty fun. “I don’t get why this is always everyone’s roadmap to having fun.” She shakes the cup for emphasis, but gently, because she’s not about to spill even a half of a drop of a Pop’s vanilla milkshake.

“Your bitterness is showing, Betty,” Kevin chastises as he drapes a wool blanket over both their legs, and she thinks then how sweet it is that he still remembers that in the summer, if she’s not wearing pants or an entire bottle of bug-spray, her legs need to be covered lest they become dinner for all the mosquitos in the tristate area.

“What are you talking about? I’m not bitter.”

She can just barely make out Kevin’s look of disbelief through the crack of a red firework over Sweetwater River.

“You’re bitter because you’re supposed to be at Reggie’s misogynistic rager-slash-orgy in the Hamptons, partying no less than three houses away from Ina Garten and her hydrangeas, and instead you’re home in backwater Riverdale babysitting your niece and nephew as they very disturbingly play near the exact spot where I found their dead father.”

Well.

So much for beating around the bush.

She sips nosily from her milkshake as she searches for the right response because Kevin’s diagnosis is, as always, uncannily spot-on. “I wouldn’t mention the part about Jason to the twins,” she says eventually.

“I’m not about mentally scarring young children for the rest of their lives, Betty.”

Betty sighs and looks over to Dagwood and Juniper making what she thinks are the poorest, most pathetic attempts to skip rocks across Sweetwater River – she doesn’t even know if she can blame them, though, because she knows that Polly is absolutely hopeless at the game, and unless Brian isn’t, it’s not like they’ve had anyone to teach them. She definitely can’t, because she’s worse than her sister.

She wonders if Jason would’ve fared any better, if he would’ve been able to teach them anything about the past time they’re so marvelously failing at right now. Would he have been able to gently correct their enthusiastic tosses by rolling their wrists gently, and separating their clenched, fisted fingers around the rocks? It’s there again, that feeling of unbearable sadness she has for the twins, for Polly, because they’ll just never know, no matter how much they want to.

“I was cordially disinvited to the party,” Betty admits through the burst of a firework.
She watches as Kevin nods slowly in understanding, eyes turned towards the sky in appreciation for Riverdale’s dinky five-minute show. “Who’d you piss off?”

“Archie.”

Kevin whistles then, loudly enough to cut through the crack of the fireworks, loudly enough to draw twins attention all the way down by the riverbank. “I was sure it was Veronica. What did you do?”

“We had a fight,” she says. “About Jughead. I did... something and Archie’s mad at me about it.”

“And you think he’s wrong?”

“Not exactly,” she says. “What I did was awful. But I didn’t think it would end with me kicked out of Reggie’s stupid party.” She pauses and calls to the twins to step back from the river’s edge, even though they’re doing a pretty good job of staying far enough away from the water, just like she’d told them to. “I don’t know,” she confesses. “Lately, I just feel like everyone’s moving on with their lives while I stay stuck in place. It’s like I’m in this glass box watching everyone from the outside, and I’m just stuck. I’m just stuck in there and everything I try to do to make things better just makes everything worse. I’m trapped.”

She stares at the plastic cup in her hand, waiting for Kevin’s inevitable response. Her milkshake is melting quickly in the remnants of the day’s heavy humidity that still clings to the night, and she thinks then how even it seems to be mocking her. There it is, confined within a small Pop’s cup and turning to liquid before her very eyes, but still, nevertheless, changing; here she is nursing the same disorientation, the same hurting heart that she’s been tending to for months.

“Betty,” Kevin says slowly. “Sometimes I don’t think you know how lucky you are.”

At that, she frowns – from the sharp, decisive tone of Kevin’s voice alone she knows she’s treaded too far. “You want to talk about glass boxes?” he continues. “You have no idea what it’s like to watch all your friends move on and up from the godforsaken town – the godforsaken murder town you all grew up in while you’re left behind. You don’t know what it’s like to see them explore new cities and meet new people while you wander around the same haunts without them. You don’t know what it’s like to really be trapped because the second you left Riverdale, you’ve been free.”

Kevin scoffs and shakes his head at the sky, at the remnants of colored light now nothing more than lines of smoke bisecting the blackness. “Don’t hate me for saying this, but I always thought it’d be Jughead that’d get left behind, what, with his dad and everything. I never thought it’d be me.”

When Kevin’s voice trails off, all she can bring herself to do is remind herself to breathe. Inhale, exhale.

Inhale. Exhale.

She doesn’t know if there’s a time in her life she’s felt more horrible than this, felt more ashamed of herself, felt more self-centered, more privileged to the detriment of everyone around her.

Selfish, he’d called her that night, and she’d been so wrapped up in her own anger and her own problems to entertain for even a moment the possibility that the person who knows her best in this world would be right about her.

But of course he’d been right because he’s rarely been wrong about her – she had been selfish then.

And she’s being selfish now.
“Kevin,” she starts slowly and shamefully, coughing out the catch in her throat. “I – I’m so sorry. I don’t even know what to say.” And she doesn’t – there’s nothing she can say to make this better. There she’d been going on and on about glass boxes she’d built herself into and feeling alienated from her friends, products of her own poor decisions, and here’s her actual friend, one of her only friends who will still give her the time of day, trapped in an actual glass box based entirely on circumstance.

He was right, she thinks then. He was right about absolutely everything.

“I don’t want your sympathy, Betty, and I mean this in the nicest way possible.” Kevin’s eyes look kind, understanding even as he speaks, but she wonders if she’s only seeing what she wants to see. “Ever since my dad’s accident, we’re close now, closer than we ever were before. Knowing that I can be here for him when he needs is better than any kind of cruising I’d do in the city. Sometimes,” he says, nudging her arm playfully. “What I meant by all that is that you, Betty Cooper, are lucky. You have the entire world at your disposal, and you can be anything you want to be in it. So if you’re in a glass box, break it, because you actually can. The Betty Cooper I know wouldn’t stand for anything less.”

The Betty Cooper that Kevin knows. The Betty Cooper that Archie knows, that Veronica knows, the Betty Cooper that Jughead knows, the one that he’d loved – she has no idea where that girl is anymore. She’d started this year so intent on finding herself, on building herself back into a person she’d be proud to look at in the mirror and attach her own name to.

What she hadn’t planned on was devolving into a version of herself that she’s so ashamed of now, a version of herself that’s so selfish, so self-centered, so bitter, and yet, here she is.

Betty, the Bitch.

She doesn’t like Betty the Bitch, she doesn’t like her one bit.

Enough is enough.

“What are you doing next month?” Betty asks, setting down her milkshake and shaking the condensation off her hands – she’s not going anywhere, but it gives her the momentum she needs. It’s a start, and that’s what she needs right now – a start.

“Next month?” Kevin laughs. “I don’t know, I don’t even know what I’m doing next week.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she says, and she surprises herself with the determination she hears in her own voice – it’s been a while since it’s been there, she realizes, but it’s there again, like an old, familiar friend. “Pick any weekend, and if you can swing it, come to New York.”

“Betty, you don’t have to-”

“Yes,” she interrupts. “I do. This isn’t about me,” she says, although she wouldn’t blame anyone if they didn’t believe her. “This is about you. I put my own self into that box, but you never asked for yours. I’m your friend, even though I haven’t been acting like it recently. If you can’t come to New York, then I’ll come here. It’s my job to help you break your box.”

And whatever it takes, she’s going to help him do it.

Through the flickering glow of the lantern between them, she sees the flash of Kevin’s smile and the wide circle of his arm as he slings it around her shoulders, pulling her close.

“I think,” he says softly, words packed full with meaning and sincerity. “You just started breaking
When she’s back home, under a cocoon of blankets facing her window, facing Archie’s window, she calls her best friend.

When he doesn’t pick up, she calls her other best friend.

Betty doesn’t know if she still has the privilege of calling either of them that, but she does know she’s going to do her very best to hold on to both of them because she’s been taking them for granted lately, like she has been everyone around her, and it all has to stop.

“Hey, B, what’s up?” There’s genuine concern and camaraderie in Veronica’s voice, muffled by the sounds of what even she’ll admit sounds like a pretty successful descent into debauchery, and she blows out a sigh of relief.

“Hey,” she says back, wrapping her arms around her knees. “How’s the party?”

“Same as always.” There’s a deliberate air of aloofness in Veronica’s words and tone that Betty thinks might be there for her benefit – they’re having a great time, from what she can hear, there’s a lot of woo-hooing going on in the background – but maybe Veronica thinks that the fact that she isn’t there is punishment enough. “Missing my bestie, though,” Veronica says.

“I miss you, too,” Betty says. “Listen, is Archie there? I tried calling him but...” she trails off, because she’s sure Veronica knows the rest.

There’s a great, big, pregnant pause and for a moment, Betty thinks Veronica might just hang up on her. That would be fair, she thinks, because she hasn’t been the greatest friend to Veronica, either. But then – “I’ll find him, B,” Veronica promises. “And really, you’re not missing much. The party isn’t that great.”

She listens to the muted sounds of the life she’s more or less singlehandedly excluded herself, and tries her best to recreate the scene in her mind, the sights she’s missing out on, the people she’s simply missing. It’s an irony that isn’t at all lost on her – how she desperately now wants to be included in the world she’s only listening in on, the one she’d just assumed would always be there for her and with her whenever she’d want it, rain or shine.

“Hi,” Archie says, voice tired and completely weary.

But it’s still him.

“Hi,” she counters slowly. “So, I’m home.”

“Okay,” Archie responds, but it’s more a question than it is a dismissal.

“I’m at our window.”

“Wait, you’re in Riverdale?”

“Yeah.” She thinks there might be a question there, but since he doesn’t ask it, she continues.

“Do you remember what we did when we found out our windows faced each other? We were so
“excited.”

“Sure,” Archie says, and from the shuffling and fading of the white noise across the phone, she thinks that he might be retreating to a quiet room upstairs and away from the scene. “We tried to make those tin can phone things.”

“We couldn’t find string,” she fills in, staring across at the black window across from hers. “So we cut up all the rubber bands we could find and spent two days tying them together. It didn’t work.”

“I told you it wouldn’t,” Archie says. “The one time I was right.”

“No,” she corrects, blowing out a breath. “You were right about this, too – about me, you. About Jug. I’m sorry, Arch,” she says for the second time tonight. “I feel like that’s all I’ve been saying to you recently is that I’m sorry, but I really am. You’re my best friend, and you’ve been there for me through everything. Especially through this – this whole goddamn mess, because you were right about that too, it is a mess and it’s a mess that I made.”

She’s not used to making messes – everything about her, from her color coordinated day planner, to The List, even her ponytail – has always been neat. But this is definitely a mess, and it’s entirely her mess.

“I wasn’t angry about the party,” Betty finally admits. “I couldn’t care less about the party. I was angry that you were right – you’ve never picked sides and I don’t know how you do it.” She sucks in a breath then, gearing up, because this is the hard one. “You were right about Jug. I never should’ve done what I did to him.”

It’s first time she thinks that she’s ever owned up to a wrong directly to Archie. It’s not a great feeling and it’s definitely not one she wants to endure and replicate in the near future, but it’s therapeutic in a sense – it feels right and completely necessary, as awful as the whole experience is. “I don’t know what I was thinking,” she continues. “I don’t know that I was thinking – I was just hurt and I let that rule me. But I was wrong. I was very wrong.”

There’s nothing on the line except the sound of Archie’s breathing, then hers, then Archie’s again – they’re out of sync but oddly, uncharacteristically, there’s a comfort in that. Her life is messy right now, this conversation she never thought she’d have with her best friend is messy, and it’s fitting that rhythmically, they’re off balance. It’ll take them time to fall back in line again, but for now, listening to the staccato of their friendship is more than enough.

“Is my dad watching baseball?” Archie asks eventually, and for the first time in her life, a question about sports has her breaking out in a truly uncontrollable grin.

“Naturally,” she says. “Although I think he’s sleeping now. He stopped cheering, like, half an hour ago.”

Archie laughs gently at the joke she hadn’t thought was funny at all, a peace offering, a gesture of kindness. “Sounds about right. You coming home tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I need to drop off my rental by ten.”

“Cool,” Archie says, and like the dawn of the sun peeking over the horizon, like the bloom of a new, fragile bud welcoming the spring, the storm is over and the weight she hadn’t known had been quite so heavy on her shoulders falls away like rain off a windowpane, sliding and slipping into nothing.

“Cool,” she repeats.
“Betty,” Archie starts, and because she knows that Archie plays the role of best friend to someone else, too, she knows exactly where he’s headed. “All that stuff you just told me about Jug – you should think about telling him that. He deserves to know.”

“I will,” she promises to both Archie and herself. “I’ll figure it out. I just – I don’t even know how to talk to him anymore. I screwed up so badly, Arch. He’ll never forgive me.”

But, if the tables were turned, she thinks she’d be able to find it in her heart to forgive him if she knew the whole story. She knows enough about how much he loves – loved – her to know that if he’d fallen short of who she’d expected him to be, if he’d made a mistake, she’d still try her best to see the best in him because love is never perfect, and neither is he.

“If anyone can figure it out, it’s you,” Archie offers. “And if there’s anyone that Jug will forgive, it’s you.”

“Arch, I’m going to be a better friend from now on. To you and to Veronica and to Kevin – I’m going to do better. I don’t exactly what that looks like yet, but I promise, I’m going to be better.”

“I know you’ll be,” Archie says, and that the faith that he’s always had in her is still there in his voice is almost enough to make her choke out a sob in relief. Almost.

“I love you, Arch,” she tells him, because there’s nothing else left to say anymore, because she does love him and he’s still there – he’s still someone she can say those words to. “Enjoy the rest of the party.”

“Love you too, Betty.”

She listens to the static dial tone long after Archie hangs up. There are tears poking at the back of her eyes, sharp like needles, and she feels a biting sting when she tips her head back against the wall and furiously blinks them away. She looks across to the black window where her best friend used to wave her to bed every night with the easiest of boyish smiles, to the old garden ladder still propped up against her own where once, a boy who had loved her like no other took a chance on her.

They’re worlds away now.

But she doesn’t cry. She’s too strong for that.
pockets of time stolen here and there, mere moments with the people she loves.

That’s not enough, she thinks. That’s simply not enough for her – this is her sister, this is her mother – this is her family, and she needs to do better by them, too.

“It always gets so quiet when you girls leave,” her mom says, sitting next to her primly and neatly folded hands in her lap. Instinctively, Betty reaches for a throw pillow to drape across her knees, a poor effort to hide the fact that she has her feet up on the couch, an Alice Cooper no-no.

“It’s the twins,” she says, trying to lighten the mood. “My ears are still ringing from all the screaming.”

It does the trick, Betty notices, or at least half a trick – her mother smiles, but just slightly. “You and Polly were worse,” she reminisces. “Especially you. I used to be able to hear you, Archie, and Jughead playing in the Andrews’ backyard over both the washer and dryer running at the same time, all the way in the basement.”

She breathes out a laugh and fumbles with the edges of the puffed throw pillow in her lap. Growing up, she hadn’t been girly in the way Polly had always unabashedly been, with her silk headbands in every color under the sun. There were days where she simply couldn’t take another round of Victorian dollhouse adventures, days where she simply needed to feel grass and dirt beneath her hands and feet, where she needed a bit of playful roughhousing that didn’t end in her sister bellowing and crying for their mother because Betty had just looked at her the wrong way.

Even so, Archie and Jughead were a class of their own, prone to shooting her square in the face with the garden house, surprise attack to kill the cooties, they’d claim, prone to sticking worms down the back of her dresses when she’d so much as turned around. A shriek or ten had simply been inevitable.

Gone are those days, too, she supposes.

“Honey, we haven’t really talked about Jughead and what happened there,” her mother says without any preamble, and Betty can tell that she’d really tried to not separate out the two syllables of his name like she always does.

“Mom,” she begins. “We really don’t need to. I’ve talked about it with everyone else.”

“You have so much potential, Betty,” her mother says, and with that Betty knows that whether or not she wants to talk about it is no longer a question – they’re talking about it, period. “I’m so proud of you – you’ve already accomplished so much. The work that you’re doing at Post is excellent. I think that’s a great place for you to be, it’s a great place for you to maximize your potential.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“I think that you’re making a good decision to focus on your career right now,” her mother continues. “Being a woman in journalism can be a hard thing, Betty, and it demands your full attention.”

“Mom, that’s not why I-“

“But you need to make time for love, too.”

Oh. Her mouth instantly snaps shut. That had not been what she was expecting, least of all from Alice Cooper who’d always taught her to be harder than nails.
“For my whole life, I always made the decisions that I thought were right for me,” her mother says, laying her hands straight out in front of her on her crossed knees. “I did my best to get out of the Southside, I focused on my career and on building the Register, and I married your milquetoast father.”

“Mom, you really shouldn’t talk about Dad like that,” she defends quietly, even though she doesn’t outright disagree with the analysis. She loves her dad because he’s her dad. But her dad is also the definition of the unassuming suburban father, straight and narrow, and as humdrum as they come; it’s not necessarily a bad thing, she thinks, but Hal Cooper is everything unlike the past she knows her mother emerged from.

“Do you ever wish you did everything differently?” she hears herself asking as she braids together the tassels of the throw pillow. Or is it just me with a mounting pile of regrets and words I didn’t say?

“No, Betty,” her mother tells her. “There are things I could’ve done better, but I don’t wish I did everything differently. I wouldn’t have you and Polly and the twins in my life if I did.”

She sighs and pushes the pillow off her lap. It’s a beautiful answer, it’s an answer she’d both expected and predicted from her mother, but it’s not one that makes her feel any less alone in her regret.

“But,” her mother adds quietly, and it’s surprising enough to make Betty look up from her folded hands. “I also know that once you give up and walk away someone you love, he may not come back to you, no matter how much you want him to. So make sure that this is really what you want. Because if you decide differently one day, it may not even matter anymore.”

“Mom, why are you telling me this?” she whispers.

“Because I love you, Elizabeth,” her mother says. “And above all, it’s important to me that you’re happy.”

For a moment, she wishes she were back in New York, doing her laundry alone like she’d planned because all of this is so much, maybe even too much for her to handle right now. It hits her then just how many people she has in her life that love her, who all want so much for her to find her place in this world and to just be happy; she’d come so dangerously close to losing them. It’s an overwhelming, consuming realization that has her breathing in shallow, short breaths – she’s already lost one of the most important people in her life, kicked him out and banished him with her reprehensible words and actions, never to return – no more. She’s done.

“It doesn’t matter if I decide differently,” she admits quietly. It’s never been easy to talk to her mother about something quite personal as her boyfriend, but she knows how hard her mother is trying to connect with her right now, and this she realizes, is what’s important – reaching back to everyone that’s been reaching out for her. “Jug doesn’t want anything to do with me anymore.”

Betty watches as her mother’s eyes soften in sympathy, and when she holds open her arms in comfort, Betty sighs, curls her knees up to her chest, and lays her head down on her mother’s lap instead, just like she did when she was five and wanted everything in her little universe to feel better. It was so easy back then, she thinks, in those lazy, hazy days of youth where her biggest worry was whether or not she could play at Archie’s after school or if there’d be pizza for dinner, where she never worried about things like lost friends and lost love because she’d always assume that she’d keep them all.

“Love takes time, Betty,” her mother says gently with all the wisdom in the world behind her
voice. “And it hurts for a lot of it, too. Love is never easy – we’d all be happily in love if it were. But don’t you give up on it, not even for a moment.”

“I won’t,” she whispers back, her voice echoing into the empty living room that had once been so filled with the sounds of cartoons and animated characters on family movie nights, so filled with the laughter of two boys covered in mud and grass stains, of the ‘wait up, guys,’ from a ponytailed girl desperately trying to keep up with them. “I won’t give up on love.”

She falls asleep as her mother gently teases the tangles out of her ponytail.

“Sorry about the time,” he’d said as brought the bike to a halt in front of her house. “Tell your mom it was my fault if you want.”

She’d tugged her helmet off her head, carefully, because even though its sole purpose was to safeguard her from any harm, she still felt like she had to keep it safe, too. It’d been her sixteenth birthday present from him, one that she knew just from looking at it, was worlds more expensive and protective than his was.

“I won’t, because it wasn’t,” she’d said hurriedly, swinging her leg over the bike and pressing a quick kiss to his wind-chilled cheek. “Thanks again for today.”

“Hey, my bike is your bike.” She’d smiled then – she’d never dream of claiming something so important to him, and that he’d even offered she could would always be more than enough for her.

“Walk me to school tomorrow?” she’d asked.

“I’ll be here.”

She’d already been halfway up her front steps, feet turning quickly as she tried to minimize the damage and wrath of the Angry Mother when his voice had stilled her and turned her back to him – completely compelling, completely intoxicating. “Hey,” he’d called to her. “I love you.”

There was so much beauty in the juxtaposition of him, she’d thought, the black of his jacket, of the helmet on his hip, of the errant lock of hair that fell waywardly across his forehead casting the starkest of contrasts against the pure color his words brought to her life. She’d looked back towards her front door silently calling to her, the red paint muted and faint in the gloss of the night, thrown all caution to the wind, and flown back down the steps to him.

She was already late, a few more minutes wouldn’t matter; something as trivial as her curfew could always wait when stacked up against those three words coming from his mouth.

“I love you, too,” she’d whispered back to him, his weight against his bike holding her steady from falling into him completely. “Jughead Jones, you’ll never know just how much I do.”

Even in the darkness, he had made her world so bright.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from "Peace of Mind" by Boston.
August

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pair of forgivers, let go before it’s too late.

It’s impressive, he thinks, just how bad Archie is at video games given how much he likes to play them.

“Again?” he asks tiredly when the game-over title card flashes across the screen. They’re dead in the water, literally, because they’d been crossing some river by boat, and Archie has yet again failed to duck through the spray of bullets even though doesn’t he know by now that they come at exactly the same point in the run each time?

It’s not that hard a concept to grasp, he thinks, but insulting Archie’s video game prowess has only ever ended in a sulking, ego-bruised friend, a fact that’s held true from the days game controllers barely fit in their chubby hands – a few snarky words isn’t worth all the sullenness that comes after.

“Sorry,” Archie offers with a sheepish smile. “Redemption round?”

He gives a dramatic sigh because it’s not like he didn’t explicitly tell – yell – at Archie to stay away from the zone clearly demarcated ‘do not enter.’

Then again, he doesn’t have much to do right now other than wait for his sister to show up, and if he knows JB at all, that could either mean right on time, or two hours later with no explanation other than ‘sorry, I got caught up.’

Caught up in what, he doesn’t know, and he’s learned not to ask because he’s tired of having the ‘you’re infringing on my independence’ argument with her.

“Hey, listen,” Jughead says, biting back a laugh at the look of sheer concentration on Archie’s face. “You seriously don’t need to stay at Veronica’s the whole weekend. It’s not like JB minds you being here.”

In fact, he knows JB very much doesn’t mind Archie being here because his sister, much to his disappointment and yet incredibly unsurprisingly, thinks that Archie is, or at the very least, that Archie’s abs are something of God’s gift to the entire human race.

“Nah, man, it’s cool,” Archie says easily. “I haven’t seen Ronnie all week. But if your friend from last night wants to stay over again, you might want to save that for after JB leaves.”

Jughead pauses then, completely caught, but not long enough to do any real damage to the game that is, to Archie’s credit, actually going better this time around. “The one time you actually get up on time,” he mutters to no one in particular. “It’s not what you think.”

And it really isn’t. It is, however, definitely more embarrassing than what Archie thinks, and it’s also not something he wants to really discuss in any great detail right now. But, there’s a bigger part of him that just feels like he needs to defend himself and explain very thoroughly that whatever sordid affairs he’s sure Archie is assuming went down couldn’t be further from the truth.

“Right,” Archie snorts. “If you say so.”
Case in point.

“The date was fine,” he admits slowly. “We got burgers and it was fine.”

“Where’d you meet her again?”

“She was in one of my seminars,” he says. “She called and asked me out. I don’t know how but she heard about – you know, but she knew.”

There’s no need to clarify by this point because Archie knows better than anyone else.

“She was pretty hot, from the like, five seconds I saw her,” Archie offers. “And she stayed over.”

“Yeah, and I slept on the couch.”

“Why? Did she kick you out of your own bed?”

He wonders if that’s more or less embarrassing than what actually happened.

“No,” Jughead sighs eventually. “She passed out long before she made it there.” He pauses then, building up to it because he’s a storyteller, and he might as well make this good. “She passed out on the couch while she was reading the piece I wrote, the one that just got published.”

He’s prepared for Archie barking, booming laugh, he’d fully expected it even, but it doesn’t make him want to knock Archie over the head with his controller any less when he hears it.

“In my defense, she asked to read it,” he says after he thinks Archie’s mocking has gone on for long enough. “She was also drinking at dinner.”

He’d been, too, and he’d managed to stay awake through their date, but he doesn’t feel like sharing that tidbit.

“I’m sorry, man,” Archie says with as much feigned seriousness as he can muster. “It’s just—” Apparently still funny, he surmises as Archie descends into yet another round of uncontrollable, knee-slapping laughter.

It’s not entirely undeserved, he admits, because when ‘it’s Ann-Marie, not Marie-Ann’s’ head had slammed down audibly on the armrest behind her, magazine pages falling from her limp hand and fluttering down to the worn carpet, his first instinct had actually been to laugh because of course the first date he’d go on in eight-plus months would end in her conking out on him before it was over.

While reading his work, no less, an ego-deflator the likes of which he’s never quite experienced before.

Thinking back, he concedes that he could’ve done a bit more planning, put a bit more effort into the date instead of just doing bare minimum. He could’ve put on a shirt that didn’t have plaid print on it, he could’ve figured out what she’d really wanted to eat instead of lazily suggesting burgers because it’d convenient and easy, he could’ve tried a little harder to actually seem present during the whole song and dance instead of just going through the motions.

He could’ve not gotten her name wrong when he picked her up.

He doesn’t really have an excuse other than the fact that it’d simply been a while since he’d been on a date – months, if he’s being exact, and it’d been the very first time in his life he’d been on a
date with someone he hasn’t known since his sandbox days.

It’d been so easy with Betty. There’d never been any need to try to make conversation happen or to plan what to talk about in advance, because it’d all just come so naturally with her. They could talk for hours, they’d shut down pizza parlors and diners before, they’d wake each other up in the middle of the night with musings and burning questions that just couldn’t wait until daylight hours.

He hadn’t expected that a different conversation partner across from him at the dinner table would lead to no conversation at all.

He figures that the failed date, a nice way to describe what had actually transpired, had been on him, so he’d done what he’d thought was the kind and gentlemanly thing, carried the snoring Ann-Marie to his bed, and tried his best to not think about how his date’s brown hair fanned across the pillow had looked so very wrong there like that, where her blonde ponytail had once been.

That whole night had been a surprising look into his own locked box of emotions because he’d still been so angry with Betty, filled and brimming with it even as he’d watched, shocked, as Ann-Marie ordered a salad at his favorite burger joint in New York, as they’d sat in a silence only unbroken by the sounds of their chewing. He’d been so furious with her even months later, and he’d thought that his anger would’ve been enough of a catalyst to get him through this one date.

He hadn’t expected the invisible hand of unease that had gripped at his heart when he’d laid Ann-Marie down on the side of the bed where Betty used to sleep, he hadn’t expected the wave of genuine sadness that had come when they’d chastely and very awkwardly kissed goodbye the next morning and he’d realized then that this was it – this was what moving on from six years of loving a woman he’d thought he’d love forever looked like.

“How’d it feel?” Archie asks.

He thinks Archie’s confidence in him is truly touching. “I highly doubt the girl who literally fell asleep halfway through the date wants to see me again,” Jughead says.

“Hey, you never know.”

“She wasn’t really my type, anyway.”

Archie doesn’t go for the obvious retort, the one that goes something like ‘there really isn’t anyone but a girl by the name of Betty Cooper that is his type,’ and Jughead supposes that this is what his friends moving on from his break-up looks like, too.

“How’d it feel?” Archie asks. “Dating again?”

Jughead puts down the controller when they reach the clear screen and stretches out the muscles in his hands as the next level loads. “It felt different,” he concludes diplomatically. “I don’t know, it was just – different. I guess I should’ve expected that it would be.”

“You’re forgetting the fatal flaw,” Jughead says. “There have to be people there that want to go out with me first for that to happen.”

“I could set you up,” Archie offers. “Or Ronnie could. Seriously, she’s got so many friends besides Bet-” he watches as Archie catches himself, hands stilling on the controller. “Ronnie has a ton of friends.”
“You can say her name, I’m not going to implode if I hear it.”

“Sorry,” Archie says.

“You can set me up,” he tells Archie, shrugging. It honestly sounds all kinds of exhausting to him, the idea of going on multiple dates with potentially multiple new people, but he figures that if there’s going to be any sort of reprieve in his personal life again, he’s going to have to deal with the exhaustion first to get there. “But no one weird,” he clarifies.

Archie smiles and Jughead immediately sees the trap he’s set for himself. “No worries, you’re the weirdest friend I have.”

“Very funny.”

It’s something of a miracle they reach the second clear screen, because they’ve both been playing half-heartedly, and when they do, Jughead ducks out of harm’s way as Archie hops the back of the couch and runs to the fridge in an effort to make it back with a cold, cracked beer before the next level loads.

“Hey, are mimosas made with orange or apple juice?” Archie asks, flopping back down.

“Is Veronica quizzing you on this or something? Orange.”

“Do we have any?”

“Please,” he scoffs. All they have is beer, tap water, and a block of cheese that he suspects is growing either a new cheese or some kind of toxic mold.

“Crap.”

“Why?” Jughead snorts. “You want one?”

“I’m supposed to bring some to brunch tomorrow.”

“Veronica’s making brunch?” That, to him, doesn’t sound like Veronica at all; he doesn’t think he’s ever seen Veronica come within the vicinity of a stove before, save the handful of times he’s seen her standing beside it, pouring a glass of wine. If anything it sounds like -

“Not Veronica.”

Ah. There it is.

“Got it,” Jughead says.

“She’s doing this whole brunch thing and she wants to have a Mimosa bar,” Archie says, and even though he wants to explain again that it’s perfectly okay to say Betty’s name, that there’s no need to walk on eggshells around him anymore, he lets it slide – Archie will get there when he gets there he’s learned long ago. “I have no idea what the hell a Mimosa bar is,” Archie continues. “But it’s for Kevin. She’s been cooking for this brunch for, like, a week.”

“Kevin’s here?”

“Yeah. I think she actually went back to Riverdale to pick him up today because Kevin couldn’t get his dad’s truck or something – I wasn’t listening, she was talking fast. But she planned this whole New York weekend for him. There’s like two thousand things on her itinerary.”
He almost laughs then, because of course there’s an itinerary planned down to the minute – that’s the Betty he knows.

“Anyway,” Archie continues. “I’m supposed to bring juice for Mimosas to this thing. Orange, right?”

“Orange,” he confirms.

He thinks then about sending a message along with Archie to Kevin, something along the lines of ‘hi,’ because that’s about all he really has to say to Kevin, but he decides against it. It’s Betty’s weekend with her friend, he decides, a weekend that, if any part of the girl he used to know still remains, she’s been planning for a hell of a lot longer than just a week like Archie had let on. It’s not his place to invade that and make any of it about him, even if it’s only a second.

He’s happy for her, he admits to himself then, and it’s a happiness he doesn’t know how to square away with the anger that still remains. He can’t remember the last time Betty mentioned Kevin, the last time she’d talked to him or called him. But if there’s one thing he’s learned from the loss of her friendship in his life, from the loss of the casual, idle conversation he used to have with her, from her shoulder to lean on, the metaphorical wind beneath his wings, it’s that friendship is important - more so than he’s ever given it credit for in the past.

It’s something that, despite everything that had happened between them, he still wants her to have in her life in spades, even if it’s not from him.

“Don’t get anything with pulp,” he says quietly enough that it’s almost drowned out by the noise from the screen. “She doesn’t like it.”

He’s acutely aware of Archie’s unwavering stare directed straight at him. “Did she ever talk to you?” he asks cautiously. “You know, after that night you nearly knocked down the front door?”

“No,” Jughead responds slowly, confused. Talked to him? About what? Did she have more she’d wanted to say that she hadn’t thrown in his face already? “Why would-”

“Hey Jug, it’s the stripper you ordered, open up!”

Instantly and instinctively, he’s on his feet with the controller’s wires tangling around his legs and nearly tripping him as he strides quickly to the door, trying to minimize the damage already done. He doesn’t know exactly what phase in teenage development his sister is going through at the moment, but her whole gung-ho dive into explorations of the world of alcohol and her propensity to drop sexual innuendos at every turn is just not working for him. At all.

“JB, are you serious right now?” he asks in greeting as he pulls the front door open. “You know I actually live in this building, right? I have neighbors and they have ears.”

His sister, his kid sister dressed in black shorts that he thinks she really has no business wearing on an airplane, let alone in the general public, rolls her eyes at him and dumps her large black backpack into his open arms.

“Jeez, lighten up, Jug,” she dismisses, waving him off. “You’re so serious all the time. Archie, hi!” JB calls loudly. Then, she’s breezing right past her discarded luggage and hugging Archie tightly in the hug that he, her own brother, never got.

Archie and his magic over women. Jughead doesn't think that will ever change.
He’s been following his sister around the Village for the better part of the afternoon, holding her many, many bags, and it’s hot enough out that the beanie has come off long ago. He’s been doing his best to be supportive and to just let her do her thing – he knows the shopping scene in Toledo is nothing to write home about, even by his standards.

“Yes,” JB says, looking down at her crumpled, messily scrawled list in hand and up at the street signs. “Two more stores, then I’m done.”

Thank you to all the gods, he thinks.

“Lead the way,” he says, adjusting the bags between his hands. “And out of curiosity, where are you getting all this money, Capone? And I swear, if you make another stripping joke-”

His little sister, the one who used to spit up on him and only him when he’d burp her after her strained peas, the one who’d bury her face in his shoulder when a thunderstorm tumbled in and cracked down loudly on the tin of the trailer’s roof, raises one eyebrow at him. He’s about to go off on her, no holds barred, when she starts laughing.

“I picked up a few extra shifts – and not working the pole, so you can close your mouth before the bugs fly in,” JB says. “Seriously, Jug, what’s with you?”

He frowns, completely unappreciative of her hard, glaring stare when he’s been following her around like a dutiful lost puppy all day without so much as a complaint. “Nothing,” he defends. “It’s ninety-five degrees and I’ve been baking in the sun with these.”

He shrugs, completely unappreciative of her hard, glaring stare when he’s been following her around like a dutiful lost puppy all day without so much as a complaint. “Nothing,” he defends. “It’s ninety-five degrees and I’ve been baking in the sun with these.”

JB rolls her eyes at him. “Is that all? Here,” she says, motioning for the bags. “Now will you tell me what’s wrong? Or do you just want to sulk through the entire weekend?”

At least this one had the decency to spring for air conditioning.

“I’m not sulking and there’s nothing wrong,” he responds eventually. “I had a long week and I’m tired.”

He watches as JB flips through the t-shirts on the rack, bags forgotten and discarded on the floor again. “Are you sulking because of Betty?” she asks casually.

At her name, he swallows hard and coughs around it – he’s heard it in his mind often enough, he’s even said it out loud to a handful of people since, but it’s been a while since he’s been confronted with ‘Betty’ so bluntly and baldly said right to his face. “No,” he manages after a round of throat clearing. “It’s not always about Betty. It hasn’t been in a while.”

“Uh huh,” JB says, voice teetering with calculation and disbelief. “Then why do you look so mad right now?”

“I’m not mad,” he repeats. “Seriously, I’m not mad. Just – do your thing. Don’t worry about me.”

“Jug,” JB starts seriously, turning to him with a shirt extended in either hand for his opinion. “You can tell me not to worry, but I’m going to anyhow. And you can say you’re not mad, but I can tell
you are. So we can talk about this now, or we can talk about it later, but either way, I’m going to keep bothering you about it until you tell me what’s wrong.”

He sighs and runs his free hand through his hair, caught and trapped. He knows JB’s right because he’s been walking around with a ball of anger sitting right on his chest for months, heavy and unyielding, completely consuming; he just hadn’t known it’d been so clearly and plainly written across his face for the world to see.

“Let’s just talk later,” Jughead says, dismissing his sister – he’s not about to air his dirty laundry in public and do a deep dive into the chasm of his feelings, even if they are the only two people in the store. “And that one,” he says, pointing to the top in JB’s right hand. “The other looks like half a shirt.”

“That’s kind of the point.”

“To walk around half naked?”

“It’s called a crop top. Not that I’d expect you to know that since you’ve been wearing the same thing since high school.”

“I know what a crop top is,” he says. “And I know that if Veronica is wearing them out to bars and clubs, you probably shouldn’t be.”

JB shakes her head at him, her dark, unkempt ponytail swishing against her back. “Whatever you say, Dad,” she mocks, and there’s a moment, an almost out-of-body, otherworldly kind of moment that he sees so clearly a little girl with dark hair – just like his sister’s, just like his – swooped up into messy pigtails, a mischievous little hellion with wide green eyes just like Betty’s calling him ‘Dad.’

Calling her ‘Mom.’

“Watch those for me, will you?” JB orders, pointing at her bags at her feet. “I’m going to try these on.”

“Fine,” he says, still lost somewhere in his own fleeting fantasies and reality.

“And browse while you’re at it,” she adds. “ Seriously, Jug, I know that you have like, a grand total of three things in your closet because you’re still holding onto all your Kerouacian dreams of taking off like a highway man in the night, but this,” she says, gesturing to him up-and-down, “this could use an update.”

It’s not that he has a problem the concept of the wardrobe update, or even with the idea of dropping hundreds, or in Veronica’s case, thousands, on a blouse or a purse or shoes if it’s something that’s necessary, hell, if it’s even so much as something that brings happiness. He doesn’t judge how others choose to cash out on their paydays – it doesn’t bother him if Archie blows all his money on booze and baubles for Veronica, or if JB spends hers on t-shirts silkscreened with bands he’s not sure she even listens to – it’s all their prerogative.

But for him, aside for the two or three collared shirts he’s been more or less forced to add to his closet since starting at the Empire, it’s just never something that has brought him any happiness.

She’d picked a beautiful day for sitting out in the park – clear, cloudless skies, and only a whisper of the winter chill that’d only just begun to break after months of snowy slush and harsh winds.

“Happy birthday, Betts,” he’d said, pressing a kiss to her temple. He hadn’t ever been one for
public displays of affection beyond simply holding hands and an occasional hand on the lower back, but he figured that on today of all days, he could bend his own rules and principles for her. Just a little.

Her eyes had turned down to her lap demurely then as the pink had risen to her cheeks. “Thank you,” she’d said. “Again. Jug, you don’t have to keep saying it, you know.”

“I know,” he’d said. “Sorry. It’s just that-” I want this day to be as special for you as I can make it, he thought. I want you to never feel as isolated and alone today like I’ve felt before. I want you to have the world. “I just want you to have a good day,” he’d settled on.

“I am having a good day,” she’d said, slipping her hand into his. “Come on, let’s eat.”

“Sexier words have never been spoken,” he’d joked. Then, seriously – “where do you want to go? Anywhere you want – it’s on me today.”

He’d known she’d been up to something when she’d glanced over her shoulder at him, the corners of her mouth turned up in the smallest of knowing smirks.

“What, here?” he’d asked as she’d brought them to a stop in front of the hot dog stand across from the bench they’d been sitting on, the very same one with a placard boasting three-dollar hot dogs and Diet Snapple at a buck per pop.

“Here,” she’d said.

“Betty, are you sure? We can go anywhere,” he’d asked. “Seriously, you have the whole city at your disposal.”

“I know,” she’d said easily. “But I want to eat here.”

“Okay,” he’d said with a shrug. “Go nuts.”

She’d looked happy, he’d thought as they ate, and really, that was the goal, the endgame of it all – he’d just wanted her happiness and if this was what brought it to her, then so be it. Even so, he’d reasoned, this was a girl who lived with the daughter of a millionaire in a high-rise doorman building on the Upper West Side, a girl who’d grown up in a room of her own, with four pink walls and a queen-sized bed to herself, a girl who had an allowance that didn’t come solely from working at the drive-in.

But here she was on her birthday eating a three-dollar hot dog on a park bench with him, and nothing about that had added up.

Was it enough, he’d wondered then, is all of this enough for someone like her?

Am I enough?

“It’s not like you to play with your food,” she’d said, shaking him gently out of his bubble of thought. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” he’d said quickly. “You’re happy?”

“Yeah, Jug,” she’d said, laughing softly. “I am. But you don’t look like you are.”

“No, I am,” he’d assured her. “But – didn’t you want to go somewhere, I don’t know, nicer? With an actual table and knives and forks?”
She’d looked down at her hands then, and he’d felt the heaviness of realization set in at her averted eyes. The heaviness that told him that maybe she had wanted a white linen tablecloth after all, but she also didn’t want him eating Top Ramen for the foreseeable future, the heaviness that told him that maybe she’d actually changed her conception of happiness for him, dumbed it down because of him, formed and molded it into something that fit in with who he was and what he could be for her.

“I would’ve paid for it,” he’d said quietly. “I know I’m not Veronica-rich, but if it’d make you happy, then it’d make me happy to pay for it. It’s not like checking out books at the library comes out to nothing.”

Minimum wage, but still – not nothing.

“I know you would’ve,” she’d said, her voice assuring and gentle. “This isn’t about money or Zagat restaurants. I picked this because this is what I wanted to do.” She’d neatly folded her napkin and brushed off the crumbs only perceptible to her from her lap. “I’m not Veronica – I don’t need you to buy me fancy dinners or expensive jewelry to make me happy.”

“But do you want that?” he’d clarified. “Forget need – what do you really want?”

He’d knew, when she’d turned and faced him with honesty written across her face, with love shining so confidently and unmistakably in her eyes, that he’d never forget the way she’d looked at him in that moment.

“Oh don’t you know?” she’d asked softly, reaching a hand to his face. “I don’t want anything else besides this. You make me happy, Jug – the way you listen to me, the way you’d do anything to make me happy. The way you love me. All I want is you, just like this.”

She’d tipped her forehead to his, and whispered words meant only for him. “You are so much more than enough.”

Absentmindedly, he flips through the closely-packed line of clothes on the rack and tries to bring himself to afford even the briefest of half-glances at the shirts which frankly, look identical to each other. All this is just so not him. He’s always been a creature of habit, a creature of comfort – he likes his shirts and jackets well-worn and just on the brink of coming apart at the seams, preferably after years of wear and tear, after years of his getting to know it.

In an effort to draw his already absent mind even further away from idle browsing, Jughead pulls out his phone and checks for nothing at all – no texts, no emails, no nothing. He knows the lack of crises and messages wondering where he is, what he’s up to, and if he’s home because Archie has ‘oops! forgotten his keys again,’ is something he really should be grateful for, especially during a weekend he has his hands full with his sister and her jam-packed itinerary.

But still, he argues to himself, it doesn’t mean that he can’t feel just a little lonely, either.

At the familiar feel of leather under his hand, he stops, and for a moment, he’s standing in his shoebox of a room, half-asleep and reaching for any collared shirt that will pass as work appropriate, his knuckles inadvertently brushing up against the metal zipper. For a moment, he’s back in Riverdale and in the tin trailer he’d called home, feeling out the difference between his father’s jacket and his own in the dark because someone had forgotten to pay the electric bill yet again.

Wiggling out the jacket from the tight hug of paisley shirts and printed tees, he holds it up in front of him and almost as soon as he does, flips it over and checks the back. It’s not there – the snaked-S
he’d once worn so proudly on his back – and there’s a part of him that’s entirely relieved because, inexplicably, his eyes, his hand, his entire subconscious being, had been drawn like a moth to an open fire to this jacket, and that’s just not who he is anymore.

It’s not who he is.

“Try it on,” JB’s voice interrupts.

“Jesus,” he says. “Don’t sneak up on people like that.”

“Noted,” she says, bouncing up to his side. “Try it on.”

“What? No.”

JB blows out an exasperated sigh right at his face and pries the jacket from his grasp. “You’re so annoying sometimes,” she mutters.

Then, she’s boldly forcing the jacket over his shoulders, flinging it over him like a cape, like a shroud.

“JB, what the hell – stop!” he says, violently shaking the jacket off. “What are you doing?”

“I’m helping you!”

“You’re hassling me!”

He takes a step back, a full length’s step back when his sister, sixteen and proud and all-knowing, childishly stomps her foot at him. “God!” she says, snatching up the jacket from the floor where it’d fallen. “What is wrong with you, Jug? Why won’t you just try it on?”

She’s near yelling at him now, her face twisted and scrunched in frustration, and even though he’d promised himself that his showdown with Betty on the streets in Hudson Yards would be the first and last fight he’d ever have in public, he hears his voice matching his sister’s decibel.

“Because,” he says firmly, trying and failing to snatch the jacket back from his sister. “This is not who I am anymore. This life – Dad’s life, the life I used to lead – this is all in the past, and that’s where it’s going to stay. So put it back. Now.”

“No.”

“Fine,” he says throwing up his hands. “Suit yourself. But I’m not trying it on.”

It’s taking nearly everything in him to not shove JB’s shopping bags at her and storm out of the store in his cocoon of rage. It’d be all too easy to do – to give in to his anger that’s holding on so strongly to his head and his heart.

But he knows, better than many, that life isn’t about the easy way out, and so he forces himself to stand there with his back-half turned to his sister even though it’s not what he wants to do, even though right here is anywhere but where he wants to be.

“Jug,” JB says softly. “I know that all that Serpent stuff is not who you are anymore. I know that. Archie knows that. Betty knows that-”

“Don’t make this about-”

“I’m not,” she interrupts. “But you have to know because I don’t think that you do. No one sees
you like that anymore. We all know that’s not your life. I mean, it’s just so clearly not. The only thing you ever do anymore is work and write and sulk and keep your head buried so far below the sand that—"

“It’s called being an adult, JB.”

“I wasn’t aware that being an adult meant that losing every part of yourself and being angry all the freaking time. Or not having any fun at all.”

“I have fun,” he counters harshly. “And ‘losing every part of myself?’ I don’t know if you’re just choosing not to listen to me or actively trying to piss me off, but I told you. This isn’t me.”

“You’re not listening to me,” JB snaps back, jutting her chin out at him. “I know that. Everyone knows that, moron, because you shove it down our throats enough. I know this isn’t who you are anymore,” she says, shaking the jacket at him. “But that doesn’t mean it isn’t still a part of you.”

He scoffs loudly, runs a palm over his face, and anchors it on the back of his neck. He knows, deep down in his heart of hearts and soul of souls, that the turbulent, macabre past he’s locked up and thrown away the key to is a part of him as much as all the good is. He knows who he was back then has formed and shaped who he is today for better or worse, and that however much he binds and ties up the strings of his past, they’re always there, seeping into the present and coloring his future.

He knows.

He’s always known.

But it doesn’t make it any easier to admit.

“No one’s ever made up of all good, Jug,” JB says to him quietly.

No, he supposes, and no one ever should be either.

Jughead breathes in deeply and shakily, holds out a hand in invitation for the jacket. “Do you psychoanalyze everyone you cross paths with or is it just me?” he asks.

“I’ve been reading Freud.”

“Doesn’t answer my question.”

He runs his fingertips over the leather, over its grooves and ridges, the pockets and zippers. It’s not completely familiar in his hands - there’s a roughness to it that’s immediately and obviously different; it’s newer than his, and it probably hasn’t gone through the literal blood and sweat his has endured. It hasn’t ever felt the shake of his shoulders from moments of unmatched fear, it hasn’t played handkerchief to the hidden tears that’d escape when the going got especially rough, when everything got to be much too much.

But, there’s something about it that’s not completely foreign, either. There’s a feeling that comes with the jacket in his hands, an amalgamation of emotions that he can’t make real sense of yet. There’s apprehension, and a good deal of it too, because this is the embodiment of everything he’s cast aside for years right here in his hands and staring back at him; there’s excitement, and a tinge of disappointment at that giddiness.

Above all, most prominently and pronounced - there’s a wave and wash of serenity that’s completely surprising and completely unexpected. It’s like coming face to face with a long-lost
childhood friend, he parallels as he looks at the jacket in his upturned palms; the roots of friendship and familiarity are still there, they’re buried deep, but they’re there, waiting to be unearthed and set free once more.

In one swift, practiced motion, he turns the jacket over his back and shrugs it on over his shoulders, and as it settles and curves around him, he knows that there’s nothing in him that can deny the pure, unadulterated fact that it just feels right.

And when he brings his eyes up to face his own reflection’s in the fingerprint-laden mirror, as squares his shoulders and feet in front of it, he smiles.

It looks right, too.

He doesn’t look like a boy playing dress-up anymore, a boy trying to emulate and walk in his father’s footsteps. His shoulders don’t hunch over and pinch together under the leather, they don’t tremble with crippling pressure, or fear, or uncertainty.

He faces himself, straight and tall, but there’s nothing about his reflection that’s shocking or unfamiliar.

There's nothing about it that's unrecognizable.

He just looks like him.

Even though he’s a couple hundred dollars poorer because who knew leather jackets could be that expensive, he springs for both pizza and Chinese food for dinner. He tells JB that he’d ordered both just to shut up her incessant ‘but what do you really want, like really, really want?’ line of questioning, but really, he likes that he has enough money now to let her have both things she’d been mulling over, and he hopes that this at least partially erases and eases any memory she has of them counting and dividing evenly a single order of Pop’s fries, of the guilty look she’d wear when he’d push a few of his on her plate, because she could never resist even though she knew how much he loved them.

“Got it,” JB says, voice bursting with triumph as the zippers on her suitcase give way and groan shut – the thing looks like it’s about to explode right back open in the next breath. “And thanks so much for all the help.”

“What?” he says innocently. “It looked like you had it.”

His penalty is the remote out of his hand when JB flops down on the couch next to him. Careful, he wants to tell her, because he’s pretty sure this particular hand-me-down is older than both of them combined, and he doesn’t want it giving way under her weight.

But then again, she also weighs all of one hundred pounds, so he lets it slide.

“So,” JB begins, flicking through the channels even faster than he’d been doing. “Are we going to talk about Betty now or later?”

“How about never?”
“Yeah, that doesn’t work for me.”

He snorts. Of course it doesn’t. Never mind that talking about Betty ‘doesn’t work for him,’ – it doesn’t work for JB, so they’re going to talk about it.

“What about Betty?” he relents.

“Why do you look so angry when someone even mentions her name? Or, like, even thinks about her?”

“I don’t,” he defends poorly, because even right here and right now, he can feel all the muscles in his face twisting and pinching unpleasantly.

“You do,” JB says. “And before you say anything else – Archie told me about the kiss at graduation. And I also saw you guys talking. Seriously, the level of eye fu-”

“Okay,” he cuts off sharply. “I get it. And for the record, we didn’t kiss.”

JB doesn’t take the bait. “What happened between May and now?”

Jughead runs a hand through his hair, holds back a groan, and suppresses the vehement, overwhelming desire to petulantly kick at the coffee table just barely within his foot’s reach. He can’t believe he’s having this conversation right now – about Betty, about what happened, about his feelings – and of all people, with his teenage sister.

“Nothing happened,” he says. “We had a fight.”

If the information he’d just offered and admitted into the world wasn’t so replete with a backstory begging to be told, he knows JB would’ve called him out for the contradiction in his words – ‘a fight is by definition not nothing,’ he can hear her chastising him.

At least he can take pride in the fact that JB is painstakingly careful with her words. There’s not much they have in common, but he likes that they share in this.

“You had a fight,” his sister assesses slowly. “What about?”

“I really don’t want to talk about this.”

“I’m fully aware.”

He pauses then, thinking. Everything, he wants to say, the fight was about everything – about how Betty had used him, how she’d been so single-mindedly selfish when he’d come to her with an olive branch hidden behind his back, how when she stood in front of him, face contorted in anger, he’d been facing off with a stranger.

“She did some things and she said some things,” he answers vaguely. Talking about himself and expressing his feelings has never been his strong suit.

“Did it have to something do with Archie?”

“No,” he says. “You really think she’d do that?”

“I don’t,” JB qualifies. “But I also don’t know what else she’d do that would have you this pissed off with her.”

“I went to this bar with her – she wanted me to help with a work thing. And I don’t know,” he says,
searching for the right words to hide his real thoughts. “She spent the whole time flirting with other
guys.”

“But that’s not why you’re really mad,” JB cuts in, voice filled with all the confidence he never
had at her age.

But an earned confidence, he concedes, because JB is right. She’s absolutely right – Betty’s
flirting, her bar tab that had somehow ended up on his own credit card for reasons unknown to him
– he couldn’t care less about all that. Those are the little trees of minor problems in a much bigger
forest of overwhelming wrongs.

“It was like she wasn’t herself that night,” Jughead admits eventually. “I’ve never seen her so out
of it before. She was so single-mindedly focused on herself. She was so oblivious to everything
around her. She was just so... selfish.”

He watches his sister weigh the gravitas of his words in her mind. There’s a tinge of disbelief in the
way she’s looking at him, like she can’t quite believe what he’s just told her because that’s simply
not the Betty she knows.

He thinks that the Betty he’d seen that night is something like an apparition that only he and no one
else in the haunted house had seen – that side of her had been like Mr. Snuffleupagus, the
freakishly horrifying monster his mother had promised he’d grow to like, and that to this day he
still absolutely hates; no child of his will ever be subjected to Sesame Street if he has anything to
say about it.

But it’s something of an apt parallel, he thinks. To everyone around her, Betty has never been
anything but the perennial best friend with a smile on her face and a hand to help; he can’t blame
JB, or really anyone for that matter, for even half-doubting him about that night in June.

But then comes JB’s blithe retort, and if he hadn’t been sitting down already, he definitely would
be now.

“So?”

He’d expected sympathy, maybe even pity and an ‘oh, poor Jughead,’ directed his way, but there’s
no sign that his sister is about to indulge him in any of that right now.

“So,” he starts, snapping out his words. “It was like cavorting with Jekyll and Hyde. She was
someone entirely different. She wasn’t the girl I loved. She wasn’t Betty.”

“Yes, she was,” JB says, bringing legs up on the couch and crossing them under her. “I mean,
come on, Jug, it’s your favorite thing to say – two sides of the same coin or whatever. So she was
mean and selfish. That sucks. But who isn’t at some point?”

Not Betty, he wants to interrupt. Never Betty.

“You have these visions of people sometimes, Jug,” JB tells him, looking down at her hands folded
in her lap. She’s admitting something, he realizes, because the look-down is something he does,
too. “You put them on a pedestal that’s so unreachable and so unattainable that they have no choice
but to fall. And when they do...” her voice trails off into a shrug.

“What?” he scoffs. “I don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what I did at sixteen, JB, you’re so much better than that. You’re so much better than I
ever was. Just keep your head down and work hard, JB, and you’ll be able to be anything you want
“to be,” JB mimics in a voice and tone that’s not at all unlike his own. “Look, Jug – it’s sweet that you think so much of me, it really is. I know you think the world of Betty, and before you say that you don’t – save it, because I’ve seen the way you look at her. But,” she says. “You don’t know how hard it is to live up to your standards sometimes. People need to be able to fail, but in your world, they never can.”

JB pauses then, shifting on the couch, reaching for her water glass, tactics in delaying and distracting until she drums up courage to continue on.

“I’m not saying what Betty did was right,” she says. “It probably wasn’t. I don’t know exactly what happened between you guys, and I probably never will because it’s not like you’re going to tell me. But if all you’re mad about is that she did something selfish, then ask yourself if that’s even fair. Betty’s allowed to be selfish and she’s allowed to make mistakes sometimes, you know.”

“Whose side are you on, anyhow?” he asks.

“What sides?” JB retorts with an ugly-sounding snort. “There are no sides. There’s just you two dimwits on the same stupid side, and the rest of us out here trying to get you guys to see that you make each other happy.”

“This is such a useless point to beat to death,” he says. “She’s moved on. I’ve moved on. There’s no point in discussing this.”

“You’ve moved on?”

“I’m moving on,” he clarifies, feeling heat and blood rise to his cheeks – why this conversation again? What gods has he pissed off? “I went out on a date this week. With a girl.”

“Yeah, and I can tell from your face that you had a great time,” JB says, brushing him off. She sighs then, and even though he feels sorry that she sounds just so resigned and fed-up with him, he doesn’t know what else he can say to make it better for her. It’d been her idea to breach the monolithic subject of ‘Betty Cooper’ in the first place, and he’s been nothing but a disappointment on that front for months now – there’s simply nothing left to say. What’s done is done and all that.

“Look, Jug,” JB starts, gathering up her shoulders and her voice. “If this whole moving on thing is what’s making you happy, then I’ll shut up about Betty. Seriously, I will.”

There’s not a chance in hell of that happening, he thinks, but he keeps that thought to himself. JB is trying, as misguided as he thinks this whole conversation is; he should try, too.

“But,” she continues. “If there’s even a shot in a blue moon of you getting back together with Betty, then do her, and more importantly, do yourself a favor and take her down from that pedestal you put her on. It may make you feel better about yourself, too.”

It’s not much to go on, logic wise, but he thinks he understands what his sister is getting at. Betty has never been anything to him but perfect Betty Cooper, the perfect girl-next-door for as long as he’s known her – she’s the girl who taught Archie to read out of the goodness of her own heart, the girl who empathetically placed a reassuring arm on his when he’d tried to burn down the elementary school and told him simply ‘it’s okay, Juggie, I know you didn’t mean it.’ She’s the girl who juggled the Blue & Gold and the Homecoming Committee, and then later, the Daily Spectator, she’s the girl who did it all with a blinding smile and a gung-ho attitude whatever the day, whatever the time.

She’s the girl who loved him and looked past all his flaws and failures even when he hadn’t
extended the same courtesy to her.

She was so perfect, the Betty Cooper of his past, and he was just so unworthy of her.

But this version of Betty – this imperfect version, the one that makes mistakes, the one that has regrets, the one that’s selfish – maybe this is a version of Betty is one he matches up more closely with. Because just like her, he makes mistakes, and he has regrets, and he’s been so selfish before, too, and especially when it comes to her.

And if that’s true, then maybe he’s not so unworthy of her after all.

“You’ve been through so much, Jug,” his sister says, head hung low. “I was only ten – I don’t remember much about what happened with Mom and Dad other than that one day, it was just Mom and me on a bus on the way to Toledo, and you, not there with us. I don’t know much about what you went through, other than the fact you dealt with it all in a way I never had to. I’m happy in Toledo – I miss you when I’m there – but I’m happy.”

“JB, that’s a good thing,” he assures her quickly, and just how good, he can’t even begin to express to her. It’s all he’s ever wanted for his sister – for her to be safe, to be healthy and happy, and here she is now wearing the confidence and self-assurance he’s always wanted for her. He doesn’t want her ever feeling guilty for her happiness, and especially not at his expense. “I’m happy that you’re happy.”

“That’s nice of you, Jug, but this isn’t about me.” JB stares at him then, and for a moment he sees his own self at sixteen, the same sixteen when this had all begun, reflected back in her eyes – she’s so determined, so resolute, so staunchly stubborn. “You’ve been through so much with Mom and Dad and everything in between – you dealt with it all in a way I never had to – and after all of that, you deserve to be happy. You deserve to have what you want in love.”

Deserves.

What he deserves. The love that he deserves. It’s such a foreign concept to him - the idea of deserving something - it’s so unknown, that JB’s seemingly unassuming words hit him square in the chest, barreling into him with full force. He’s never considered the idea of deserving love before because simply he’s never thought of himself as the type that deserves anything – he’s just always made do and gotten by, and in love, he’s only ever focused on what he thinks Betty deserves, because that’s what love is – taking care of someone else, their needs, their desires. It’s doing for her the things that she deserves, being for her the person she deserves.

But that’s so foolish, he thinks now, it’s such a bizarre, incoherent double-standard he’s set up for himself by himself. Even as angry as he is, every part of him still believes that Betty deserves a truly great love, a love of epic, insurmountable proportions that takes all of her breath away, a love that leaves her heart pounding and her head dizzy. She deserves that, even after everything.

But so does he.

So does he.

“Do you think she would forgive you?” JB asks, so softly that he thinks he might’ve misheard her. “If it’d been you that said and did all those horrible things – would she forgive you?”

Yes, his mind fills in for him, because if anything of the girl he knows still remains, if that other side of the coin is still there, she has a capacity to forgive that’s unparalleled; she’s already forgiven him for so much worse, maybe even more than she ever should have.
“What does that have to do with anything?” he asks.

JB shrugs. “If she’d forgive you, don’t you owe it to her to do the same?”

“I don’t owe her anything.”

“No, you don’t,” JB agrees firmly, surprising him. “But maybe, you owe it to yourself. It’s okay to just not be angry anymore, you know? There doesn’t have to be a reason. It’s okay to just let it go. Forgive her. Move on. Start again. Be happy.”

He snorts and shakes his head. “Were life so simple.”

“Well,” JB answers back thoughtfully. “Why can’t it be?”

In a surprising stroke of genius masterminded by one Archie Andrews, he’s driving his sister to the airport in Veronica’s Audi like the stand-up brother he is, instead of subjecting her to a fifty-dollar cab ride and a wave goodbye from the living room window.

He supposes he really owes Archie one for this, big time, because he’s doing the brunt of the legwork here – Archie’s the one driving the car to and from their apartment and Veronica’s to save him the ‘you know,’ he’d said.

Embarrassment, awkwardness, the desire to crawl-in-a-hole-and-die, he’d filled in effortlessly.

He’s forgotten how much he hates driving in the city – everyone drives like they’ve never quite learned how to – and he’d gotten next to no sleep the night before. The dishonest part of his brain, the red devil on his shoulder, blusters his way around an excuse – the couch was lumpy and uncomfortable and he’d been much too tall for it even with his legs pulled up to his chest, the apartment creaked in an altogether different way in the living room, JB snores louder than their grandfather ever had.

But the honest part of his brain, the angel on the other side of the devil knows exactly why he’d tossed and turned the entire night – and it’s the same exact reason that’s caused him every sleepless night he’s suffered this year.

Were it so simple, he’d said. Were it so simple, would he want to fix it and try again?

“The curb’s fine,” JB says, motioning to the line of cars triple-parked by the terminal. “Seriously, don’t pay for airport parking and walk me in or anything like that.”

“You sure?” he asks, even as he pulls the car over, leaving more room than necessary for JB to get out – he’s not about to have some idiotic Super Shuttle run right into his sister. Or Veronica’s luxury convertible.

“I’m sure.” He watches, heart suddenly extremely heavy and weighing down his entire body, as JB clicks off her seatbelt and adjusts her backpack on her shoulders. She’s so old now, he thinks. She’s this fully formed, realized person, and she’s funny and thoughtful and confident – everything he’s always hoped she’d be even as they grew up cities and miles apart from each other. He doesn’t doubt for a second that his mom made the right decision in towing JB along with her to Toledo and getting her the hell out of the mess that was Riverdale, but he doesn’t think the part of him that
wishes he grew up with his little sister will ever disappear, either.

But it’d been for the best, and there’s so much comfort he can find in that now.

“Do you want me to get your bag for you?” he asks, coughing out the rock that’s lodged itself in his throat.


She doesn’t move, though, almost as if she’s waiting for him to say something – anything – to her, and because he does in fact have a thought or two to share, he jumps at the opportunity.

“Hey,” he starts, letting his hands fall from the wheel to his lap. “I heard you. Last night, all that stuff you were saying about Betty and about me being happy, I heard you. I know you want us to get back together, but it’s just more complicated than that. But I’ll think about it,” he says. “I’m thinking about it.”

JB smiles at him, but it’s one he almost wants her to take back because it’s the first time he’s ever seen her smile with sadness. It’s a smile he’s never wanted to see on her – sixteen is far too young to know that smile, and he thinks that he might’ve had a big hand in forcing her to learn it. “I just want you to be happy,” she says. “And yeah, it’d be great if it was with Betty, but even if it isn’t, that’s okay, too. I just want you to be happy, whoever that’s with or whatever you do. I love you, Jug.”

She looks so much like she did at five when he’d make up stories to send her to sleep because she’d been bored senseless from the three tattered paperback children’s books they owned, she looks so much like she did at eight when he’d pick her up from school and she’d tell her friends ‘that’s my brother, he’s in middle school and he’s super cool.’

He’d once been something of a hero to her, and he’s so glad, relieved, even, that when she looks at him now even after all he’s said and done, she still looks at him in the same way. He’s changed – he’s older, maybe wiser, maybe not – but he’s still her brother, the brother that she knows will protect her and stand up for her until kingdom come.

“I love you, too,” he says, reaching across the seat and awkwardly twisting himself to hug his sister. “Be safe, okay? Text me when you land.”

He expects some kind of joke then, something of the ‘Dad’ or overbearing parent variety, but JB simply nods once and tells him ‘I will.’

She pushes the door open, and the question that’s been on his mind since May, the one that he’s thought about and mulled over for so long he’s almost forgotten it, jumps right back to the forefront of his mind.

“Hey, JB?” he blurts out. “At the graduation party – what were you and Betty talking about?”

JB’s head tilts to the side, and her eyebrows knit and furl together as loses herself in the recollection. Or the lie, he theorizes, if she’s thinking about not being completely honest with him, if she’s thinking about sparing him whatever pain she thinks the truth might bring.

“Girl stuff,” JB admits eventually. “She said we were still friends and that I could talk to her even though you guys weren’t together anymore.”

“Oh,” he says, hearing the disappointment in his own voice. Of course they hadn’t been talking about him. “That was nice of her. You should talk to her, if you want.” He hopes that she knows he
really means it, because he knows for a fact that JB is more of the ‘guy’s gal’ type, and that she
doesn’t have many girlfriends – if Betty is someone that JB’s willing to talk to about all the things
she can’t tell her friends who he doesn’t like on principle, the things that she can’t tell him, then he
hopes that whatever bizarre, hellish limbo he and Betty exist in has no bearing on JB’s own
relationship with her.

He watches out of the rearview mirror as JB, with probably as much strength and effort as she has
in her wiry frame, wrestles her suitcase out of the trunk and wheels it to the curb. He’s about to
drive off, hand locked on the gear, when she suddenly stops dead in her tracks and rushes back out
towards the car, dipping in and out of traffic, suitcase unattended on the curbside and all but tipped
over.

“Are you insane?” he reprimands loudly, rolling down the passenger side window. “Don’t run out
into-”

“She also said that she missed you, for whatever it’s worth,” JB blurts out forcefully, almost
frantically. “Right before you barged in, she told me that she missed you. And you can believe me
or not, but I know she really meant it.”

He can’t explain the bubble of excitement that wells in his chest, the sudden rush of blood and
lightheadedness when he processes JB’s revelation.

She’d missed him.

Betty had missed him that night. She’d been thinking about him, he’d been on her mind, he hadn’t
been some forgotten relic of her past or a nuisance standing there talking to her like he thought he’d
been. She’d missed him, like he’d been missing her sitting outside on the fire escape and watching
the night unfold around him, the night that he should’ve been celebrating with her.

She’d missed him.

But, the rational part in him counters, that had also been months ago – before the fight, before the
fallout, before the fire they’d both set off that had burned them both down. What had been true that
night probably isn’t true now.

“Go on,” he urges JB gently. “You’re going to miss your flight if you don’t get in line soon.
Security’s probably crazy today, it always is over the weekends.”

JB’s mouth opens, then shuts, and opens again, and he knows what she wants to say without her
saying it because he knows her – ‘*what are you going to do with that information, Jug? Are you
going to do anything about it? No? Why not?’

But, he thinks she realizes as she snaps her mouth shut and as she makes her way back to her fallen
suitcase, this is his mess. This is his life and these are his own feelings, and for better or worse, he
has to be the one that sorts it out at the end of the day.

He stays there, triple-parked on the curb and ignoring the sharply aggressive honks behind him
even after JB has long disappeared inside the terminal.

Traffic is worse on the way back because for reasons unknown to him, people actually want to take
their cars into the city that has no parking and an average travel time of an hour to move a mile, but he doesn’t mind it this time around; it gives him time to think.

It’s quiet now without JB’s everlasting, prodding voice bending his ear at every moment about Betty, Betty, Betty, but even without her there all he can think about, somewhat unsurprisingly, is Betty, Betty, Betty.

He still doesn’t know how he really feels about the side of her he’d seen her unleash on him in June, but what he does know is that the anger he’d held onto so staunchly and stubbornly isn’t as pronounced anymore. She had been selfish that night, that much he’s not willing to relent, and she’d been a little out of her mind, too.

But he can also honestly say that in his entire lifetime, the way that she’d had acted that night, the things she’d said and done – that had been nothing short of a first for her. She’s never failed or made mistakes, at least in his eyes, she’s never been anything less than put together and on top of everything, selfless to the end – that’s the Betty he knows.

It’s so exhausting, he realizes now, to have to live up to such an impossible standard that she’d never even asked for in the first place. It’s not a standard he’d ever meant to impose on her, because he’s always only thought the best of her and wanted the best for her.

But if it’s a standard that he did burden her with, even inadvertently, even unintentionally, then he’s not completely faultless either, because he can’t think of anything more unfair than subjecting her to an ideal he knows he himself would fail miserably at trying to live up to. He’s wrong, too, and if that’s true – that they’re both sharing in some kind of wrong together – then the way that he’s been wielding his anger like a sword and shield may not be as justified as he’d believed.

On impulse, he switches over to the exit lane for the West Side and decides then and there he’s going to return Veronica’s car to her himself.

And, while he’s there, he might see if Veronica’s roommate is home, and what she thinks about maybe getting a cup of coffee with him.

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His palms slide on the wheel as the streets, the corner grocery stores, the many, many Duane Reade’s and CVS’ all start looking familiar. He hasn’t talked to Betty in what feels like centuries, and they’d left things horrendously the last time he’d seen her. What if she’s not there? What if she doesn’t want to talk to him, what if she doesn’t want to see him?

There’s a degree of chance in love – it’s something he’s never put much stock in before because he’s never been one to believe in something as amorphous and as nebulous as fate, but there’s so much that has to line up right here and right now for this to work. She has to be there at home, she has to want to see him, she has to not want to throw a brick at his face and slam the door on him. She has to feel something close to what he’s feeling now. Mentally, physically, emotionally, she has to be where he is, too, and there’s chance in that.

At the block before hers and stopped at a light, he wipes his hands on his jeans and exhales a shaky, labored breath. He wishes he’d looked a bit nicer for this moment, maybe put on something else other than a tattered t-shirt, and quickly, he combs his fingers through his hair and squints at himself in the rearview mirror – it’s not great but it’ll have to do.
And then he sees it, out of the corner of his eye, the vision that makes him do a double, triple, a full-on quadruple take. He sees it after all these months – that blonde ponytail, slicked back on her head and perched up high, swishing in the summer heat, and her. The her that the ponytail belongs to.

He sees her right before his eyes, and then he sees it – her hand holding someone else’s.

In a literary sense, he thinks the appropriate phrase for a moment exactly like this is ‘punched in the gut.’ But he’s been punched in the gut before, he’s been punched in his back, his face and sometimes simultaneously, too.

Whatever is happening to him now is nothing like that, because for as many times as he’s been punched in the gut, it’s never been like this. Every part of him is on fire. Every part of him – every brain cell, every thought – is burning and boiling, everything is crackling and turning into nothing but malleable, powdery ash. His skin is crawling and he can’t breathe – there’s just no oxygen – it’s all gone.

Were it so simple, he’d thought.

How stupid he’d been in goading himself into believing that something like this – something like relationships, loss, friendship, love – could ever be simple.

At the green light, he drives straight past her and he doesn't look back. He can't bring himself to.

There’s chance in love, and so much of it, too – in timing, in mutuality, in all the scattered stars of her universe and his, coming together and lining up just right.

But the odds have never been on his side.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from "Young Blood" by the Naked and Famous.
When she faces herself in the mirror, dramatically turning on the point of her new heels, she smiles widely at the girl looking back at her.

There’s a part of her that can’t quite believe that the person looking back at her is in fact, her; surely it can’t be her there in the mirror wearing this expensive silk blouse, this fine wool pencil skirt and actually pulling it off. Surely that’s not actually her standing there, looking like she belongs in these clothes.

But when she brushes her fingertips over the glass, as she takes stock of her ponytail swooped up on top of her head, of her pale lipstick and the silver necklace Polly had sent her for her birthday, they’re her fingertips reaching back to touch her own, it’s her own face there, shoulders straightened, head held high.

For the first time in a long time, she looks and she likes what she sees.

Betty allows herself a few more minutes of indulging her vanity, of turning and twisting in front of the mirror, and posing with her hand on one hip then the other, then her right foot forward, then her left. She’s about to shake out her ponytail, just to see what her hair down looks like with the outfit, when she hears keys jingle in the lock and the front door slam shut.

“B!” she hears Veronica call to her. “I’m home and I’m drinking – come sit with me!”

Betty quickly pushes her closet door shut, hiding the mirror she’d just spent an obscene amount of time in front of according to her standards, and by Veronica’s, not nearly enough. She hears the click of her heels match up with Veronica’s as they both make their way to either side of her door, and Betty’s longer stride just barely wins out as she pulls open the door to reveal Veronica’s tired but hopeful face, and her hand raised, ready to knock.

“You won’t believe the day I – oh my god, B,” Veronica says, crouching down to examine and feel the material of her skirt while forcing Betty into an ungraceful pirouette. “You look so stunningly incredible right now.”

Betty doesn’t need any sort of mirror to know that she’s coloring violently – she can feel it flush against the insides of her cheeks and almost see the reflection of red Veronica’s soft and approving eyes.

“Thanks, V,” Betty says. It’s one thing to get a ‘you look nice,’ or ‘that’s cute on you,’ from Veronica Lodge who makes sweatpants look like haute couture; it’s an entirely different thing and an entirely different feeling altogether to get a you look ‘stunningly incredible’ from her.

“What’s the occasion?”

“I’m interviewing an NYU adjunct on Thursday,” Betty says. “She just won a MacArthur Genius Grant.”
“That’s amazing, Betty,” Veronica offers encouragingly, gripping on tightly to both her hands. “This sounds like a big deal.”

Betty shrugs and smiles because secretly, she thinks so too – it’s her first solo interview and the first story she’s been assigned with all training wheels completely off. But she doesn’t want to brag about it any further, lest she jinx it all, especially when Veronica’s hair is looking as deflated as it is.

“There are brownies in the Tupperware for you,” Betty says instead.

And for Archie, too, she supposes, when he predictably shows up in about a half-hour.

“What?” Veronica asks, confused.

“The brownies on the counter are for you,” Betty repeats. “I made them when I got home, so they’re probably still warm.”

“Why?” Veronica questions again, dark eyebrows drawing together. “Did Archie ask you to make them? Did he do something? Should I be pissed at him?”

“No, no!” Betty says quickly. “Nothing like that. You’ve been home late every day this week, so I figured why not come home to chocolate?”

She watches as Veronica’s face turns from skeptical to surprised, and guiltily, Betty knows why – it’s been a while since she’s hauled out her stand-mixer from behind the pots and pans and baked anything for anyone; that much she knows is undeniably true because one, she’d spent a solid thirty minutes wiping off dust from it, and two, her baking skills had been rusty at best, and she’d very incorrectly measured for the first batch.

“You’re the best, B,” Veronica says sincerely, gathering her up into a hug she hadn’t been expecting at all. “Now come eat these brownies with me.”

Betty excuses herself to quickly change into a pair of sleep shorts and a tattered tee, and when she shuffles her way out to the kitchen, Veronica is already there in a matching silk pajama set, pouring two large glasses of wine.

“If you don’t want it, I’ll just drink it later,” Veronica prefaces.

Betty weighs the pros and cons quickly, thinking about her day tomorrow, thinking about what she feels like doing now, and ends with a shrug – one glass won’t kill her. “I’m in,” she says gamely.

“There’s the Betty Cooper I know and love,” Veronica sing-songs, tucking the Tupperware under her arm, and there’s so much of her that wants to sit Veronica down and ask her exactly what she means by that, and go over it with her point-by-point.

But Veronica finally has her feet up on the couch, red and marked with lines from her heels, and she’s blissfully midway through dessert.

This is not the time to make this about herself.

“Remember when we thought college was hard?” Betty asks instead, claiming the other end of the couch. “What were we thinking?”

“Don’t remind me,” Veronica mutters, holding out the box to her. “Seriously, who ever knew working could be this – horrible?”
“Designs didn’t go over that well?” Betty guesses quietly, biting daintily into a brownie. They’re good, she thinks, even by her standards.

Veronica sighs into her drink and the sides of the glass fog with her breath. “It was a massacre,” she says, voice filled with mournful rejection. “Cynthia more or less told me to burn every single one and start again.”

Betty knows that Veronica has a flair for the dramatics, but she’s heard enough of the Cynthia-crappling-on-Veronica stories by now to know there’s a good chance that she’s not exaggerating at all. She doesn’t know how to really help Veronica – the outfit she’d painstakingly thrown together for her interview is about as sophisticated as her fashion sense extends – and Betty hopes that dessert and kind words are enough.

“I’m sorry, V,” she says, reaching across the couch to squeeze Veronica’s arm. “If it’s any consolation, I thought they were great.”

With her head tipped down, Veronica shrugs. It’s such an unusual, unfamiliar sight – this New York It-Girl wearing anything less than complete confidence. But there’s something comforting that comes from that, too, Betty admits to herself, something oddly and wonderfully settling that comes with knowing that it isn’t just her trying and failing, that it isn’t just her having to pick herself up after she’s been knocked down.

“It’s okay,” Veronica concludes, in between a sip of wine and a bite of brownie. “I just have to work harder. What that looks like, I have no idea, but it’s what I have to do.”

Betty nods along silently – she understands the sentiment.

“Anyhow,” Veronica brushes off. “I’ll think about all of that tomorrow. I want to hear about your date! I can’t believe I didn’t get a chance to grill you last night. This was date three, right?”

“Four, actually,” Betty says, feeling the back of her neck heat at the information she’s inevitably going to have to share with Veronica if they keep discussing this particular topic. “If you count that coffee date we went on in August.”

She counts it. It hadn’t been much of a date at all – it’d been a twenty-minute ice-breaker where the most interesting details she’d learned about him was that he had a golden retriever named Max and went to one of the Ivy Leagues – which one, though, she already can’t remember. But he’d taken her hand while walking her home, and she’d fought every instinct she had to quickly snatch it away and cradle it to her chest.

It’d felt different. He – Parker – had held onto her tightly, almost like he’d known, too, that she’d been fighting herself by letting her hand stay in his. But they’d made it to her door, she hadn’t pulled away, and that, she thinks, has to count for something.

“Betty,” Veronica starts slowly, voice filled with tell-tale knowing. “What’s wrong? You have that face.”

“There’s no face,” she says quickly in deflection.

“You don’t like him, do you?”


“Betty,” Veronica says again, and it’s all that she needs to.
Eventually is not enough. Settling for half a feeling, for the dim hope that one day, she’ll develop more of a spark with this person she thinks she already should be sparkling with, is simply not what she wants for herself in love. She knows what a real spark feels like – there’s a building and burning, and there’s overwhelming mix of calm and calamity that comes with the inherent knowing that an incredible love could be blossoming, that something very great and monumental and awesome is out there for her on the horizon.

Whatever she’s feeling now just isn’t that.

“He kissed me,” Betty admits, and quietly because it’s still a raw, ugly truth she hasn’t come to terms with yet. She’s kissed someone else other than the someone she’d once seen her entire future with, and even though her heart hadn’t been in it at all, that in no way erases the simple fact that she’s kissed someone else.

“And I kind of kissed him, too. I kissed him back.” She looks over to Veronica then any signs of scorn or encouragement, but Veronica has always had the poker face Betty’s never quite perfected. “But there was just nothing there,” Betty continues. “I just felt... nothing. I felt numb. It spent the whole time wishing it would end.”

“You can’t force love, B,” Veronica tells her gently. “Or physical attraction, for that matter.”

“I know,” she says, sighing, and she thinks then that even if she could, she wouldn’t want to.

She doesn’t know if she’ll ever find that kind of spark again, that electricity that once sent her whole body thrumming with heat and chill, but she knows that there’s no way for her to make it manifest.

It’s either there, or it’s not.

She’s downtown on Thursday morning with time to spare, just like she’d planned, and since she has her route mapped and tracked, her notes reviewed and ready in the leather purse Veronica insisted on lending to her, she decides that yes, she can afford herself twenty minutes of dog watching at the park on West Tenth. It’s a beautiful day, she convinces herself, the heavy hand of the summer’s heat is slowly but surely loosening its tight grip over the city with each hour, each day, and she wants to take advantage of that while she still can.

At a coffee cart near the park, Betty stops and steps in line, and starts sorting through her bag for the exact change so she doesn’t hold anyone up when it’s her turn; she’s been on the receiving end of more than enough glares and exasperated sighs to have learned that lesson many times over. She runs through her questions again in her head as she waits, the ones she spent her entire sleepless night memorizing and rehearsing. She reminds herself to shake hands firmly, to keep her head high and her eyes away from her notebook, to stay engaged and present during the interview.

But, as nervous as she is – and she is nervous because this could really mean something for her career – she also thinks that she’s okay. She’s got this. She’s practiced and researched and she’s dressed for the part – she’s ready. She’s unstoppable. She’s going to take the world, or at the very least, this interview, by force and fire.

When the man in front of her turns with his coffee and a donut in hand, she steps forward into her turn, and the words ‘medium coffee’ are only halfway out of her mouth before her world flips
sideways into disaster.

Betty feels the next five seconds before her mind catches up to what’s actually happening. As her foot comes down onto the pavement, the point of her heel lodges and digs itself firmly into a sidewalk crack, sending her ankle rolling and buckling sharply under her. Then, she’s tumbling and flying forward with both hands held out in front of her, grabbing onto nothing at all.

The groan and exasperation of the morning’s traffic is loud, but it’s still completely and wholly incomparable to the thunder of her heel snapping free from the base of her shoe.

She breaks her fall by knocking into the arm of the customer in front of her, and as he flings his coffee all over her blouse, as she hisses and yelps from the heat spreading over her stomach, all she can think to do is to swing Veronica’s purse out of the way and behind her back because that isn’t hers, and there’s just no way she can replace it if anything were to happen to it.

“I’m so sorry,” she blurts out, fanning herself furiously. It’s so hot. Everything is sticky. Everything is on fire. “I’m so-

“Lady, are you goddamn serious?”

Betty stops in the middle of peeling her blouse away from her skin at the man’s derisive tone – she hadn’t expected anger. She’s the one with potential second-degree burns, she’s the one with a broken shoe, she’s the one with a bruised ego and red face, apologizing.

“I-

“Watch where you’re going next time.”

“Hey,” she says sharply, even as she wobbles on her one good heel and with no legs to stand on. “Do you think I wanted this to happen?” she asks. “Do you think I woke up today and thought, ‘I know, the thing that will make my day just that much more fun is having a perfect stranger spill coffee on me?’ Because I didn’t.”

Betty doesn’t wait for his answer – the muffled laughs and snorts from the coffee line are more than enough – and with what little of her dignity and tenacity she has left, she hobbles to the corner to really assess the damage done.

“Oh, God,” she whispers to no one at all when she looks down. “Oh, God.”

There’s no saving it – all the time and bleach in the world won’t save the ruined white silk. There’s coffee stained across the entire expanse of her stomach, there’s coffee dotting her chest, and enough of it that she can see her red skin shining right through.

Frantically and with increasingly cloudy, misty eyes, she looks around the streets for a sign of something that’s open at this hour, any boutique, any novelty tourist shop selling ‘I-heart-NY’ tees she can turn inside out, anything all.

There’s nothing.

“Crap,” she mutters to herself again, digging through Veronica’s purse for her emergency cardigan she already knows isn’t there, because she so clearly remembers tossing it on her bed this morning – it’d made the bag look bulky. She scans the streets once more, feeling the ticking of the clock setting in heavily on her heart, tasting nauseating fear at the back of her throat, and then, her eyes snap back down the purse on her arm.
Just how far does Veronica’s wardrobe really extend?

It’s not a great solution, in fact, it’s a downright terrible one, but it’s all she can think of right now. It’s all she has.

She kicks off both shoes, scoops them up in her arms, and ignoring the side glances, the averted eyes thrown her way, she starts walking.

Her bare feet instinctively and intuitively guide her back down the streets they haven’t forgotten yet.

The soles of her feet are hot and bruised from their beating over the pavement, her stomach feels raw and chafed under the coffee-soaked blouse that’s only just begun to cool, but she ignores the pain as she makes her way up Archie’s front steps, and pushes out every thought screaming at her to not do this, to find any other work-around, even if it is begging some stranger on the street for the clothes off her back.

But that’s not a workable solution, she thinks, and this one just might be.

Betty taps incessantly on the intercom, willing someone to be home, and just as she’s about to give up and start screaming Archie’s name at the top of her lungs from the street, she hears a static, muffled, grumpy ‘what’ come through the box.

Archie. Her dependable, loyal, sweet Archie.

“Archie?” she blurts out, pressing her face up close to the intercom box. “Arch, it’s me, I know it’s early and I’m sorry, but I-” she gulps in a breath, snorts in a snuffle, and slams her palm a few more times on the button to emphasize the gravity her situation. “I need your help. I screwed up and if I don’t – just – Archie, please. Help me.”

She can’t choke out the rest because she can’t think about it right now – what happens if she can’t fix this problem, what happens if she doesn’t get to her interview on time, what happens if she shows up like the snotty, coffee-stained mess she is?

But three more taps on the intercom is apparently Archie’s threshold level for seven a.m. annoyances, and the door whistles open from its hinge.

She has no plan other than to tear through Archie’s room like the hurricane she feels like she is, and to try to find something of Veronica’s there. It’s a terrible, thousand-to-one odds kind of plan because she knows that Veronica packs for nights away at Archie’s like she’s going on some kind of international vacation – complete with coordinated jewelry and shoe combinations – and to her knowledge, Veronica doesn’t really keep anything at Archie’s, aside from a spare hairdryer.

But she’s been wrong before, she thinks, and as she bounds up the stairs two at a time – heels clacking together noisily in hand and pencil skirt riding up her thighs in a way that she’s sure would make her mother faint – she hopes that today, she’s wrong again.

As she rounds the final flight of stairs to the apartment, she hears his voice before she sees him.

“Veronica, I swear to god, if you-”
She stops – really freezes – on the third-to-last step, and immediately crouches down behind the banisters, burying her face between her bare knees.

No, she thinks. No.

Not again, please not this nightmare again.

Jughead.

She’s an idiot for letting this happen again. She’s a horrible, awful, person for showing her face here like this. He shouldn’t be here, she fights with herself, because she’d overheard one night while shuffling out to the kitchen to refill her water, Archie mentioning to Veronica how early Jughead leaves for work because he has to take three trains.

But that doesn’t matter, because she’s here and so is he, and she hasn’t apologized and expressed how truly sorry she is yet. She hasn’t told him that she knows now just how wrong and misguided she’d been, or let him know that if he’d one day find it in his heart to forgive her, that in and of itself would be more than enough for her.

She hasn’t done any of that yet, so how dare she show her face here now.

“Betty?”

She can feel her heart hammering right up against her skin, it’s beating so fast, and at the sound of his voice wrapping around her name, she stands up straight and steps up the rest of the way to face him. It’s like a magnet, his voice saying her name, it’s like the moon’s pull over the ocean’s tides – she’s drawn to it, just as she’s always been drawn to it.

“Hi,” she breathes out shakily, standing straight and running a thumb under her wet nose. “I’m, uh, not. I’m not Veronica.”

“No,” he assesses slowly. His hand is stiff and frozen on the unbuttoned cuff of his shirt, and he’s blinking rapidly at her, like he can’t believe she’s really standing there in front of him and looking the way she does, no less. “No, you’re not.”

She’s never felt time stop quite like this before. There’s a visceral, tangible weight in the air, one that she can almost reach out and grasp with both hands, like a butterfly landing softly on her forefinger, like a lightning bug in between an open mason jar and its cap – all she’d need to do is lean forward, reach out, and act.

“I’m – I’m sorry,” she stammers out. “I didn’t think you’d be here, Archie said-”

No.

No excuses.

“I’m sorry,” she repeats. “It’s early, and I shouldn’t be here and I’m just – I’m so sorry.”

And she is – she’s sorry in so many ways she can’t even begin to express.

His hand falls from his shirt cuff. “Archie isn’t here,” he says, and she feels her heart sink, her head grow foggy. “I thought he was at your- I thought he was with Veronica. He hasn’t been home all night.”

“Oh,” she breathes out wetly, rubbing her thumb and forefinger across her wrist, the need to do just
anything at all with her hands overwhelming. “Okay. That’s okay. I’ll just-“

There’s a solution, she reasons with herself, there simply has to be. She’s been taught to think and think twice, to find the other angle of the story, to methodically start from square zero and lay out all her options until she lands on the right one; she can figure this out. Maybe she’ll call in sick, she thinks, or run into the nearest Starbucks to see if they sell t-shirts there. Maybe if she hops into a cab right now and takes the West Side Highway home, she can change quickly – she’ll be late, but at least her bra won’t be on display. Maybe-

“Do you want to come in?” he offers softly, kindly. “I have paper towels.”

It’s the tug of his lips just slightly upward and the concern that she isn’t sure he even means to have written in his eyes, the same concern that he’s never been able to hide from her, that shatters her heart. He has every reason to slam the door in her face right now, and there’s a part of her that thinks it might hurt less if he did because it’s exactly what she expects.

It’s exactly what she deserves.

What she doesn’t deserve is any kindness from him right now or ever, and the fact that he’s still giving it to her after the way she’d treated him, after the things she’d said, after all the things she still has yet to say, means that he’s a bigger and better person than she’s given him credit for. It means that once again, she’s sold him way too short.

She feels her face crumple, contorting and twisting in what she’s sure is the most unattractive, ugly grimace as she tries to hold everything back, but like a dam bursting and sending forth a magnetic push of water, like the sharp pop of a balloon releasing out pressurized, trapped air into the world, she’s suddenly crying – weeping – in the alcove in front of his door, the sound of her wails so jarring and so shockingly piercing as they echo loudly against the walls around her.

“Oh no, no – hey,” he says frantically over the splutter of her trying to keep in her wails. “It’s okay, it’s really no big deal. You, uh, you don’t need to cry. Really. They’re just paper towels. They’re paper towels from Costco so we have a ton. It’s really not a big deal.”

According to her mother, to Archie, and really, everyone ever who’s ever seen her cry, the man standing in front of her included, she is an extremely ugly crier – the whole of her cries when she cries. Everything turns red – her nose, her cheeks, her freaking hands – her eyelids swell to twice their size, her mouth twists into something resembling a fish, and she just heaves with tears – ‘seizure-like’, she’s had it described to her before.

But if he’s noticed at all, and he’d be hard-pressed not to, he doesn’t show it – there’s only concern written across his face, tinged with apprehension. With one foot lodged between the door, he leans forward and reaches a hand out, his palm upturned in an urgent invitation for hers.

“Come on, Betty,” he pleads again. “It’s okay. Just come in, we can figure it out.”

She doesn’t take his hand – partly because her own is covered in her tears and snot, and partly because she doesn’t know if that’s okay, if that’s what he really means by holding his out to her.

But she does sniffle and she does step tentatively into the apartment, crossing the threshold to the place she once used to know so well.
It doesn’t get any better once she’s inside.

If anything, it gets worse.

He moves fast and decisively when the front door swings shut behind them and gently pries her broken shoes from her clenched hands. But when he presses a wad of paper towels into her palm, scratchy and rough against her raw skin, it’s all it takes to set her off again.

Then, she’s standing in the space between his living room and kitchen, wailing even louder than she had been before.

There’s no part of her that wants to be crying because she’s so acutely aware of his wide, anxious eyes fixed on her. She’s envisioned this moment – the moment when she’d see him again – so many times in her head, and absolutely none of them have her standing here like this.

But as much as she wants to stop crying, she simply can’t. Every sob she swallows back regurgitates itself a horrifying burst of mucus and spit, every sound she tries to muffle comes out as an even uglier snort, and so she figures there’s nothing she can really do but turn her back to him, hide her face, and wait for the tears to run their course.

She’s dabbing paper towels to her nose and eyes when she feels it – his hand, tentative and so soft resting on the small of her back, and his fingers turning gentle circles on the ruined silk. It’s a slight, simple gesture, one that he’s done for her thousands of times before, and yet, it’s one that she doesn’t think has ever brought her quite as much comfort as it does now.

Around him, her body has always acted instinctively and of its own volition, with her mind only catching up to her actions seconds, sometimes even minutes after the fact. She turns, the soles of her dirty feet lightly marking the ground, and without thought, without any rhyme or reason, she curls both her arms around his back and hugs him to her with every ounce of broken, beaten strength she has left.

There’s something primordial about it, her mind wanders as she turns her face down into his shirt and shoulder, there’s something very basic and biological about the need to feel human-to-human contact in times of great upset and upheaval, the need to feel embraced, hugged, and held close. Mothers do it for their children, friends do it for their friends, brothers for their sisters.

She’s not sure exactly what they are, but he’s doing it for her, too. As his arms wrap around her and hold her steady and close, as they remind her that she’s not standing alone in this unforgiving world, as they still her erratically racing heart, she hears silence settle over the room, punctuated only by an errant hiccup or sniffle, and their breathing, not quite in line with each other, but not completely out of sync, either.

Then, it’s quiet.

“Thank you,” she whispers against him.

“Are you okay?”

She steps back from him and does her best to ignore the rush of biting cold that comes with the loss of his body wrapped around hers. ‘Yes,’ she very nearly says, ‘yes,’ she’s okay, because that’s the answer she’s been trained to give her entire life.

But she isn’t okay. There’s nothing about this that’s remotely close to okay. She’s unwittingly barged back into his life and his apartment with no right to do so. She hasn’t told him how sorry she is yet, and she’s cried all over him – the evidence is there on his left shoulder, as plain as day.
She’s going to be late for her interview, and she might not have a job at the end of the day because of it.

“No,” she admits eventually, and fleetingly through her swollen eyes, she thinks she sees him smile at her for finally answering that question with something other than the affirmative.

“I fell,” she explains shakily. “I was at the coffee cart on Tenth and my heel broke. I fell into the guy in front of me, he spilled his coffee, and—” she gestures to herself up and down in explanation of the rest. “He actually yelled at me,” she says, huffing out a laugh to mask her wet sniffle. “I know it was my fault, but still— he yelled at me.”

“Yeah, well, he’s a dick.”

She laughs then at his bluntness and blithe dismissal of the stranger who’d ruined her day, at the shoe she’ll be demanding a full refund for, at the whole tragic comedy of errors that led them both to this very moment. She laughs because what else is there really to do?

He joins her laugh quietly, with lightly shaking shoulders and a smile just barely breaking on across his face. There’s a beautifully unique melody to sound of their laughs together again; it’s a song she’s never heard before, but it’s one that’s familiar. It’s one that she just knows.

“I’m supposed to be interviewing someone in twenty minutes,” she says.

He nods once, conveying his clarity. “I was wondering why you were all the way downtown,” he muses. “How can I help?”

She hadn’t really believed that he’d invited her in only cast her back out onto the street with nothing more than a paper towel and a ‘sorry, I’m still furious with you, can’t and don’t want to help,’ but even so, his offering a helping hand, literally and figuratively, has her gulping in a huge, relieved breath.

“Does Veronica have any clothes here?”

He moves past her towards Archie’s room and throws the door open. “Only one way to find out.”

She stops at Archie’s door, suddenly and abruptly, like a force field has been thrown up. “Oh my god,” she murmurs.

“Yeah, don’t breathe in,” he says, kicking clothes out of the way.

It’s a sty.

There are more clothes on the floor than there are in the closet, the laundry basket is suspiciously empty, and the bed is hopelessly unmade with its fitted sheet hanging on by imagination and the blankets bundled in a pile on the ground. She’s never remembered Archie’s room being this level of catastrophic before because she thinks she would’ve said something or at the very least, offered to help clean if it’d been even half as bad as this.

“I don’t know how he lives like this,” she mutters, tiptoeing around the mess and wriggling open a stuck drawer.
“Veronica’s cleaner is coming today, so you’re getting it on a particularly bad day,” Jughead explains.

“What? Veronica-”

“Has a cleaner that comes once a week to clean Archie’s room so she doesn’t have to deal with it when she’s over? Yeah,” he finishes dryly.

“That’s-” She searches for the right word, not wanting to come off as completely judgmental. Jughead had always been relatively neat, most likely a side effect of not having a lot of stuff to create a mess with to begin with, and frankly, she doesn’t know what she would’ve done if her own boyfriend’s room had in any way resembled Archie’s. She probably wouldn’t have hired a cleaner, but she’s also been trained in the Alice Cooper roll-up-your-sleeves-and-do-it-yourself school of thought rather than the throw money at the problem one.

“That’s very nice of her,” Betty finishes lamely.

He snorts in reaction and she thinks then how it’s nice to be on the same page as him again, if only for a moment.

“I really feel bad looking through his stuff,” she announces, because if she acknowledges the fact that she’s well aware she’s doing a pretty egregiously awful thing by rifling through Archie’s room without his permission, maybe that just tampers down the ‘bad’ by a few degrees. “Not like there’s much to go through, since it’s all on the flo- oh good god.”

She’s not a prude but she can’t help the hand that flies to her mouth when she unearths the jumbo, one-hundred-count box of condoms hiding under a crumpled shirt.

Betty has no problem with sex; she likes sex, as far as doing it with the man standing behind her and laughing at her reaction goes. But sex is private. It’s intimate and personal, and in her opinion, it’s not meant to exist outside the boundaries of the two people having it.

And sex is definitely not something she wants to be thinking about or drawing attention to while standing in her apparently, very sexually active best friend’s room with her ex-boyfriend.

“He got the value pack this time,” he notes casually as she wrestles the drawer shut forcefully, cheeks burning red.

“No one needs that many condoms,” Betty mutters. “You need one, maybe two if you’re feeling adventurous.”

“Hey, those are expensive. If he wants to buy in bulk and save a buck, then I applaud his miserliness.”

“You never bought condoms in bulk,” she muses absentmindedly, and before she’s even finished her sentence, she seriously contemplates moving into Archie’s closet, setting up a new zip code, and never coming out of there ever again.

Why.

Why had she said that? Out of all the things in the great wide world she could’ve said, why that?

What the hell is wrong with her?

But Jughead merely shrugs, throws a smirk her way, and tugs open another drawer.
“Maybe I did and you were just none the wiser.”

It’s not that sex between them hadn’t been fun, because she can point to several instances where it had been very fun. But they’re serious people – they think through every action almost to a fault, they imbue things with meanings maybe too great, and unsurprisingly, sex had been serious affair. It had been meaningful, it had been thought-out, it had like them, just been serious.

Which is why, she thinks, that the air of recklessness and nonchalance he’s using now to casually refer to their past sex life is somehow incredibly attractive – she’s never really seen this side of him before, and there’s more than a part of her that’s inexplicably drawn to it.

“So did you?” he finds herself asking, because if he can be bold, she can, too. “Buy condoms in bulk, I mean.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” He yanks open the only drawer they haven’t done battle with yet, and steps back with a quiet ‘ah ha’ when he reveals a few stacks of neatly folded clothes, the only stacks of neatly folded clothes in the entire room.

Betty hikes up her skirt and drops to her knees, focusing her attention on sifting through Veronica’s clothes. “I would,” she says, trying to match his tone.

He delays his answer, long enough that she can’t help but sneak a glance up at him over her shoulder. “No,” he says eventually. “Archie may be the kind of guy who can buy something like that confidently, but I’m not about shooting myself in the foot.”

She about to comment that he wouldn’t have been, because she’d once been there in the picture, and while they might not have gotten through a jumbo-pack as fast as Veronica and Archie might’ve, they definitely would have at some point. But, she supposes, the fact that she’s clearly not in the picture anymore lends his argument more weight than it does hers.

Betty flips through the small pile of clothes one more time before settling on a sensible and plain black V-neck. Veronica hasn’t stocked the drawer with much in the way of options, and she thinks that one stack might actually be costumes that she wants to know absolutely nothing about.

“All set?” Jughead asks as she rises to her feet, her knees cracking with the pressure.

“Yes,” she answers, unfolding the shirt for emphasis. “I’m not going to be in Vogue anytime soon, but it’s coffee-free, which is about all I’m looking for right now.”

Her hands are at the hem of her stained blouse before she remembers that she can’t simply tug her shirt off in front of him anymore, and flush with embarrassment at her near-mistake, she makes a show of smoothing down the fabric instead. “Would you mind if I use the bath-”

“Actually,” he interrupts, quickly moving past her out of Archie’s room and towards his own. “This might help with the whole Vogue thing.”

Betty’s eyes widen as she follows after him, hopping around Archie’s landmine of a room. She doesn’t think he’d ever be crass enough to saddle her up with another woman’s clothes, but he’s trying so hard to be helpful, too, and she knows better than anyone else what kinds of misguided paths one can traverse down in the name of ‘helpfulness.’

“It’s really okay,” Betty calls into his room, not wanting to step directly into the space. “The shirt’s not that bad.”

He’s not listening, she realizes, panicked, because he’s buried deep in the confines of his closet,
rummaging for something she desperately doesn’t want to see or know about.

She’s been out on dates, and she hadn’t at all expected or even wanted him to sit around and pine for her for the rest of his life. But there’s a vast difference between a vague, peripheral knowing that he’s going on dates with some unnamed, unknown face, and actually being forced to confront the smoking gun with her own two eyes.

“Here,” he says, holding out a baby-blue pashmina, and it takes every ounce of her self-control to not snatch the cheap accessory from his hands and throw it right back at his face.

But she can’t bring herself to because at heart, he’s trying to help her when he has no reason to, however inappropriate his attempt at ‘helping’ may be.

It’s a nice color, Betty concedes reluctantly, it’s a color she might’ve even have picked out for herself. But she’s been around Veronica and her mother enough to know that the scarf is a knock-off, and not a good one at that.

Betty tries her best not to, but she’s scowling. She can’t help it.

Who left it?

Who is she?

“That’s nice of you to offer,” she says slowly and as politely as she can manage. “But I couldn’t. I don’t know when I’d be able to get this back to you, and I wouldn’t want to deprive...her of her scarf, in case she needs it.” It’s such a clunky answer, but it’ll do.

There’s nothing but confusion on his face when she brings her eyes to his. “You don’t remember?” he asks.

Should she? She narrows her eyes in a careful contemplation and touches the scarf, her fingertips brushing against his through the fabric.

“You ready?” he’d asked, the march of his footsteps behind her in rhythmic line with her own.

She’d shrugged. “As I’ll ever be. God, I hate presentations.”

“And yet, you’re always great at them,” he’d said encouragingly, holding the front door open for her. “You’ll be great with this one, too.”

She’d blinked rapidly when she’d stepped out into the day, her eyes taking a moment to adjust to the accosting light, and when she’d turned back to him she’d frowned at his sheepish, guilty look.

“What?”

“Before you get mad,” he’d prefaced, pulling his phone from his pocket and handing it to her. “Just remember it was completely unintentional and that I was caught up in the, uh, moment.”

He’d tapped on the side of his own neck in explanation, and she hadn’t even needed to pull up the phone’s camera to see the extremely obvious, dark red hickey cemented on her skin glaring back at her.

“Oh my god,” she’d breathed out. “Oh my god.”

“It’s not that bad,” he’d offered, his voice ticking up in a question.
“Are you serious? Look at me! My presentation is in an hour!”

“It’s really not as bad as you think.”

“I look like a freshman at an orientation week frat party,” she’d said flatly.

“No, you don’t,” he’d said quickly. “You look-” He’d tilted his head from left to right, frowning as he examined her neck from each angle. “Like a freshman at an orientation week frat party,” he’d agreed.

“Fantastic.”

“I’m sorry,” he’d said, holding up his hands in surrender. “Really, I am.” He’d looked around the street, surveying the options as she’d dug in her bag fruitlessly for any sort of cover-up. She’d had an old compact of blush, but she’d figured that throwing more pink on her angry, red welt would simply be fueling the already flaming fire.

“Come on,” he’d said suddenly, reaching for her hand still searching through her tote.

“Jug, what are you – I’m going to be late,” she’d said as he weaved them through the early morning crowds dotting the streets.

“It’s on the way to the subway. Just trust me.”

She’d sighed and lengthened her stride to keep up with his. She’d been fresh out of ideas, anyhow.

At the block before her subway stop, he’d stilled them in front of a street vendor hugging the curb, and so suddenly that she’d run right into his back.

“Here,” he’d said, dropping her hand and digging for his wallet. “Pick one.”

She’d blinked at the array of colors folded in front of her. Scarves, she’d realized then, horribly cheap knock-off scarves at five-bucks a pop, ubiquitous on every New York street corner, but definitely workable in a pinch.

And she’d definitely been in a pinch.

He’d looked at both her expectantly and incredibly proudly, and she hadn’t been able to tell if the latter had been because the mark on her neck generated some caveman-like instinct in him, or if it’d been because he’d found a pretty clever solution to the whole thing.

“This one,” she’d announced to the vendor, shaking free a baby-blue scarf from the stack and wrapping it around her neck. The color reminded her of his eyes, it’d reminded her of the way he’d looked at her in that moment, amused and so in love with her.

She’d wanted to be able to remember that.

“Well?” she’d asked, turning to him. “How do I look?”

He’d adjusted the fabric on her neck, his fingertips cool against her skin. “Like a model student,” he’d leaned in and whispered to her. “It’ll be our secret.”

She’d worn the blue scarf like a scarlet letter that day, coyly smiling to herself at the fact that the real brand had been burning heavily and hotly under it, completely distracting her and constantly reminding her of his lips on her, trailing a blazing hot line of flame up and down her neck.
She’d gone straight back downtown after her presentation, unable to focus on anything else, let herself into his apartment, and all but pounced on him when he’d walked through the door later that afternoon, his eyes wide with surprise as she’d charged straight into him.

“Betty,” he’d said as she’d pushed him up against the door and attached her lips to the soft skin just below his collarbone, nipping, licking, sucking – repeating. “What are you doing?”

When she’d been sure she’d engraved herself into him as well as he’d done to her, she’d lifted her head and pasted her most innocent smile on her face. “Payback, Juggie.”

In one swift motion, he’d spun the scarf off her neck and dropped it to the floor with his bag, the blue fabric pooling around them like water as he’d walked her back towards his bed, his mouth fixed on her lips, on her skin – hot like a whisper, sweet like desire.

It’s hers.

She doesn’t know how she could have possibly forgotten – maybe because the scarf had never made it back to her after it’d fulfilled its purpose of masking her dirty little secret that day, maybe because she’s conditioned herself to stop remembering everything about them that had made her feel alive – but she wants the scarf back so much now. She wants to wear it proudly on her neck again, even though she has nothing to hide this time.

“Yes,” she murmurs when he lets the fabric slip from his hands to hers, her gaze holding his. “Of course I remember.”

When she wanders back out to the living room, changed and somewhat more put and pulled together, she smells the harsh scent of superglue before she even sees him with her broken shoe in hand, anchoring the snapped heel back in place.

“I wouldn’t run any marathons in this,” he says by way of explanation, moving over in invitation for her on the couch. “But it should hold up.”

She sits down as far away from him as possible, hugging onto the opposite end of the couch, and feeling the full weight of her imposition on his morning, on him. He has a three-train commute waiting for him, but he’s here, gluing her shoe back together, dealing with the mess that is simply her. He owes her nothing, not even kindness, and that he’s giving it to her now so openly and so sincerely makes the heaviness of her wrongs that much more monumental.

“You should’ve slammed the door in my face,” she begins quietly, weaving the fringe of the scarf in between her fingers in distraction. “I wouldn’t have held it against you.”

There’s an actual weight that comes from the strength of is eyes on her, but she forces herself to sit steady and still because she deserves the full impact of his judgment, whatever it may be.

“You really think I’d do that?” he asks eventually.


Betty draws in her breath and forces her eyes up to meet his. She owes him an apology, and she owes him one where she’s looking fully at him and not at the geometric pattern on the worn rug at
her feet.

“How I acted that night was inexcusable,” she says. “All of it. I don’t know how I could’ve treated you the way I did. I don’t know what in me thought that any of it was a good idea. I’m sorry, Jug,” she says firmly. “For everything – I’m so sorry.”

“Betty, it’s okay.”

“No,” she counters urgently. “It’s not. You were right – I was selfish and I was out of my mind. I want – I need you to know that I heard you. You were right about me, everything you said was right. I was angry and so focused on work because I didn’t want to deal with everything else.”

He nods slowly and blows out a steady stream of air onto the heel of her shoe. He’s stacking her sincerity, the force and depth of her words, the memory of it all up against each other, but she doesn’t know which way he’ll cut one way or the other.

“Anything ever come of that story?”

She shakes her head. “No.” Nothing had come out of that night other than the teardown of them, she wants to say.

Jughead shrugs at her, but there’s sympathy written into it, and something like confidence, too. “You’ll get there,” he says. “You always have.”

“Jug, stop being so nice to me.”

“Betty, it’s okay,” he says again. “It’s in the past.” He breathes in deeply then, and swings his eyes from her shoe to the floor, and slowly back to her again. “That night wasn’t all on you,” he says quietly. “I said you were selfish, and maybe you were. But I wasn’t fair to you, either. You’re selfless, Betty, to a fault even, and I can’t expect you to be that one hundred percent of the time. You shouldn’t be, that isn’t human. That isn’t real.”

She blinks and breathes, letting his words slowly sink in and weigh on her head and heart. She’s never even let the thought cross her mind that he might’ve been wrong too, because the weight of her mistakes had been a heavy enough burden to bear.

“You told me once, years ago now, how much you hate the word perfect,” he reminisces. “But I don’t think I really ever listened to you. I’ve never seen you do anything that you haven’t done flawlessly, and I was so hard on you the one time you did. It was unfair of me to expect so much of you, when I’d never expect half as much from anyone else, including myself. I’m sorry.” He sighs, shoulders dragging down heavily with his apology. “I’m sorry, Betty.”

There’d been a tangible weight that’d had slid and fallen off her when she’d turned to him, faced him square in the eyes, and owned up to her mistakes, a weight that she’d knowingly carried and slogged through the summer. But this weight – the one that she puts down and shrugs off now with his apology to her – is one that she had no idea she’d been bearing all this time; all of a sudden, she feels light. She feels airy, she feels like she’s flying and falling at the same time.

All of a sudden, she feels free.

She inhales in deeply, once, twice. Emboldened by his apology, and lighter, so much lighter from the weight of his disdain off her back, she slides closer to him, but just close enough to hold him at her arm’s length. Hesitantly and with shaking fingers, she reaches to his wrist and clumsily closes the unbuttoned cuff on his shirt.
He doesn’t pull away at the brush of her fingers over him, he doesn’t flinch when she lingers a second longer than she should have on the hammer of his pulse under his skin, and that alone is a victory in and of itself.

“Jug,” she starts quietly, returning her hands to her lap. “I know there’s probably not a lot I can say that you’ll believe anymore, but I hope you can believe this. I know how hard dealing with your past is for you, I know that. And I did what I did anyhow – I dragged you back into a life that isn’t yours anymore, and I forced you to relive it. I don’t have any excuse for what I did, and I don’t know that there’s anything I can say to make it better, except that I’m sorry. I am so sorry.”

She watches him carefully, cataloguing his blinks, the slight shift of his shoulders, the clench of his hands around her shoe. But he’s being careful, she realizes, extremely careful in not revealing any of what he’s thinking or feeling to her, and so she swallows hard and forges on.

“I want you to know that I didn’t mean a word of what I said that night – I was angry and upset, and I took it out on you. But I did mean this. I told you that I knew that you weren’t that person anymore, the person you were at sixteen, and I meant that. You’re so much more than those decisions you made back then, than the tattoo on your arm. You’re so much more than your past. I know that, and I’ve always known that, but I wish so much that you could know that, too. I’m sorry I made you feel anything less than who you are.”

“I still feel like I don’t know who I am, sometimes,” he admits to her, his voice dropping to a near-whisper. “But I also feel like I’m getting there.”

“You’re Jughead Jones,” she says simply, because even though he might still be finding out who he is to himself, she knows who he is to her. “You’re the guy who gave me his flashlight when mine died that night we told ghost stories in your tree house, because even though I was nine, I was still scared of the dark. I didn’t want to admit that in front of you and Archie, but you just knew, because you’ve always known me. You’re the guy I traded my Judy Blume books with every other week because it’s not like anyone else wanted to read and talk to me about them. You’re the man who taught me how to love with my whole heart, and what it means to be completely in love.”

She pauses for emphasis and effect, and desperately caught somewhere in the vast spectrum of love and adoration and admiration. “You’re Jughead Jones, and you’re the best person I know.”

Anyone else untrained in the art of watching him might’ve missed the knife edge of his smile and the hitch of his breath at her words, the soft twitch of his fingers, and even though it’s been more than a while since she’s had the chance to look and study him like this, his tells are still there – unmistakable and unmissable.

Then, across the divide that she’d begun to bridge, and crossing a couch not unlike the one they’d claimed opposite sides of all those months ago, he holds out her shoe to her.

“Don’t run in it,” he advises lightly, and even though it’s the most untraditional symbol for an olive branch she’s ever come across, Betty accepts her shoe from him and slips it back on her foot. It’s a little worse for the wear, she notes as she examines his work – the heel is just slightly off center, and there are jagged lines of overrun, excess glue she’ll have to take a wet wipe to later. But when she tests out her weight against it and pushes the ball of her foot onto the leather, she’s surprised at the resistance that answers back.

The cracks are there, as is the evidence of an imperfect, organic repair, still fusing and melding back together with each passing second.

But, she realizes as she rises slowly and allows her weight fall equally between both feet, it feels
stronger than it had been before, too.

In the no-man’s-land between the front door and the kitchen, she turns to him so suddenly that he nearly walks right into her, even as slowly as he’s moving.

“Thank you,” Betty says. “For everything. I don’t know what I would’ve done without you.”

He digs his hands into his pockets, masking a shrug. “You would’ve figured it out.”

“Probably,” she agrees. “But I’m glad I didn’t have to.”

In the quiet that comes after the echo of their words whispers away, she lets herself stop and glance around the home that had once been the home away from her own. There’s not much that’s different – there are fewer hoodies strewn around the furniture and there’s a distinct lack of beer cans dotting various surfaces – but overall, it’s still the same apartment, the one that still gives her that peaceful comfort when she breathes in and smells the lives of the people she loves.

At the fridge, her eye catches on a short stack of matte pages, pinned to the surface by a Bulldogs magnet, and bearing a name she only half-knows.

“J.P. Jones?” she questions, running her fingertips over the flat print of his name. “You wrote this?”

His cheeks are tinged red when she turns back to him for his answer. “Yeah,” he admits, slightly embarrassed. “It was published about a month ago. I didn’t put it on the fridge, though – I wouldn’t do that. That was all Archie.”

She smiles – of course it was. She doesn’t doubt that if it wouldn’t be the most insensitive thing for him to do, Archie would have her articles up on the fridge, too.

“But J.P.?” she questions, her eyes tracking back to the byline.

His smile is shy, but it’s just for her. “You don’t know how many iterations of that I went through.”

“Like?”


“Not Jughead?”

He shrugs. “Didn’t seem professional enough.”

She doesn’t know how she feels about that. She supposes at one point she must have found it his name strange – he’d been the only Jughead she knew in a homeroom class of four Lauren’s and three Matt’s, she herself had been one of two Elizabeth’s – but it’s all she’s ever known him as. He’s just Jughead – wonderfully unique and bizarre in his own ways, so special – to her, he’s just Jughead, and he’ll never be anything or anyone else.

“J.P.,” she says eventually, testing out the name on her tongue, and it’s so foreign and so unfamiliar that she can’t help her undulating laugh. “J.P. Jones.”
“Hey, come on,” he says, his voice light. “It’s just a name.”

“Hmm,” she hums, but only teasingly. “This is amazing, Jug. You’re published. Like, actually published in a real magazine that real people subscribe to.”

“Crazy, right?” he says. “I’m pretty happy with how it turned out.” Her head snaps up from the worn pages at the careful pride she hears in his voice. She’d been expecting some sort of cynical self-deprecation or a line of mournful regret about how ‘this and that could’ve been better,’ and that there’s no sign of that now has her heart swelling with her own burst of pride for him.

“You should be,” she says, flipping the pages over, then back again. Then quietly, “I’m so proud of you.”

There’s sincerity in his voice, and above all, the unmistakable sound of his belief and trust in her words. “Thank you, Betty,” he says.

“Can I – would you mind if I keep this?” she asks.

“You want to read it?” He’s confused, she realizes, and so much of her wants to tell him that what she wants to do most right now is sit down right where she is and devour every single, special word he’s written.

“Yes,” she says simply. “Unless that’s too weird?”

“No, no.” He reaches a hand out to still hers from sticking it back on the fridge. “Keep it. I want you to. Fair warning, though, there’s probably a horrifying overuse of semi-colons in there, even by my standards.”

“Penny for a semi-colon, right?”

The lift of his lips isn’t sad, but it’s filled with memory, enough so that she doesn’t have to wonder whether or not he actually remembers – she knows he does. “Yeah,” he says softly. “Something like that.”

She wonders then if this is it. That if this is the this that comes after the fight and after the fallout, after the heartache and heartbreak – the final moments of surveying the wreckage together one last time before they both part ways for the rest of their lives, only to happen on each other every now and then at Archie’s wedding or twenty-year Riverdale High reunions where they’ll politely ask about each other’s husbands and wives, children that once upon a time in another life, they might’ve shared.

She’d hoped ever since that night in June, that the way they’d left things then wouldn’t be the way they’d leave things forever. She’d hoped that there’d be something, some moment of reprieve the universe would grant her even after all the horrible words and things she’d said and done to make at least some of it right again. She’d hoped that she’d get just one more moment with him, one last moment to apologize, to say thank you, to say goodbye.

She thinks that this moment, right here and right now, might be it – here in his apartment with the clock mockingly ticking down towards just another day at work, here as she stands in her broken shoes and in someone else’s clothes.

She’s not ready for it, she realizes. She doesn’t want it to be like this. There’s so much she wants to say to him, the ruminations on love and loss that she’s finally been able to unpack after all this time, that she’s finally been able to feel after all this time – thank you for loving me the way you did, she wants to say. You kept me safe, and warm, and happy and for that I’ll always be grateful. I
don’t know if I’ll ever love anyone the way I love you again, but I’ll never forget you. I never could.

But right now doesn’t seem like the time or place for all that, and she doesn’t want it to be, either.

“Editing!” Betty blurts out, and it’s so sudden and so loud cutting through their pleasantries that she thinks she sees him step back from her. “If you need help with, you know, cutting down on semi-colons or anything, I’d be happy to help. I’ll forgo the penny-fee, too,” she rushes out.

She has no idea where that came from, but when he scratches behind his neck she wishes that she’d just left with her head full of what ifs and could’ve been’s instead, because at least that would have been more tragically romantic than this awkward moment she’s stumbled into.

“Oh,” he says slowly, and she internally groans. “Thanks. I have an editor at work, and they like me to run everything by her, but I’ll, uh, I’ll definitely keep that – you, I mean – in mind.”

She thinks the term shot down must’ve been invented for moments exactly like this.

“Oh,” Betty croaks out. “Yeah, of course you do. I just meant that if you wanted – I mean, I didn’t mean that you needed to – thank you,” she concludes dumbly, because since there’s no recovering from the mess of words that she’s just uttered she might as well change the subject. “For fixing my shoe. And for the scarf.”

She knows he’s thinking seriously about challenging her swift subject change, but she figures he decides against it because what else is there for him to say?

“Technically, it’s your scarf,” he answers instead, reaching behind her to pull the front door open. Technically, he’s right. But technically, it’s also been sitting in his closet for years.

“Can I ask?” she begins softly, because technically, if this is the last time she’s going to see him for the foreseeable future, then there’s no point in her not laying her full hand out on the table. “Why did you keep it?”

Jughead leans against the door frame, arms crossed and eyes turned towards the ground in thought. “I don’t know,” he answers eventually. “I didn't think you wanted it back - you hadn’t asked for it since that day. And honestly? I just wanted it,” he says. “I love that memory.”

She nods and leaves him with a half-smile as she starts down the stairs – it’s a nice note to leave things on; she likes that answer.

“Did you keep anything?” he calls to her.

She wants to lie to him then, because he’s just been so honest and so sweet to her, and she thinks her real answer might hurt him; she’s just so tired of hurting this man, inadvertently or otherwise. But she’s also no great liar, especially around him who’s always been able to see right through her.

“No,” Betty answers truthfully, turning back to him. “I wanted to, though.”

“What would you have kept?”

The two of hearts, she wants to say, because if the scarf is one of the memories that he loves best, the two of hearts is hers. Small and inconspicuous, mundane, commonplace and yet so completely imbued with all the meaning in the world – in their world – the two of hearts without a shadow of a doubt.
But, she thinks, there’s been so much that’s already been put to rest, and maybe there are just some things that are better left unsaid, there are some things that are better left up to mystery and memory.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she says.

There’s a harmony, one that’s hauntingly beautiful and achingly melancholy all at once, that comes from the rumble of his laugh interspersed with the click of her heels down the stairs.

By the end of month, the leaves begin their slow morph into burnt orange and fire red and it’s cool enough that she needs a blanket again at night. It’s always been her favorite time of year, the cusp between cool and cold, a season that’s always meant new beginnings – a new school year, new supplies, new pastel cardigans her mother would add to her wardrobe for her. She still loves it, but now there’s a song of sadness there, too, a resignation that’s new in a different way.

There isn’t anything for her to be disappointed about, she tells herself, because she’s gotten everything she’s wanted. She’s gotten the chance to apologize and make things at least somewhat right with Jughead, and that’s all she’d wanted. When she sent up her prayers and wished on eleven-eleven and fallen eyelashes, all she’d wished for was for him to hear her out. She’d simply wished for him to listen before shutting her up and shutting her down, and maybe, she’d bargained in her boldest moments, if she was really and truly lucky, maybe he’d forgive her, too.

She’s gotten everything she’s wished for, so there’s really no reason for her to want more.

And yet, she does.

But this isn’t about what she wants anymore, and it never has been. He’s forgiven her, and they’ve made their peace, and that’s everything she wanted and more. So, as much as she wants to spend a just few more moments memorizing the way he looks when he looks at her, as much as she wants to tell him how the story he wrote had her physically rubbing at her chest because she knows in her heart that it’d been about her, she can’t, because it’s simply not an option anymore. It’s no longer an option he’s offering to her, the right to be in his life again.

And that’s okay. Even though it’ll take her time to get there, she thinks she will be okay with that eventually.

She has to be.

Crossing her room in her fuzzy socks, Betty flops down diagonally across her bed and flips open Instagram, idly scrolling through the first of what she’s sure will be millions of pictures of turning leaves and Pumpkin Spice Lattes.

She hates those – she doesn’t think coffee should ever be that sweet – but she throws out a few likes anyhow because that’s the kind thing to do.

She’s on the fifth or sixth picture of the same unappetizing cup of coffee when her phone rings. The accosting sound quickly filling her room and the vibration between her fingers is so unexpected that she flat out drops her phone on her face, and the corner smacks hard against her forehead. She splutters and sits up, kicking out both socked-feet in the process, and she feels her
eyebrows fly up into her hairline at the single name across her screen.

Jughead.

She tells herself to calm down, to *calm the hell down* and not behave outwardly like the teenager her mind’s currently behaving like. She’s sure there must be a perfectly rational explanation for why he’s calling her. He’s probably looking for Archie, she reasons, because Archie likes to leave his phone in places he can’t remember for days on end, and maybe Jughead’s locked out of the apartment, or maybe Archie’s room has suddenly imploded and caved into itself from its sheer mess of crap strewn everywhere.

She sucks in a breath and brings the phone to her ear.

Hello or hey.

*Hello or hey?*

“How’s the shoe hold up, Cinderella?”

“Oh.” He’s calling about her *shoe*? “Fine. Great, actually – it made it through the entire day. If the whole writing thing doesn’t work out I’d say give the cobbling industry a shot.”

She cringes at the words she can’t recapture – she hadn’t meant to imply that his writing career *wouldn’t* work out, especially since he seemed to be doing just fine for himself in that particular regard, but it’s a sensitive topic and she doesn’t want him getting the wrong idea. But his laugh is loud over the line, tinged with static, and sincere, heartfelt.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he says, and instinctively, her teeth bear down on her lower lip in an effort to stop her growing grin from spreading any further across her face. “Speaking of the whole writing thing – very eloquently put, by the way – I was hoping to take you up on your offer. If it still stands.”

“My offer?”

“Yeah,” he follows up slowly and so cautiously; his voice is like a walk through quicksand. “You know, to help edit? There’s a piece I’ve been kicking around for a while – longer than a while, actually – and I could use someone who isn’t both my boss and my editor’s opinion on it. If you’re too busy or if you don’t want to though, say no more-”

“No!” she yells abruptly, cutting into his words with such force she startles her own self. *Why can’t she just chill right now.* “I mean, yes – of course the offer still stands. Send it over. I’d be happy to help.”

“Really? You’re sure?”

She wraps her arms around her knees and this time, she doesn’t even try to stop her smile, one that she thinks must be bordering on maniacal. But, she thinks, it’s okay, because he’s all the way
across town and none the wiser.

“Yes,” she responds firmly. “I’m sure.”

Even over the phone with an entire city between them, she can so clearly see his smile matching hers.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from "I Shall Believe" by Sheryl Crow.
October

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

My huckleberry friend.

At the chime of the bell over the coffee shop’s door, his head snaps up expectantly and eagerly in search of a blonde ponytail and hopefully, a smile.

It’s not her.

It’s the third or fourth time he’s looked up and been disappointed. She’s now over twenty minutes late, and he’s worried – Betty is rarely late.

He’s nervous if he’s being completely honest, but in his defense, he doesn’t think it’s at all unwarranted. He’s nervous about what she’s going to say about his piece. He’s nervous about seeing her again, and he’s deathly nervous that her running late might translate into her not showing up at all.

He didn’t love the way they’d left things, and he especially didn’t love the hurt, wounded look she’d worn when he’d unceremoniously rebuffed her moments before she walked out his door. It wasn’t that what he said hadn’t been true – he does have an editor at work – but he hadn’t meant to shoot her down that harshly, either. She’d just caught him off guard. He’d woken up that morning tired and bleary eyed, grumpy at the prospect of facing just another day of tireless commuting and poorly written submissions, he’d buttoned his shirt incorrectly twice, and before he’d even had a sip of bad coffee, there was Veronica at his door, obnoxiously spluttering about something nonsensical about Archie.

Except that it hadn’t been Veronica, not by a long shot.

He doesn’t think he’s ever seen Betty quite as broken and defeated before, and he definitely doesn’t remember her ever crying like that in front of him – not even when she’d tearfully told him about her parents’ divorce, though that had admittedly been a long time coming, and not when she’d been sick with a hundred-and-three-degree fever, halfway to delirious while binging videos of rescued stray dogs on YouTube.

It’d been surprising, he thinks, that even as she’d wailed away in his arms, dribbling snot and tears all over his only clean work shirt, there’d been a closeness he’d felt to her in that moment even after months of separation. There’d been a new kind of intimacy, one that he’s not sure he’s ever shared with her before, because never has Betty Cooper let even him see her in that broken a state. Never has she been asked if she’s okay and answered with anything less than ‘absolutely, why wouldn’t I be?’

He doesn’t think that there will ever be a part of his heart that doesn’t break at seeing her so completely defeated, but as much as he wrestles with himself to rethink and reformulate his understanding of what exactly had happened that morning, he keeps landing back on the same conclusion.

It’d physically hurt him to see her so destroyed, but there’d been so much beauty in her vulnerability, too; at that moment, when she’d stood in front of him, red-faced and teary-eyed, heart exposed and bare in her coffee-stained hands for him to quiet and protect – he doesn’t think
He’s about five-minutes away from manning-up and checking in with her when she bursts through the door, clicking away on the tile in a pair of heels he’s never seen on her before.

Or repaired.

“I’m so sorry,” Betty rushes out, dropping her bag on the floor and her coat behind the chair in a whirlwind of swishing ponytails and swinging arms. “My meeting ran over and the Four stalled.” She sits down with a huff, disappearing below the table into her tote, and before he can even tell her not to worry about it, that he’s just relieved she’s here across the table from him, she’s rambling on again. “I have so many thoughts,” she continues excitedly, kicking off her heels and breathing out a sigh of pained relief as she switches into her flats. Nothing has ever looked more unnecessarily painful to him. “Let me just get a drink and -”

“She’s ever seen her quite so beautiful.

“It’s not a big deal, he wants to say, and it really isn’t because all he’s done is buy her an admittedly delicious cup of bean water. She on the other hand has taken time out of her day to read the inane ramblings of his two-a.m. mind, and to sit down and work through them with him now.

But he also doesn’t feel like diminishing in any way the look she’s giving him right now, like he’s handed her the world instead a cup of coffee, so he simply shrugs.

“It’s the least I could do,” he says. “Thanks again for all of this.”

“It wasn’t any trouble.” Her dainty sip leaves a faint imprint of pink lipstick on the cup’s lid. “I meant what I said, I’m happy to help.” Then, almost shyly, and with her eyes turned down to her completely innocuous cup of coffee – “It’s a beautiful story, Jug.”

He doesn’t know how forthright she’s being, because the two printed copies sitting in front of him are bleeding red from her loopy, scrawling script inching all over the margins – but he’ll take it.

“Shall we?” she asks, uncapping her pen.

“Never thought I’d say this, but I’ve missed the red.” And he has. He’d hadn’t realized just how much, until he’d been handed back a mostly-clean copy of his work, plain and clear evidence that the words he’d spent hours tearing his hair out over hadn’t been given the time of day.

At least not the way she’d clearly given it the time of her day.

“It’s not all bad,” Betty assures him quickly. “A lot of it is just me thinking out loud and-” Her
thoughts trail and her breath hitches when her eyes fall to his hand, poised and ready to write. “Is that-”

His eyes follow hers and when he realizes what exactly has her attention, his grip immediately tightens. The pen. Her pen, the one she’d given him.

“Oh,” Jughead starts slowly, fighting every urge to shove it back in his pocket. He’s so used to absentmindedly grabbing for it that he hadn’t given any thought at all to how insensitive using it in front of would be. “I know, it’s a miracle I haven’t lost it,” he tries to brush off.

He knows the smile that turns her lips just barely upward isn’t one that she means to share with him, but he’s always been good at catching those. “I can’t believe you still have it,” she says softly. “I thought you’d have thrown it away.”

“Why would I do that?” He’s being a little disingenuous because he remembers that summer night with perfect clarity, how he’d stomped home in a whirlwind of rage, how he’d grabbed the pen that had been mockingly staring at him on his desk and nearly chucked the thing right out his window. He’s glad he didn’t.

“I wish I’d been brave enough to give it to you that night,” she says.

He’s surprised at her honesty. “Why didn’t you?”

She props her chin up on her palm, thinking. “I don’t know,” Betty says. “I hadn’t seen you in so long. I didn’t know how you’d feel about something like this.” Her voice drops then, and he leans forward across the table to catch her words before they’re lost to the whirr of the industrial coffee grinder. “But I wanted you to have it, and I’m glad I dropped it that night,” she says. “You’re such a wonderful writer, Jug, you have such a gift. I guess I wanted the pen to always remind you of that, even if I couldn’t anymore.”

He looks at her. He stops, places the pen down, and lets everything else in the world fall away as he really and truly looks at her. Physically, there’s not much that’s different. Her legs, crossed at the ankles under the table, look more toned. They’re slightly slimmer than he remembers them being, and slightly tanner, too. Her ponytail, once haughtily brushed back and severe – ‘the higher the ponytail, the closer to God, right, Betts?’ he used to joke – now hangs low and loose on her head. But all things considered, she still looks like the same Betty Cooper he’d spent all those years loving.

And yet, she is different. It isn’t anything physical, but as much as he tilts his head from one side to the other, as much as he blinks, and blinks again, she’s still there in front of him – Betty Cooper, the same and different all at once.

There’s a calmness to her now as she sits across from him, one that has her shoulders relaxed and her tired, overworked eyes bright, and there’s an easy sureness about her, too. It’s a quiet kind of confidence, courage even, and it floats around her like an unbreakable, indestructible bubble.

She doesn’t look so much like the girl he’d cut class with to joyride through Riverdale on a beat-up bike in senior year, or the girl who’d cheered on the Football team in a River Vixens uniform with a white and gold pom-pom in each hand. She isn’t so much Betty Cooper, the girl who downs a Pop’s strawberry milkshake faster he does anymore, so much as she is Betty Cooper, the woman across from him now who makes mistakes, who has shaking moments of self-doubt and selfishness, who is imperfectly and bravely finding her own way in the world.
He’s spent months, years even, conjuring up visions of her in his mind. In his darkest moments, in the times he needed her with him most, he always thought of her – Betty smiling at him in her perfectly pink and white room, Betty in her perfectly ironed and pressed River Vixens uniform, brimming with that famous Riverdale pep, Betty with her books perfectly stacked in her arms according to size – the girl of his dreams was perfect, and made even more so by the fact that she loved him.

“What?” she asks, pink lips curling up in a smile.


Betty turns her face down, immediately averting her eyes from him. “I know,” she starts remorsefully. “I’ve been stuck doing rewrites almost every night this week. I think I’ve slept a sum total of–”

“No, I didn’t mean anything like that,” he cuts in quickly, stopping her from traveling further down the path he hadn’t intended at all. “You look nice, Betty – you always do, however many hours of sleep you’re running on.” He shakes his head again, unsure of how best to phrase what he wants to say – no one has ever made him lose his words quite like she does. Older doesn’t seem exactly right – there’s a negative connotation there that he doesn’t intend at all – and mature isn’t a whole lot better, either. “You just look different,” he lands on again, somewhat helplessly. “I don’t know, just different.”

“Well,” she starts through the hint of a smile. “Different in a good way?”

You don’t look perfect anymore, he wants to say to her, you don’t look perfect in the way I used to think of you as.

But you look so real.

“Yeah,” he says. “Different in a great way.”

Betty sits with him for nearly two hours, working through each margin note with unending patience, and by the time he files away her painstakingly edited pages and she shrugs on the pink trench coat he’s always loved on her, it’s way past acceptable social hours on a Friday night.

He tries not to let his mind wander too far down that black hole, but he can’t help the small burst of victory he knows he shouldn’t be reveling in as much as he is – she’d just spent her Friday night with him and not someone else. Then again, there are the unacceptable social hours still left unaccounted for, but he doesn’t want to think about that now, not while she’s still right here with him.

He knows that in the grand scheme of things they haven’t been apart that long, but even so, there’s so much about her he doesn’t know anymore that he’d like to learn about. He wants to ask her about Polly’s twins and if they’d found someone to teach them how to skip stones across Sweetwater River yet; he’d promised them he’d show them how to the last time he’d seen them, and he still feels guilty that he’s let those kids down. He wants to know about how her weekend with Kevin went and if Archie had gotten her the right type of juice. There’s even a part of him, the masochistic part, that wants to know about the guy he’d seen her hand-in-hand with, and if he’s
treating her the way she deserves to be treated. That clown will have another thing coming his way if he’s not.

“What was your meeting about?” he asks. He doesn’t have the courage for the rest yet.

“Oh!” Betty says, almost like she’s surprised he’d been listening to her rambling rush of words when she’d sat down in the flurry that she did. “Everything and nothing. It was a staff meeting.”

“That just might be the cruelest thing I’ve ever heard,” he says.

“What is?”

“A staff meeting on a Friday evening?”

When she snorts, he smiles. It’s one of her involuntary actions, one she only does when something’s truly funny, and it’s nice to know that she still does that.

“And it always runs over, too,” she tells him. “There’s this Post legend that says they changed the staff meeting from Mondays to Fridays because they thought that everyone would want to get out of there faster and be more productive during them.”

“But it backfired because no one can bring themselves to give a shit about anything at five on a Friday,” he concludes for her.

“Exactly,” she laughs.

Jughead looks down at his feet and tries to fall into time with her. She’s walking slower than he is, and he wants to savor what little time he has left with her.

“But aside from that,” Betty continues. “I love my job. I feel like I’m where I’m supposed to be.”

He remembers the fights they’ve had over this, he remembers the pain and how biting the words they’d never meant to wound each other with had been. But that’s so inconsequential now, he thinks, it’s all so worth it because this is exactly what he wanted for her: for her to feel fulfilled and like she belongs, for her to be happy.

“That’s amazing, Betts,” he says, forgetting to catch himself on her old nickname. “I’m really happy for you.”

He hopes she knows just how much he means that.

“Are you?” she asks, voice dropping low. “Happy?”

What he wants to tell her is that this moment he’s sharing with her right now, walking to the subway stop he wishes were another ten or twenty blocks away, he’s happy. He’s happier than he remembers being in a long time. Being here with her makes him happy.

But he also knows that isn’t quite the answer she’s looking for. “Yeah,” he says. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, there are days at work that are worse than others, but that’s just life. I like what I’m doing there, though. I’m happy.”

“Good,” she says to him. “That’s really good.”

It falls quiet then, and unsure of what to say next, he thinks back to the past two hours he’d spent with her for something to work off of. It’d been pleasant, and she’d been nothing but completely kind and patient with him, even when he’d pushed against her on just about every point she’d
raised.

But she’d been reserved, too, shy in a way she’s never been around him before. She’s always been the counter-point to his counter-point, the devil’s advocate to his devil’s advocate, and that’d been one of the things about her he loved best – the way she challenged him and forced him to think in ways he’d never thought of thinking in before.

“Betty,” he starts. “What did you really think of it?”

“About what?” she asks. “Your story?”

“Yeah.”

“Jug, I meant what I said. It’s beautiful, and it’s a beautiful conception of love.”

He studies her tone, listening carefully to the rise and fall of her cadence. There’s unmistakeable sincerity in her voice, but it’s woven in with a touch of secrecy she’s inexpertly hiding from him, too.

“You don’t agree with it,” he concludes. “What I wrote about love and the way I approached it.”

Betty looks at him with her bottom lip caught between her teeth, and he can so clearly tell she’s wrestling between the honest answer and the kind answer. “No,” she decides eventually. “I don’t, not necessarily.”

Honesty it is.

“Go on,” he encourages gently.

“You painted such a stunning picture of what it means to be in love,” she starts thoughtfully, and even though he knows that getting into the nitty gritty about this particular subject with her – love – teeters the edge of highly inappropriate and the very last thing he should be talking about with her, he’s hanging on her every word. He knows how she loves because he’s been the luckiest in love. Even after everything, that much still remains undeniably true – he couldn’t have asked her to love him any better than she had. He’s felt the quiet, indestructible strength of her unyielding support for him, undeserved as it may have been at times, and he’s heard the calm comfort of her words of encouragement, of her words of love in the times he’s needed it most.

He knows all about how she loves, but even after all this time, he’s still not quite sure what she thinks about love.

“You – and by you, I mean your protagonist,” she corrects quickly. “He loves so wholly and so unconditionally. I never once doubted how completely he loved her – it was like he loved her with his entire heart and soul, you know?”

“He did,” Jughead agrees. “I mean, he does – I’m glad that translated.”

“It’s hard to miss,” she tells him gently. “Like you said in the story, she’s a love he’d do absolutely anything for – there’s no sacrifice that’s too great, there’s no burden he won’t carry, there’s no mountain he won’t climb.”

“Right,” he responds slowly, unsure of where she’s leading him.

“And that’s such a beautiful idea of love,” Betty says. “But it’s incredibly flawed, too, don’t you think?”
Her words nearly stop him in the middle of the crosswalk. He hadn’t expected that to be the
direction she’d take. “Well, no,” he says truthfully. “How so?”

“At the end of the story he leaves her, right?”

Jughead frowns. “I wouldn’t say that, exactly. He lets her be – there’s a difference. She didn’t want
to be with him anymore and so he respects that – he lets her go and he lets her live the life she
wants even though he doesn’t want to let her go. Even though it completely breaks him.”

“But isn’t that still just him leaving her in a way?”

“I mean, if you’re talking about ‘leaving’ in its broadest sense, then sure. But semantics aside, isn’t
that what love is though, at its core? Being selfless and loving selflessly?”

“It’s a theory of love,” she says carefully, crossing her arms and grabbing on to either elbow with
the opposite hand. “I don’t think it’s the only one out there, though. Or even the right one.”

Jughead pauses, thinking through her words. A *theory* of love. He’s never really considered the
possibility of loving in any other way before.

“There’s something to be said about loving selfishly, too,” Betty continues. “And it’s a dichotomy
because it’s so unusual to have those two words next to each other, but I don’t think it’s an
altogether bad, or even a wrong way to approach love.”

“What do you mean by that?” he asks. “Loving selfishly?”

“Well,” she starts. “We have all have these ideas about what we want out of love and what kinds
of love we want to experience in our lives. And that’s the key, I think, the fact that as human
beings, we innately want and desire love for ourselves. We want to feel loved and we want to love
others. But if we all loved as selflessly he does in your story, we’d never give ourselves any voice
or agency in love – we’d never even be able to want anything out of love except to make someone
else happy.”

“And that’s unnatural,” he follows slowly. “To not want anything out of love.”

“In a way, I think it is,” she says. “Aren’t there things that you want out of love, just for yourself?”

Betty turns to him then, face full of surprise at her own question. He thinks she might be
wondering if she’s crossed the line and overstepped her bounds – admittedly, it’s a loaded question
in so many ways. But it’s a loaded conversation, too.

“I know there are things that I do,” she continues quickly before he can answer. “And that’s the
thing with want – it’s so rare that we get anything we want without fighting for it. I think that’s
true about everything in life, including love. We don’t get the love that we want unless we fight for
it. You get as much as you earn out of love, and you earn what you work for. You earn what you
fight for.”

Jughead thinks then about JB, sitting there on his hand-me-down couch and waxing poetic about
the world like she knew it best at sixteen, his little sister telling confidently him that he deserves to
have what he wants in love. He’s spent his entire life using that word, but it isn’t actually a concept
he’s given any thought to, so much as it is one he’s simply taken at face value.

He thinks back then to the evenings he’d sit there pouting when his mother told him there’d be no
pizza for dinner after all because he’d stayed over at Archie’s for an extra hour without telling
anyone where he was – if he wasn’t responsible like he should be, his mother had said, then he
didn’t deserve a special treat. He remembers the nights he’d steal glances at Betty hunched over at
his desk, burning away the midnight oil with a pen between her teeth and brow furrowed in
concentration, and all the moments he thought, and so proudly, too, that she deserved the entire
world in her hands because no one worked as hard or cared as much as she did.

It’s reciprocal, he realizes then – deserving something – it’s not the one-way street he once thought
it’d been; all the good in life, all the things deserved don’t just materialize from nothing at all.

They’re earned.

They’re fought for.

“I’m sorry,” Betty says, her quiet, steady voice breaking through their standstill. “I hope that didn’t
come off the wrong way. I really did mean what I said – it is a beautiful story, regardless of what I
think about love.”

“You don’t ever need to be sorry for telling me what you really think, Betty,” he tells her. “No one
knows my writing, or me for that matter, better than you do. Your opinion is important to me.”

And that, he realizes then, will probably always be true.

At the divide between the uptown and the downtown trains, Jughead stops and turns to her, hands
tucked into the pockets of his jacket. Time’s up, he thinks, but there’s so much left her still wants to
talk to her about. There’s so much more he wants to say.

“What do you think should happen?” he asks. “In the story, I mean. What’s the right way for him
to love?”

Betty looks serious as her lip twists in thought. “I don’t know,” she says sincerely, drumming her
fingers gently against her leg. “Life is so unpredictable, you know? Who’s to say what would really
happen if he went after her? Maybe their story isn’t over yet. Maybe they’re people that defy odds
and logic, and that love works out for. I’d like to think so.” Then with her eyes shyly meeting his,
and in the most tender of quiet whispers – “You know how much I love happy endings.”

He does.

It’s something he’s always known about her - he’s known it ever since they were six and she had
him playing pretend minister while she played pretend wedding with Archie. Betty is realistic in
love, and she’s practical. But he also knows there’s a part of her that’s hopelessly romantic and that
wishes so hard, even against all rhyme and reason telling her not to, that everything would just
work out happily ever after.

He wishes that he could’ve given her that. He wishes that he could tell her he’s sorry he hadn’t
been able to.

“Thanks again, Betty,” he says, coughing out the catch in his throat – it’s what’s easiest.
“Seriously, you have no idea how much this helps me.”

“Happy to do it,” she says. “I’ve always loved reading your work.”

Jughead tries to find his voice because he knows that the next thing out of his mouth, the right next
thing out of his mouth should be something along the lines of ‘goodbye,’ but he’s having a hard
time working up to it. It’s so final, he thinks, and there’s such a definitive end to everything once he
says it – the minute he does, she’ll be walking away from him all over again, just like she did that
morning in September.
Instead, he stays silent and settles for a simple nod in her direction as she turns away from him and down the steps to the uptown train.

*It’s okay,* he tells himself. He has to let her go because it’s the right thing to do. She looks so happy now, and she might even be sharing that happiness with someone else. They had their time, and it’d been unparalleled and magical, but whatever comes next isn’t his to share with her anymore.

His time with her has come and gone long ago, and letting her go now is the selfless thing to do.

*But what about the selfish thing,* he wonders.

*What’s the selfish thing to do?*

“Jug?” she calls back to him suddenly as she treads back up the steps. “I know it’s a few days early, but happy birthday.”

“Oh,” he says slowly, blinking fast at the sight of her in front of him again. “Thanks. Jesus, I almost forgot about it.”

Betty laughs. “I forgot mine, too, if it makes you feel any better,” she says, and instantly, it makes him feel so much worse. She might’ve forgotten her own birthday but he hadn’t, and he’d deliberately done nothing about it other than sit around all day in a verifiable funk.

“Any plans?” she prods casually, and he knows why she’s really asking him that question.

She’s been on his birthday brigade ever since he turned sixteen, and even though years seventeen through twenty-two hadn’t required much in the name of organizing aside from telling Archie and Veronica when and what movie to show up for, she’d still been there every year smiling the day away with him.

It’s the first time it really hits him that she’s not going to be there this year. She’s not going to be there reaching her hand into his bucket of popcorn and he won’t have his arm comfortably slung around her shoulders with her head gently resting on him, the dim lights of the movie eerily illuminating her skin. She won’t be there, checking in to make sure he’s having a good time and that he’s happy, she won’t be there making sure he knows he’s loved.

She just won’t be there.

He’s no stranger to feeling lonely on his birthday, but it’s also been years since he’s felt that way, thanks to her. It’s rushing back with stinging force now, that unsettling, familiar feeling of loneliness, and it’s severe in a way that he doesn’t remember it being before.

“Archie said he’s free after his shift,” Jughead says eventually. He hopes she can’t hear the unsteadiness in his voice. “Which probably means we’re going to watch some chick flick Veronica’s going to choose.”

“Probably,” Betty agrees with a relieved nod. “Make sure Archie gets your popcorn, okay?”

It’s like a punch to the heart – that’d always been her job.

“I will,” he tells her.

For the second time tonight, Jughead watches her turn away from him and this time, he’s much less okay with that than he’d been all of two minutes ago.
“You should come,” he hears himself blurring out to her. “But only if you want to, and you don’t even have to get my popcorn or anything. Just, you know, come and have fun.”

“Really?” she asks.

“I mean, if you want to get my popcorn, I’m not stopping you,” he jokes in what he knows is a poor attempt of downplaying the significance of what he’s just asked her. But since there’s really no coming back from that, either, he figures he might as well go with the truth. “It wouldn’t feel like my birthday without you,” he says. “I want you there.”

He knows what her answer will be before she even says it, because she’s smiling so brilliantly at him. “Okay,” she says. ”Then I’ll be there.”

And just like that, while standing there with her in the most nondescript and derelict of subway stations with so many nameless, faceless strangers brushing around them, rushing home to the furthest reaches of the city, he’s no longer lonely.

Halfway through his twenty-third birthday, a knock on the front door interrupts his otherwise peaceful and solitary afternoon, and he’s about to just let it go, too, when he hears Veronica’s shrill, piercing voice on the other side.

“Jughead! I have a key and I will use it, but I’m giving you a chance to answer!”

He sighs and sets his book face down on the coffee table, holding his page. Veronica sounds like she’s on a mission and she’ll just be so much less of a hassle if he opens the door for her instead of hollering back to let herself in.

Telling her to go away and leave him alone, however, is just not an option as much as he wants it to be.

“Archie’s at work,” Jughead says in greeting.

“I know,” Veronica says, pushing the door open behind him and breezing her way into the apartment. “I’m here to see you, believe it or not.”

“Not, but yet here you are in the flesh.”

She’s been the unofficial third roommate for years now, but still he thinks that Veronica looks so out of place here against the mismatched, second-hand furniture, with her black cape and stole draped around her shoulders, her nose turned high up in the air.

“What are you doing?” she starts plainly.

“I was about to take my birthday nap when you barged in uninvited.”

“Don’t be coy, it doesn’t suit-”

“Coy? I have never been coy in my life.”

“You know what I mean.”
He does. Jughead sighs – he’d fully expected some version of this conversation at some point, but he’s in no way overjoyed that it’s happening now.

“It’s a movie, Veronica – you couldn’t find a more PG activity for us to both be at.”

And he means PG in the literal sense because Veronica’s going to be there chaperoning, and he knows better than anyone just how protective Veronica is of Betty, although he wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I heard about your little coffee date.”

“What coffee date?” Jughead asks innocently. He knows exactly which coffee date. He just didn’t know Veronica had been aware of it, too.

“It’s like pulling teeth with you,” Veronica says flatly.

“It was a... business meeting,” he offers unhelpfully.

“Jughead,” she says, flattening her palm against the kitchen counter and leaning her weight against it. “What are you doing? Really, how do you see this all ending?”

He frowns at her, feeling a truly deep scowl setting in across his face. Honestly, he doesn’t know how it ends, and if he were to hazard a guess, he’d go with ‘probably not well.’ He knows enough of the world, he knows enough of them to know that there’s a good chance that this house of cards they’re carefully constructing will come crumbling down sooner rather than later.

But maybe this time, he thinks. Maybe this time.

“Do you still love her?” Veronica asks, and just when he thinks he has a smart, philosophical answer about friendship and different types of love, she blows a hole right through it. “Let me rephrase – are you still in love with her?”

“I’ll always care about her,” Jughead says carefully, quickly overcorrecting when Veronica’s eyes start going wide. “Don’t start reading volumes into that, and don’t look at me like that either. I just meant that you don’t spend that long loving someone and suddenly stop caring when you’re not together anymore.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“Well, I don’t feel like answering your question,” he says defensively. “My birthday, my rules.”

“Mmm,” Veronica hums deliberately, and he knows exactly what she means by it – he didn’t say no. “You hurt her, and I hurt you,” she says conclusively. “And you know as well as anyone else that I actually have the means to follow through on that. Got it?”

“I don’t know what kind of monster you think I am, and honestly this whole conversation is a little insulting. I’ve never actively set out to hurt her. I wouldn’t do that.”

But that isn’t the answer Veronica wants and he knows it’s something of a cop out, too, because at the end of the day his intent means jack if Betty ends up hurting because of him.

“Got it,” he repeats back with a sigh.

“Good,” Veronica says, pushing the paper bag on the counter over to him. “Happy birthday.”

“You think you’d open with that,” he mutters, unearthing the take-out box. It’s the fancy kind, he
notes, the kind made from sturdy plastic. But it’s Veronica, so of course it is.

“Don’t be rude,” she says primly, tapping her finger on the top of the box. “4 Charles doesn’t usually do take out.”

Jughead knows because he’s tried before, more than once. He thinks that twenty dollars for a burger is highway robbery and then some, but this burger is also just that good.

“Is it good?” Veronica asks, eyebrows raising as he brings the burger to his mouth. “It smells good.”

He doesn’t know that much about women who aren’t named Betty Cooper, but he knows all about that hungry, yearning look plastered on Veronica’s face right now. He’s definitely seen that look before staring longingly at his fries, his ice-cream, and once, even at his pack of gum.

“Here,” Jughead concedes, reaching for a knife and splitting the burger; he can’t in good conscience eat the entire thing with her staring at him like that. “And before you start with the whole ‘I can’t eat this’ because of calories and carbs bullshit, don’t, because this is a one-time offer.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Veronica says lightly, prying the smaller half from his half-willing hand.

They’re late getting to the movies thanks to Archie, and by the time they get there, Betty is sitting alone with several buckets of popcorn and what he thinks might be the entire candy display surrounding her.

He hates that he’s made her wait and that he’s shown up with their friends flanking his either side like an army ready to do battle. She’s not the petty or irrational sort, and he doesn’t think that she’d hold something like this against him, but his rationale doesn’t have him feeling a whole lot better. He knows he’d feel more than a little on edge if he’d been the one waiting alone on her birthday while she showed up late with their friends.

“We’re here, B!” Veronica calls across the lobby, completely uncaring of the heads turning her way in judgment; any space is personal space you can scream into if you’re Veronica Lodge, he’s learned long ago. He watches as Veronica throws up various wide, wild gestures and signals, pointing towards herself, Archie, and the ticket kiosks, and then he’s all but shoved forward, hard and unceremoniously, to walk up to Betty alone.

“Sorry we’re late,” Jughead says by way of hello and explanation. “Archie apparently can’t tell the difference between when the hour hand is pointing at the seven or the eight.”

“What?” she asks. “I was listening to him on the radio all afternoon. He literally announced the time every hour.”

“That’s what I said.”

Betty laughs, and even though he’s still a little pissed at Archie for making them all late and forcing her to wait alone, he’s grateful for the ice-breaker. His alternative had been ‘hey, what’s up?’ and he knows that’s in no way profound.
“So,” Jughead starts, eying the jumbo buckets of popcorn. “All for you?”

“All for you,” she corrects, quickly grabbing for the bag of Sour Patch Kids. “Except these. Happy birthday, Jug.”

“You’ve outdone yourself, Cooper,” he says. “Although you just took the only candy I was remotely interested in.”

“Oh, really?” She looks at the bag in her hand and to him, eventually holding out the bag reluctantly. “Here, I’ll just get anoth-”

“I’m kidding, Betty,” he says, fingertips brushing her wrist as he stills her offering. “I still don’t like those.”

“I didn’t know if that’d changed,” she says.

“Trust me, there may be things about me that are different, but that about me will never change.”

“Speaking of,” she follows softly, and the quick up-and-down of her eyes over him doesn’t escape his notice. “I like the jacket.”

Instinctively, Jughead brushes his hand against the leather that’s now already softer and more pliable than it’d been the day he bought it. “Thanks,” he says. “I figured it was time for something new.”

“You look good,” Betty says. “I mean-”

“Go on,” he teases.

“I just meant that it’s a nice jacket,” she continues, stuttering out her words. She’s so easy to read, sometimes. “It’s a nice cut, and it’s a nice material, too. It goes really well with your skin tone and-”

She’s trying so hard backtrack but she’s doing such a poor job at it that he can’t help but laugh – she’s never been a great liar. It takes her a moment but eventually, red-faced and caught, she cracks and gives in.

Then, it’s just them in front of the concessions stand, surrounded by synthetic smell of buttery popcorn and screaming children, laughing together.

“The jacket looks great on you, Jug,” she concedes, pink still tinting her cheeks. “It suits you.”

“Thanks, Betts,” he says after a moment of basking in her compliment. “I’ll tell JB you said so. She-”

“Hey, Betty,” Archie interrupts as he jogs up to them, swooping hands descending quickly on the candy boxes. “Sorry we’re late.”

Betty recovers a second faster than he does at the sight and sound of Archie and his flaming head suddenly wedged between them. “No worries,” she says brightly.

“Is any of this for me?”

“Take whatever you want, but Jug gets first dibs,” Betty says, nodding in his direction.

“Cool,” Archie says. “Jug, what don’t you want?”
“Just don’t touch my Twizzlers.”

There’s a careful smirk twitching at the corner of her lip, and it’s one that has him involuntarily mimicking the action. “By the way, I’m disappointed in you, Arch,” Betty starts mockingly, both hands square on her hips. “All that energy I invested in teaching you how to tell time in first grade, and you reward my hard work by showing up late? I’m heartbroken.”

Immediately, Archie sighs and rounds on him, brow furrowed. “Dude, I told you not to tell her.”

Jughead shrugs. “I didn’t feel like listening.”

*But I did feel like making her smile.*

He watches as Betty holds out her hand to Archie, watches as Archie’s frustration increasingly grows when he tips two, three, then four Milk Duds into her open palm. He’s been jealous of Archie over one Betty Cooper before, and even he’s been angry with Archie over her, too. But as he stands next to them now, the two people he’s carried with him from his sandbox days to his twenty-third birthday, all he can think is that regardless of everything that has and hasn’t happened between him and Betty, he’s happy – he’s *so* happy that they’re both here with him now, even if it’s only for this night.

And he thinks, when he hears heels tapping against the tile behind him, he’s even happy that Veronica is here.

“They were sold out of *It,*” Veronica says, and he’s instantly doubtful – they can’t be conveniently sold out of the movie he wants to see every time he sees a movie with Veronica in tow. Even his luck isn’t *that* horrendous.

“Are you sure?” Betty asks. “I checked online before we-”

“Don’t worry about it, B,” Veronica interrupts. “I already bought other tickets. We’re watching the throwback special.”

And it’s apparently not up for debate. Happy birthday to him.

When he takes his ticket from Veronica and glances at the title, he understands exactly why they’re at some out-of-the-way cinema they’ve never been to before.

*Breakfast at Tiffany’s,*” he says flatly. “Again?”

“Spare me your indignation, Jughead, I know you love this movie.”

She’s not wrong. It’s a cinematic masterpiece and he’s man enough to admit that. But he’s also interested in watching new movies, movies he hasn’t seen at least a dozen times before with exactly these three people, movies he doesn’t have at home on DVD and Netflix.

“Anyhow, they’ve already been bought, so you don’t have a choice. Unless,” Veronica says suggestively. “You two would rather do your own thing?”

He’d deliberately made it very clear to Veronica in the Uber that she insisted on taking because *‘stoles and subways really don’t go together, Jughead,’* that she was absolutely prohibited from making comments that would in any way, shape, or form lead to awkwardness and uncomfortableness – there’d be enough of that without her making it worse. Jughead glares at her now, but all he’s returned with is an unapologetic shrug as Veronica leads Archie towards the ticket-check.
“Well,” he starts, turning to Betty – at least she doesn’t look like she’s uncomfortable. “Shall we?”

“Jug, are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“What, the movie? Yeah, it’s no big deal,” he says. He’s not about to get into an argument with Veronica over something so trivial, partly because he knows he’s not going to emerge a winner there. “I probably wouldn’t have picked it, but it’s fine. Are you?” he blurts out. “I can play the birthday card if you’re not – seriously, we can watch whatever you want.”

“No, no, this is perfect,” she says quickly. “It’s one of my favorites.”

The fading of the memories that had defined them, lost to the devil of time and the limitations of his own mind has, he thinks, been one of the most difficult realities he’s had to face in the aftermath of them. There’d been so much he’d wanted to hold onto and cherish forever because the memories he had of them were so irreplaceable and so deeply personal – the freezing night she’d trekked over to the trailer with a Tupperware of chicken soup for him when he’d been sick and ended up getting sick herself, the way they’d slept on a hospital bed meant for one after she had her appendix removed, awkwardly and angularly because he’d been so afraid of hurting her, the way she simply smiled at him when he’d told the nurses and doctors with the straightest of faces that if they wanted him to leave over something as trivial as ‘visiting hours,’ they were going to have to physically remove him themselves.

He knows that there’s so much of their story his mind has already erased, but he’s so glad that he still knows this.

“I remember,” he tells her.

He loves watching her watch this movie.

He’s seen it enough times to know exactly what’s coming next, but until now, he’s never watched her watch it. She reacts so beautifully, he thinks, her whole heart is so plainly written across her face, and it’s such a travesty he’s always been too caught up in the story on the screen to notice the infinitely more captivating one next to him – the story of her, the moments that make her laugh and the scenes that make her sigh.

The song comes on then, the song that has almost everyone around him collectively melting, the one that has Veronica weeping on cue, and out of the corner of his eye, he’s surprised to see that even Betty has her hand fluttering over her cardigan-covered heart.

She’d been beautiful to watch.

He’d never once looked at her and saw anything less than beauty in every sense of the word, but in that gown, the black silk cut low against her bare back, the starkest of contrasts against her pale skin, and her ponytail twisted up in an intricate knot on her head – he’d been completely captivated. He hadn’t been able to take his eyes off of her.

Across the ballroom, Veronica’s hands had fluttered at the song change, and as she’d excitedly turned and pulled Archie to the center of the dance floor, stopping directly in front of the live orchestra, he’d almost laughed at the crystal tiara on her head winking at him as it’d caught the light from the chandelier.
The entire night had felt like walking in a fever dream.

But then, there was his girl, so poised and so graceful, gliding across the floor to him; in search of him, smiling at him, wanting just him.

“Dance with me?” she’d asked, holding out her gloved hand for his. “I love this song.”

He’d never been one for dancing, let alone the type that required him to step in time with her in a neat four-corner pattern, hand circling her waist. But she’d asked, eyes so bright with hope, and he hadn’t been able to say no. She deserved someone to stand up proudly and dance with her, even if that meant he’d completely embarrass himself in the process.

“No promises I won’t step on your feet,” he’d warned as the tip of his shoe grazed the hem of her gown.

He’d recognized the song, he’d realized as she’d leaned into him and tipped her head on his shoulder, it’d been the one he’d heard on an endless loop for the past week as she’d scrubbed through Breakfast at Tiffany’s on Netflix, desperately trying to match up the silhouette of her gown to the one in the movie as closely as she could.

‘Why even have an Audrey Hepburn themed party?’ he remembered her muttering to him. ‘Isn’t a twenty-first birthday enough of a theme?’

‘It’s Veronica,’ he’d said like it explained everything, and in a way, it did. ‘She wouldn’t go for the ordinary if the extraordinary is an option.’

As he’d held her, it’d struck him how different a melody could sound in a given context. Before, he supposed he’d thought that it’d been pretty tune, but it also hadn’t paid much mind to it when it’d been punctuated with the steady click of her sewing machine. But at that moment, as she swayed gently with him, as she sighed contentedly against him – he’d heard it differently. The harmony and melody, the treble and bass, her and him – it sounded like a different song altogether, so meaningful, so deeply moving, and so sweet.

“She’s beautiful,” she’d murmured against him, her voice catching on the lapels of his jacket.

“Who is?”

She’d nodded her head in Veronica’s direction. “Don’t you think?”

“Yes,” he’d said truthfully; it’d be dishonest to deny it. Veronica was beautiful, polished and refined, elegant in all the fine ways Park Avenue and a trust fund could buy. “But eye of the beholder, Betty.”

“Meaning?”

He’d thought then of how much Veronica reminded him of the pearls circling her neck, incredibly beautiful to look at, but always accompanied by an air of coolness and opaqueness; she had a certain a hardness to her that even after all his years of knowing her, he hadn’t been sure if he’d completely broken through yet.

But the girl in his arms with hair the color of fine gold, vibrant and brilliant enough to rival the crowns of kings, she was like the sun; warm and comforting, nurturing and necessary.

The light of his entire life.
He’d brushed his thumb over her cheekbone and gently turned her eyes to his, hand resting on the curve of her jaw. “I don’t say this enough, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t true every single day,” he’d whispered to her. “There is no one on this earth more beautiful than you.”

She’s different now, Jughead thinks as he watches her. That air of self-assuredness he’d first seen on her at the coffee shop is still there, and at her eyes, soft and slightly hooded, at her lips just barely parted in wonder, he sees that hint of vulnerability again, too.

Without thinking and without realizing what he’s doing, he reaches over and gently slides his hand under hers, squeezing once as curls his fingers around hers.

Do you remember? he hopes he’s saying to her. It’s okay if you don’t, because I do – I’ll remember for both of us. There are things I might’ve forgotten, but I’ll never forget that night.

I’ll never forget you.

Until the end of the song, he tells himself, he’ll let go at the end of the song because it’s his birthday and maybe that affords him a liberty or two. Then, until the end of the scene, until they get to Tiffany’s – until, until.

He can’t bring himself to let go.

But, he reasons, stealing a glance at her fingers woven tightly through his – she can’t seem to, either.

Despite the prying eyes from Archie and Veronica, Jughead walks her home. It’s dangerous for her to walk through the park at night and alone, he explains to them in a furious attempt to bring down their raised eyebrows from their hairlines, and it won’t take him long at all to make sure she gets home safe; it’s the least he can do, the gentlemanly thing to do when he’d been the one to invite her out in the first place.

It isn’t until she’s falling into place beside him, the shadows of the turning trees swinging and spotlighting the features of her face like a stage show – the flash of her eyes, the sharp cut of her cheekbones – that he realizes that, finally, he’s deeply calm.

It’s unexpected. So much of tonight has filled him with anticipatory dread and anxiety because his birthday has disappointed him more often than not, because his wanting her to be there with him led to the inevitable corollary of him wondering if she’d really wanted the same, too. But they’d made it through the storm – the storm of pleasantries and awkward greetings, of judgmental and inquiring eyes – and this, he thinks, this must be the calm.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Jughead asks, stepping in time with her.

Her eyes are turned up to the skyline, and he thinks then how much he loves the way she looks at it, how much he loves the way she looks within it, with the city draped and furled around her; she looks more comfortable and at home than she’s ever looked before. She looks confident, and confidence has always looked exquisite on her.

‘I love this city,” she whispers, and he knows she’s not talking only to him; her words are a soft love-letter to the city he loves, too, an ode to the place they’re both slowly but surely finding their
“Everything you ever dreamed life would be?”

“Mmm,” Betty hums, breathing in the autumn air deeply. “Almost.”

“What?”

“I always thought that you and I—” she catches herself, pulling her head back sharply at her mistake – she’s revealed too much. “Nice try,” Betty laughs. “It’s your birthday – we should be talking about your dreams, not mine.”

“My dreams,” he says, even though he’s much more interested in having her finish that first thought – ‘you and I.’ “Where to begin?”

His own words stop him. Really, where to begin? Once and not long ago, a lot of his dreams had involved her, the places they’d go, the people they’d become, the life they’d lead together – and he’s surprised that her gentle encouragement leads him straight back to them, to the dreams of him and her he’d thought he’d banished from his mind long ago.

“One day I’ll get that book published,” he says eventually. It’s as good an answer as any.

“Did you ever get around to working on it again?”

“Yeah. A little, you know, after.”

“I’m really glad you did,” she says with conviction; he doesn’t need to explain to her the ‘after’ he’s talking about. “We all went through so much back then. It’s a story that should be told. It’s a story that needs you to tell it.”

“Hey,” Jughead says, and even though he’s sure he’s used up his quota of casual touches with her tonight, he reaches out to stop her because he needs her full attention now. He needs her to know this. “I didn’t stop writing that or anything else because of you. I want you to know that. You had nothing to do with why I put the pen down. I just – I got in my own head.” He’s always been his own worst enemy and he hopes that she hasn’t been spending all these months thinking that he’d in any way attributed his shortfalls to her. “I mean, what sixteen-year-old, what twenty-three-year-old even, thinks he knows enough of the world to write about it with any accuracy?”

“And now?”

He shrugs. “Maybe it doesn’t have to be accurate. Maybe it just has to be real. And who’s to say that what I’m writing, what I’m feeling – what you, Archie, what we’re all feeling – who’s to say that it isn’t?”

“You’re to say,” she tells him gently. “If you’re writing what you feel and what you know, then it’s accurate, and that’s all you can do. If you’re writing what you feel, then it’s real. Your writing is your own and all it needs to be is whatever you want it to be.”

It’s the way she talks to him, gently and never with a hint of condescension, so thoughtfully and intelligently, that makes him think that there must be some kind of unwritten, undefined language of them. It’s a language that only they can speak, one they’ve been practicing for years, one that only they know and that’s theirs alone. He understands when she talks to him, understands life, and love, and the world with such clearness and clarity; he understands because there’s no one who explains and guides him quite like she does.
“You always say just the right thing,” he tells her. “You always say everything I need to hear.”

There’s a pause and a few false, stuttered starts on her part before she caves to her question. “Can I ask,” Betty prefaces quietly. “What is this? I mean, you and me and this thing that we’re doing?”

It’s the million-dollar question.

He just doesn’t have a million-dollar answer.

“I don’t know.” Jughead pauses, searching for the right words. “I just – don’t you ever think it’s all such a waste? To throw away the last, what, two decades that we’ve been friends just because we’re not together anymore?”

“We were friends long before everything else,” Betty agrees.

“I wish we could go back to that sometimes,” he admits. “It was so easy then.”

He hopes she feels the same way he does. He hopes that, like him, she does think it’s unfair, that it is such a monumental waste that something as banal as a break-up could wipe away their intimacy and familiarity in one fell swoop as if it had never been there, as if it hadn’t been carefully formed and molded for years on end.

He’s studying her intently and looking to her for any indication as to what she might be thinking, but as they pass the carousel, he’s distracted by the glint of the gold rings above the horses catching his eye. They’re so brilliant, he thinks as they flash at him through the darkness, and he feels like if he were only to try, he’d be able to reach one and hold on.

“For what it’s worth,” Betty says eventually. “I’ve never not wanted to be friends. I still do.”

Jughead blows out the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

“Really?”

He doesn’t need to look over at her to know she’s smiling. “Really.”

Friends.

In his mind, he tries to create a nexus between the simple phrase and her, the her who’d once been so much more than that. “Friends,” he says slowly, testing the word out in his mouth. “Friends. What do friends like us do anyhow?”

He supposes the more specific question is what do friends who’ve once shared a love that he’s not sure he’s ever going to be able to replicate do after that love has ended, but he thinks she gets his general idea.

“This, I guess,” Betty says, gesturing to the space between them he hadn’t realized they’d both been slowly closing. “Walk in the park, go for coffee. Edit each other’s writing,” she teases, throwing a gentle elbow to his arm. “Talk.”

It’s that last one that really gets his smile going – talk. He’s missed her voice waking him up in the middle of the night asking him if it was Bukowski or Carver that led the Dirty Realism movement, and he’s missed her bringing home unfinished debates from her English Lit class just for his own two cents. He’s missed moments like this, of him and her in a comfortable kind of quiet, just talking.
He’s had enough of silence.

“And you’d be okay with that?” he asks. "Us talking?"

“Would you be?” she asks carefully, but even in the dim street lighting, he can see that there’s eagerness in her eyes.

“Yes,” Jughead rushes out quickly. “I mean, yes, but only if you are.”

“I am,” she says. Then, shyly – “I miss talking to you.”

If she can admit it, then he can too. “I’ve missed talking to you too, Betty,” he says. “But more than that, I’ve just missed you.”

Over the years, there’ve been so many things that she’s said that together, make up some of the loveliest, most special things that anyone has spoken to him. Her answer now is simple, her words are refrain of the ones he’s just said to her, but they carry all the meaning in the world.

“I’ve just missed you, too,” she says.

Betty laughs then, loudly and freely over the muted rustle of wind blowing through fallen leaves, and because he’s learned all the incarnations of her laugh over the years – the one she uses when she’s nervous, the one she uses when something’s overwhelmingly hilarious – he knows that right now, she’s laughing because of some sort of finally. She’s relieved that they’re finally some kind of okay, and she’s happy that they’re finally at a place where they can be together again.

And, because he’s happy, too, in such an indescribable and monumental way that she’s finally back in his life, he laughs with her.

He doesn’t walk her up to her apartment because her doorman looks, plainly put, a little too overjoyed to see him. As much as he likes Betty’s doorman, he’s really not interested in having any kind of conversation about where he’s been for the past ten months or if he’s ‘back’ now.

Instead, Jughead offers a small, embarrassed wave through the glass window, and decides that saying goodnight to Betty at her building’s door is as good a place as any.

“Well,” Betty starts, heels clicking together as she turns to face him. “Happy birthday. I hope you enjoy the last hour and twenty-four minutes of it.”

“How could I not when I get to go home and listen to Archie and Veronica doing god knows what,” he jokes. “But all kidding aside, thanks for coming tonight, Betty,” he says. “It wouldn’t have felt like my birthday without you there.”

“You say that like it was a chore for me to spend the night gorging myself on junk food while watching Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” she says. “I’m happy I got to be there with you.”

“I am, too,” he tells her.

He’s stuck again on how he’s supposed to say goodbye to her. They’re friends now, so it has to be more than some kind of half-nod in her direction. He knows it’s not a kiss either, because that’d been their goodbye when she’d been something more than a friend, but he’s not sure what exactly
falls in the in-between.

A hug, a handshake?

A high-five?

Jughead settles for a half-pat, half-brush on her upper arm, and it causes a short jolt of static electricity to spark between his palm and her wool cardigan. He instantly regrets it – he doesn’t think he’s ever done anything more awkward in his life. “I’ll see you around,” he says in an effort to recover, and already, he wants to know when that might be.

He’s tempted to ask her, because he doesn’t want to leave her tonight without knowing exactly when he’s going to see her again. But he also knows his luck and how well it usually serves him – he’s already pushed it to its outer bounds. They’re friends now, anyhow, he reasons, and that means he’ll see her again at some point, maybe even soon.

It isn’t something he has to push her to figure out right now – it’ll come with time.

“Jug,” she calls, and when he turns at her voice she’s smiling widely at him. She’s smiling just for him. “Coffee on Saturday?”

It takes him a moment to key into the fact that he isn’t daydreaming her words and that she’s actually there looking at him so expectantly, waiting so eagerly for his answer.

Just maybe, his luck hasn’t run dry yet.

“This Saturday?” he asks.

“Yeah,” she says, laughing. “Are you free?”

He thinks that he could have plans to climb Mount Kilimanjaro on Saturday, or plans to do something else that’s more up his alley because he really isn’t the athletic type – play video games all day, maybe – and he’d still find a way to drop them for her.

“I’ll see you Saturday, Betts.”

Her smile is the last thing he sees as the elevator doors close on the sight of her, and even though the subway stalls twice on the way home, even though Archie and Veronica can’t stop looking at him from the couch with smug, waggling eyebrows, the memory of her hand in his, of her laughing with him, of her smiling at him – new memories, ones he never thought he’d have the chance to create with her again – have him smiling, too, unabashedly and uncontrollably, as he watches the clock strike midnight into just another, ordinary day.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from "Moon River" by Henry Mancini.
November

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As time goes by.

She’s standing in front of the microwave, exhausted and with her forehead pressed against the counter and her head cradled in a circle of her arms when her phone buzzes next to her.

Betty jumps at the noise – she’d been listening so intently to the low, steady rhythm of the microwave at the exclusion of everything else. She knows exactly who it is, though, because the only other two people who’d be awake and care enough to text her at this hour are locked away in Veronica’s room. She smiles when she flips over her phone proves herself right.

*Hey, can I call? Or would that automatically relegate me to that hate-list of yours?*

She laughs quietly to herself as she remembers the context behind his message. *‘I hate it when people call me when they can just text,’ she’d told him while they’d been ambling through a used bookstore on Twelfth. ‘Seriously, I will automatically dislike all people who do that on principle.’*

‘Wow,’ he’d said to her, voice deeply serious. *‘Betty Cooper can hate. Who knew?’*

‘Oh, Betty Cooper can hate,’ she’d said as she’d declined the call – what would Amanda from college need to talk to her about right then, anyhow? *‘And Betty Cooper can hang up on you, too.’*

Really, she’d just been pissed that anyone would have the gall to interrupt her while she’d been spending time with a friend.

*Hmm*, she types back, throwing in the thinking-face emoji in case her lighthearted intent fails to translate for good measure. *Call and I’ll let you know."

He does not a minute later but not wanting to seem overly eager, Betty lets the phone ring twice before picking up.

“*Well?”* he asks.

“I’ll make an exception for you.”

“I’m honored.”

“You should be,” she teases back. “I don’t make exceptions for just anyone.”

“So, I have a proposition for you and you can say – are you eating?”

Betty cringes – she didn’t know the sound of her chewing and slurping would be that obvious over the phone. She’s sure it’s not the most pleasant of sounds.

“*Yeah,”* she admits, sticking her chopsticks in her noodles – her hunger will have to wait.

“*Sorry, I didn’t mean to inter*—"
“No, no,” she says quickly, a touch on the too-eager side. “You’re not. I just got home late. From work,” she adds, not wanting him to think that she’d been out with anyone else. She likes where they are now and she doesn’t want anything jeopardizing that.

“You’re just got home? Betts, It’s nearly midnight.”

“I know,” she sighs tiredly, stretching out her legs on the couch. “Last minute re-write came in at eight.”

“Do you need anything?” Jughead asks. “Not that I could get it to you with any incredible speed, but say the word and I’ll-”

“You’re sweet to offer, Juggie,” she says, and it is sweet. She’s forgotten what it’s like to have someone other than Veronica or Archie care about what time she comes home, or whether she’s had enough to eat, or if she’s working herself too hard and too fast into the ground; it’s a nice feeling to feel cared about. “I’ve got my leftovers, though. I’m okay.”

“What’re you eating?”

“You want to know what I’m eating?”

She can almost see his shrug across the line. “Indulge me.”

“Lo mein. Oh, and Veronica’s fortune cookie.”

“From Szechuan Palace?”

“Of course.”

“Man, I miss that place.”

Betty doesn’t know why she feels the sudden need to apologize for the fact that he’s been deprived of Szechuan Palace’s Kung Pao chicken and egg rolls. There are thousands of Chinese food restaurants between his apartment and hers that are probably equally as good, maybe even better, and she reminds herself that she has nothing to be sorry for, that it was all just part and parcel of them not being together anymore.

“So, the proposition,” she says instead, because she doesn’t really know what to do with his comment one way or another.

“Oh, right.” The edge of nervousness in his voice makes her freeze. He wouldn’t be so misguided as to call about dating advice, would he? Not that she wouldn’t do her best to give her best, most rational friend-type advice possible, but she also doesn’t think she’ll be able to keep down the contents of her stomach after doing so, either. “If this is too weird and crosses the friend-line, just say no. Seriously, I won’t be offended.”

“Jug.”

“Remember, you can say no,” he prefaces once more, and there’s a horrible lurch in her stomach as he does. “Do you want to be my plus-one for this event I have to go to?”

Oh.

“It’s a charity auction,” he continues. “The Empire bought out a table or a booth or something. Honestly, I wasn’t really paying attention. But I do know that I have to go.”
“What’s the cause?” she asks, keeping her voice as steady and as controlled as possible.

“Kids.”

“That’s it? Just kids?”

“Yeah, kids and – hold on.” She hears the faint click of his keyboard across the line. “The Children’s Literacy Foundation. So, kids. And books.”

“A noble cause.”

“The noblest,” he says, laughing.

“When is it?”

“Oh. Hold on,” he says again.

Betty wonders if he’d even read the invitation before calling her, or simply read the words ‘plus-one’ and picked up the phone without a second thought. She’s not about to tell him this, but there’s more than a small part of her that hopes it’s the latter.

“Next – no, sorry, next-next Saturday,” Jughead says. “Are you free? You can lie and say no even if you are. No follow up questions, I promise.”

“Free as a bird,” she says easily.

She’s lying through her teeth. She knows full well that’s the day that Veronica has set her up with her cousin’s-friend’s-cousin’s – she’s been dreading it – but she figures she’ll just cancel. This is for the kids, she tells herself, and Veronica will understand that.

“I just sent you the invite,” he says.

“*Casino Royale,*” Betty reads, pulling her computer up to her lap and clicking to her email. “It’s James Bond-themed?”

“Yeah,” he says through a sigh that she thinks is really more dramatic than necessary. “Apparently they do this every year – pick some literary character conducive to horrible theme parties, slap the word charity on it, and congratulate themselves on spending more than they actually raise.”

“Let me guess – last year’s theme was Gatsby.”

“It was,” he says plainly. “You think I’m kidding, but I’m not.”

“Jug, I’d love to go with you,” she says, and she’s surprised by the depth to which she truly means that. He picked *her* and not someone else when he very easily could have. “It sounds like fun. Or, at the very least, it’s a night of free food.”

*And a night with you.*

“Thanks, Betty,” he says, relief permeating his gratitude. “You have no idea how much you’re helping me out. Everyone seems to think I’m some kind of hermit or ascetic at the office. Or both.”

“Wonder where they got that idea,” she quips, arranging the throw pillows on the couch and laying down.

“Hey, I live with Archie – that does not a hermit make.”
“Sure,” she says. “And I’m sure you spend lots and lots of time with Archie, what, with him being home all the time.”

“I’m guessing by your tone he’s over there playing his guitar way too loudly for midnight right now.”

“I’m impressed, hermit.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you that,” he says, and when he laughs, Betty curls her hand tightly around her phone in a vain attempt to preserve the sound that’s already a mere echo.

“Anyhow,” Jughead continues. “I’ll let you get back to your food. You’re probably starving.”

“No rush,” she says swiftly, even though he’s right – she is starving. “How was your day?”

It’s a slightly daring question on her part. It’s one that dances the edge of the too familiar, at least at this point in time and at this somewhat unsteady point in their newly formed friendship. But if he’s at all fazed by her and her boldness it isn’t obvious to her.

“Other than the fact I found out that I’m going to have to put on a suit and mingle,” he says seamlessly. “It was pretty good. I just found out that they’re running that piece you edited in the next issue.”

“Second Time Around?” she asks excitedly, sitting up so quickly that she knocks one of the throw pillows straight onto the ground.

“Yeah.”

“Jug, oh my god! That’s incredible!”

“Thanks,” he says. “I couldn’t have done it without your help.”

“Yes, you could’ve,” she counters easily. “But I’ll take the praise just the same.”

“If you’re free later this week, I’ll praise you in person. Coffee on me.”

“Wednesday?” she suggests.

“Whenever you want.”

She bites back her telltale smile when she sees Archie pull open Veronica’s door and pad out into the living room, shirtless as always.

“Wednesday, then,” she confirms quietly, trying to stay out of Archie’s earshot. “Congratulations, J.P.”

“Laugh it up now,” he tells her. “I told them to go with Jughead this time.”

Betty feels her shoulders loosen and fall – it’s what she’d been hoping he’d decide to do ever since she’d read his first story and frowned every time her eyes tracked back to the completely unfamiliar name paired with his very familiar voice. It’d been a beautiful story, his always were, but something had just felt very wrong about seeing that unfamiliar name tagged to it. The name that wasn’t really his, the name on the story that didn’t at all represent the stories about who he was and is.

“I’m glad you did,” she tells him simply. “I’m really glad.”
“Betty, who are you talking to?” Archie calls from behind the fridge and over the loud rustle of his forage through Veronica’s La Croix. “It’s midnight.”

**Busted.**

She’s caught, she realizes, caught in that she can’t brush it off and say ‘no one’ because he’s still on the other line and he’s absolutely not no one to her. But she’s also aware that her having midnight conversations with her ex-boyfriend isn’t exactly something she can own up to without raising an eyebrow or two.

“‘You can have those noodles,’” Betty says instead, nodding her head in the direction of her takeout box.

“Thanks,” Archie says, swooping to claim her sad, cold dinner without a second thought as she quickly retreats towards her room. Then – “By the way, can you ask Jug to leave my keys on the sconce? I forgot them again.”

She stops with one hand frozen on her doorknob and throws her best glare to Archie and his chubby cheeks, full of the food she’d needlessly relinquished to spare herself that all-too knowing, smug look. Admittedly, she hasn’t been doing the most stellar of jobs hiding exactly who she’s been having midnight conversations with – conversations plural because this isn’t the first time it’s happened. But it is the first time Archie’s directly broached the subject with her.

“Goodnight, Archie,” she says pointedly.

There’s silence on the line as Betty crawls into bed and pulls her blankets tightly around her shoulders.

“I told him not to give you a hard time about all this,” Jughead says eventually, voice quiet. “I’m sorry if he did.”

“He didn’t,” she responds quickly. “It’s just Archie, he’s nothing I can’t handle.”

Betty cups her hand over her phone’s speakers and sighs, knowing that her quick dismissal isn’t enough to save the moment, the mood, the playfulness: it’s gone.

She doesn’t even think she can blame Archie as much as she wants to. If the roles were reversed, if she were the one watching Archie or Veronica play at this dangerous game of dancing the line between friends and something more, she thinks she’d have a thing or two to say, too. There’s all the potential in the world for this to blow up in both their faces and she knows how carefully they should be treading. She also knows how carelessly they’ve been moving. Just one small misstep and someone could end up hurt, one wrong word and someone could end up heartbroken all over again, one wrong move and down comes the house of cards, crashing towards the ground.

“Are you still okay with this?” he asks slowly. “Us being friends?”

“Of course I am,” she says, pulling her blankets around herself tightly – just the thought of him gone from her life again has the beginnings of a headache gathering at the base of her neck. “Jug, maybe this isn’t traditional – people like us being friends. But I don’t care about that. I don’t care about what Archie and Veronica think, or what they’re saying about us behind closed doors. I don’t care what Cosmo has to say about being friends with your – I just don’t care.”

“So you’ve even consulted the magazines about this, huh?” he says, but his voice is light – she’s convinced him, at least for now. “Okay. I was just checking; as long as you’re happy, I’m happy.”
“I’m happy, Jug. Really, I am.”

“Then I’m happy, too,” he echoes, and she knows just by his tone that he’s speaking through a smile. “Anyhow, I should go – I have a few changes I need to run by Bill in the morning before the piece is sent to layout.”

“Oh,” Betty says, sitting up quickly.

“I’ll see you Wednesday, though.”

“Right,” she says. “Wednesday. I have a meeting at six so I might be a little late. But I’ll be there.”

“No worries,” he says easily. “I’ll wait.”

“Thanks,” she says. “I-” she just barely catches her words in the nick of time as she bites down hard on her lip to stop the rest of her sentence.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she covers. “I’m just excited. For coffee. And for the auction, it should be fun.”

“Oh,” he says, and she’s not completely sure, but there just might be a hint of disappointment in his voice. “I’m glad you are.”

“Night, Jug.”

“Night.”

When she hears nothing but the dial tone over the line and the mere echo of his voice, Betty clicks her phone off and pushes it to the furthest corner of her bed, as far away from her as possible. With a finger on her lower lip, she gently presses on the spot she’d just dug her teeth into. The sting is still there, and it feels just as telling as a tattoo on her skin. It’s a nagging, aching reminder that she’d just barely caught her own words.

I love you, she’d been about to say.

She sits there still wrapped in a tight cocoon of blankets, knees pulled up to her worn tee, heart rate rapid.

I love you.

She can’t be in love with him. If she’s in love with him – if she’s still in love with him – then she has a serious problem on her hands: trying to rebuild and recapture a friendship they’d once shared before everything else is simply wasted energy if what she really wants is something more than that.

She can’t be in love with him if all she wants him to be, if all he can ever be to her is just her old, reliable pal, Jughead.

It’s probably a habit more than it is anything else, Betty reasons with herself as she flips off her bedside lamp and shimmies and scoots down her bed, burying her head underneath a pillow. Those three words have been how she’s ended almost every phone conversation with him for the past six years and it’s only natural that she’d slip back into the habit when so much – the easy, playful text messages, the phone calls, the movie nights, the coffee and catch up dates – feels exactly like them again.
The fact that she’d almost said those words to him doesn’t mean that she loves him any more than she does Archie or Veronica or any one of her friends. She tells them that she loves them all the time, and she’s certainly not in love with either of them. Jughead important to her but the fact that she loves him doesn’t mean she’s in love with him.

She tosses and turns throughout the night, trying to forget the fact that she’s a bad liar even when she’s lying to herself.

In a gown that she’s spent the past two weeks altering well into the early hours of the morning, shoes that she’s turned circles in dozens of times to test the heel’s strength, and Veronica’s black stole draped around her shoulders, she looks on quietly at the front door of her building as Jughead adjusts his tie in the dull reflection of the car window, unaware of her watchful eye behind him.

It’s such a wonderfully innocent gesture; it’s one she’s even done for him dozens of times, too, idly during one of Veronica’s parties and before one of the thousands of high school graduation photos their parents had insisted on taking. But it’s been a while since she’s seen him do this – seen his fingers flattening and unfolding the fabric under the slightly lopsided knot, seen his features slightly frowning in frustration – and Betty thinks then how much she’d like to stay suspended in this moment forever just watching him.

“I think it’s straight,” she calls out to him, and when he turns at her voice, she knows unquestionably and undeniably that she’ll never forget the way his hand involuntarily falls from his Windsor knot to his heart when he sees her.

“You look so beautiful,” he tells her simply, but it’s the way he looks at her with such an incredible softness, almost like he might brush his fingers against her to check that she’s really there in front of him and not a mirage, that has her believing him with her whole heart.

“Thank you, Jug,” she says, and when she takes the hand he holds out to her to help her down the stairs and turns her gaze up to him, she’s instantly thrown right back in time.

“You look different,’ he’d told her that day they’d sat opposite each other at the coffee shop, both nervous, both on edge. ‘I don’t know, just different.’

Betty hadn’t quite understood what he’d been getting at that day but she thinks she understands now. She’s seen him in this exact suit more times than she can count, so there should be anything different about him in it tonight.

But there is.

It isn’t anything she can point to as the defining mark of difference. She remembers how shocked she’d been at how tired and worn he’d been at the graduation party in May and even though she’s so glad that he no longer looks that way, that isn’t really the difference she’s really seeing or feeling. The one she sees is one that exists quietly and so loudly at the same time, hidden in the way he carries himself now, in the way he holds his shoulders straight, filling out the jacket he’d once hunched away within, in the way he looks at her and meets her eyes, squarely and resolutely – confidently.

“What’s up?” Jughead asks.
She shakes her head, the feeling of her hair loose and brushing against the back of her neck unfamiliar. “You look different,” she echoes back to him.

“Like James Bond, right?” he jokes.

“No,” she laughs gently. “You still look like you. But you look different.” She sees now why he had so much trouble articulating what he’d meant that day. She knows she has a more impressive vocabulary than most, but standing here with him, she doesn’t have any better way to describe it other than exactly as he had.

Different.

“You look different in a great way,” she echoes back to him.

There’s a quick dawn of recognition as she repeats his words back to him, then a slow, shy smile as he unpacks the weight of what she truly intends to say.

“Thanks, Betty,” he says, clearing his throat and lending a guiding hand on her lower back to lead her towards the car. “I like the stole. It looks like-”

“Veronica’s,” she finishes.

He holds up his wrist, brandishing a silver stud on his sleeve. “Archie’s cufflinks. You’re in good company.”

She’s standing between the car and the door he’s holding open for her, and she forgets to stop her hand from coming to his face. Her fingertips are warm against his cold cheek.


A charity auction, Betty discovers as she enters the ballroom with her hand tucked into the crook of his elbow, is an event that’s very much Veronica’s scene and one that’s less so hers.

“Some party,” she assesses slowly, eyes swinging back and forth in examination of waiters clad in black vests and bow ties, the wells of free-flowing champagne and wine.

“I still don’t get how this is supposed to be helping the kids,” Jughead says, sounding just as in-awe as she’d thought she had moments ago.

“Well, you know,” she starts a little helplessly. It’s not an argument without merit. “There’s the auction proceeds. And ticket sales?”

“I refuse to believe that there’s anything left over from ticket sales to buy books for kids after all this. There’s a literal wall of champagne bottles over there.”


Jughead laughs then, gently and softly into her ear just for her, and she thinks that even though she might be a little out of her element mingling amongst the glitterati and their fine silks, jewels, and incredibly deep pockets, she’ll never be completely out of her element when she’s with him.
“So,” she says. “What should we-”

“Martini, ma’am?”

“Oh!” she says, stepping back and balking at waiter she hadn’t seen swooping in front of her with a full tray of glasses. “Yes, thank you.”

“Betty, what are you doing?” he asks as she brings the glass to her nose and sniffs once. It’s like fire burning down her windpipe.

She shrugs, swirling the olive-speared toothpick around her glass. “It’s part of the theme!”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“I could,” she says gamely. “I might.”

“I know you, and this is a long way from white wine and fruity cocktails.”

_That’s true_, Betty thinks as she sips. She feels herself holding her face steady for mere seconds as she swallows, then she’s scrunching up her nose, blinking away the sting from her eyes, and sneering at the glass in her hand because she’s not sure she’s ever tasted something so offensive before.

She doesn’t know what she expected from what’s more or less straight-up gin in a cup.

“This is disgusting,” she says remorsefully.

“Here,” he says, gesturing for her to pass the glass. “Let me try.” She watches with amusement as he tips back an even larger sip than she’d done and coughs his way around the aftermath. “Jesus, that’s awful.”

“My mom loves them.” Betty says in an explanation of nothing.

“She would.”

“I’m getting rid of this,” she says, taking the glass back from him and depositing it on the nearest cocktail table. “Why would anyone drink something like that?”

“I’m not going to say I told you so, but-”

“Yes, yes,” she says in her best mockingly dismissive voice. “You’re very smart, you’re very wise.”

“Can I get that in writing?”

“Why?” she teases back. “Do you think you’ll forget? Maybe I should take that back, then.”

“Touché,” Jughead concedes, grinning.

“What does one do at an auction, anyhow?” she asks, helping herself to a glass of champagne sitting invitingly on one of the bar tops. _Much better_, she thinks as she swallows. “I mean, besides bid on stuff – stuff that we probably can’t even afford. Are you bidding on anything?”

Betty thinks the slight tug of the corner of his mouth upward means that he’s thoroughly entertained at her rambling. “There’s a Tarantino basket I have my eye on over there,” he says.
“Oh,” she says, feeling embarrassed. She’d simply assumed that he didn’t have the kind of money needed to whisk away any of the overpriced auction lots, but truthfully, she doesn’t know a thing about his finances anymore. At the very least, he probably has a little more saved up now that he isn’t spending any of it on her besides the occasional cup of coffee or pastry here and there.

And dinner last Friday night. And then three dozen Insomnia Cookies delivered to his door for dessert while they’d powered through the Hitchcock movies they could find on Netflix and Hulu.

She reminds herself that whatever money they spend on their next hang-out should really be on her.

“Wait,” she says as she watches him pen his bid. “Twenty bucks?”

“Yep,” he says, slipping the small scrap of paper into the box.

“Jug,” she says gently. “You know that’s probably not going win, right?”


She feels like she does, but she lets him have it just the same. “Well,” she says. “I’m rooting for you, big spender.”

Betty slips her hand back through his arm as they continue aimlessly wandering around the ballroom. She wishes she’d paid a little more attention to what Veronica had been saying about the galas and the Oscars parties she’d attended while the It-Girl held a curling iron to her hair – maybe they’d be wandering a little less now if she had.

But then again, wandering isn’t so bad when she’s wandering with him.

At one of the casino games set up along the back wall of the ballroom, a nice touch she concedes, and very much in keeping with the theme, she stops their slow meander, mesmerized by the methodical shuffle of the cards across the table.

It takes her a moment to figure out what exactly they’re playing. She thinks it’s poker at first, but even she knows there are far too few cards out on table for it to be that.

It’s Blackjack, she realizes when the dealer tosses a few chips to a player showing a queen and an ace.

“Hey,” he says, nudging her gently. “Play.”

“What?” she says back, shaking her head. “I have no idea how to.”

“Can you add?”

Betty rolls her eyes. “Yes.”

“Then you can play. Theoretically, anyhow,” he says. “Come on, what do you have to lose? Ten bucks? Live a little.”

She looks at the complimentary chips she’d been handed at the door and turns the discs over in her palm, revealing the black embossed fives stamped in the center. Ten dollars exactly, and she hadn’t even paid for the chips to begin with so it’s not like she’d be losing much at all.

But still – it’s gambling and it’s risk-taking, and she’s never been all that great at sitting herself
down at the table and facing those demons head-on. And, she’d planned on cashing out the money and donating it to the kids.

“Why don’t you?” she asks instead.

Jughead shrugs. “Because I’ve played before, and I know for a fact you haven’t.”

“What?” she questions, pulling back and looking at him in disbelief. “You’ve played before? When?”

“Remember Archie’s twenty-first birthday?” Betty nods cautiously – she does remember Archie’s Atlantic City bash, some parts of it better than others, and she definitely remembers how they’d all argued relentlessly for Bluetooth and music control in Veronica’s car during the entire two-hour road trip to the hotel. But she doesn’t recall Blackjack being an integral part of that weekend at all.

“Remember the sake bombs?” he continues. “At that hotel bar with the weird fish fountain?”

“Oh,” she says slowly, cluing in; she sees where he’s going. “Kind of.”

“You didn’t think Archie and I just sat there and watched you and Veronica sleep after you both passed out, did you?”

Betty looks at him, blinking once, twice. She’d never given much thought to what exactly Jughead and Archie had done after she and Veronica had prematurely ended their night curled up in the same bed. Blame it on the hangover, on assumption, or pure forgetfulness, self-centeredness even, but she’d simply never asked the next day or any day after that. She’d never thought to.

She wonders then, as her mind fills in the details of the memory she hadn’t even known to be incomplete, how many other memories he holds lost puzzle pieces to.

How many does she?

“So you and Archie went downstairs to play Blackjack,” she says, suddenly feeling the desperate need to round out the missing memory. “Did you guys win?”

Jughead looks at her, surprised and with narrowed eyes, and she thinks she understands why. By all accounts, it’s a decidedly inconsequential, unimportant memory as far as memories go in the grand scheme of things. But it’s also one she has no context for and it’s one that she’s learning about for the very first time. It’s one that only he has the key to.

“Yeah,” he says eventually. “We did. Not by much, though, I think we only came out twenty bucks richer.”

“And then what happened?” she asks urgently. “Do you remember?”

There’s an entire world moving around her and possibly even someone tapping on her shoulder and asking if she’s next in line for the Blackjack table, but she can’t bring herself to care about anything other than his next words.

When he speaks, his voice is slow and composed, but faraway, too, somewhere lost in time and memory. “You were sleeping in Veronica and Archie’s room,” he starts, with a hint of a wistful smile. “Veronica was snoring so loudly, I swear I heard her all the way down the hall by the elevators. But you were sleeping so quietly and so peacefully, Betts; I didn’t want to wake you up. So I didn’t – I carried you to our room and took off your shoes. You waved me off before I could help you out of anything else. You started dreaming about something at one point, I don’t know
what, but you were upset so I just held you and kept telling you that everything would be okay. You were still asleep, but even then, you told me that you loved me. Softly, so much so that I barely heard it, and sweetly, casually, even, like you always used to do.”

He breathes in deeply then, and she hears so clearly the words he’s deliberately not saying – *like you always used to do, like I thought you’d keep doing for the rest of our lives.*

“That’s what I remember,” he says, concluding with the slightest of shrugs. “That’s what happened that night.”

In that moment, Betty fights every instinct within her to kiss him – to kiss the man who remembered so much when she’d remembered nothing at all, to kiss the man who had loved her so truly and so completely, who’d taken care of her when she hadn’t even realized he had been doing so, when she hadn’t even realized she needed him.

“Thank you for remembering when I didn’t,” she whispers instead. She can’t manage more than a whisper right now – she’s sure he’ll hear how choked and wet her voice really is if she tries for anything more. “And thank you for telling me now.”

His response is nothing more than a smile, but this, too, she understands. There are things better left unsaid and there are things that simply don’t need saying anymore.

*I loved you and that’s what you do for the person you love.*

What a beautiful and a bittersweet thing, she thinks then, to learn something so new about the story whose final words had been written so long ago.

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Betty doesn’t know if it’s the champagne she’d quickly downed in an effort to shake herself out of her funk over the memory she hadn’t known she needed to feel sad about or the fact that he in not so many words dared her to do this, but when she spots the next free seat at the Blackjack table she’s feeling suddenly bold, she’s feeling suddenly daring, and she’s finally feeling game.

“You know what?” she tells him untangling her hand from his arm. “I think I will play.”

“Really?” Jughead asks, in a tone that’s decidedly doubtful even as she slides into play at a seat at the end of the table.

“Really.”

Not wanting to give away the full extent of her novice, she peeks to her right with her eyes only and when she sees the player next to her tossing a handful of chips forward, Betty mimics the action and slides her twin chips forward into place.

She starts to get it as she watches the game unfold in front of her, as the cards reveal themselves across the table, as she looks and internalizes the first card she’s dealt – the seven of spades. There’s a certain kind of inexplicable, instantaneous high that comes from knowing that she has the potential to walk away winning it all. It’s thrilling, almost insanely so. It’s not something that she’d ever allow herself to fall victim to, but she begins to understand how so many people lose themselves to this: how homes, salaries, life savings could be lost to simply chasing this feeling.
"Thirteen," she counts to herself when the dealer reveals her second card to her, a six.

“Hit me!” she shouts back eagerly, and she’s immediately on-guard when every set of eyes at the table falls upon her in judgment. Betty frowns – she knows as much about this game as five minutes of careful observation has taught her, admittedly not much at all, but she does know enough of the world to know that’d been the right thing to say.

“Okay,” she whispers to him over her shoulder, drawing him closer with a tip of her head. Even he seems to be holding back a laugh at her expense. “Why is everyone staring at me?”

“Generally, you just do this for a hit,” Jughead says, reaching past her and tapping his arched fingers on the table in demonstration. “Apparently, Blackjack’s more or less silent nowadays, something about casino regulations.”

“I get that you’ve played before, but how is it that you know about casino regulations, Rain Man?” she asks, trying to mask just how deeply she breathes in when he leans over her to reach the table. He smells so much like him, she thinks, that comforting, familiar mix of scents she can’t quite place individually, but that together just make up him.

“I’m a man of sophistication.”

“No, really.”

Jughead snorts. “Archie made me watch 21 with him. And my dad. He, uh, this is his game. This and poker. I used to watch him play when I was younger.”

“Oh,” she says.

Betty hadn’t known that about his father. She hadn’t known that he’d known about casino regulations and how to play Blackjack, and she hadn’t known he’d once watched 21 with Archie, either, and together, it’s just another reminder that that even after all this time there’s so much about him she still doesn’t know. There’s so much about him she’d never bothered to find out.

She’s tempted to fix that right now and there’s a part of her that wants so much to wave off the half a game she’s currently party to, sit him down, and methodically work through every aspect of him she’s still in the dark about.

But right now is neither the time or place for that, she thinks, because tonight isn’t about her. It’s about him and it’s about his work, so she goes for the easier route.

“Is that the movie about the MIT kids who count cards in Vegas?” she asks instead.

“Yeah. Which is not happening here,” he announces loudly to the table. “We wouldn’t do that to the kids.”

“No,” she says as seriously as she can through a laugh she chokes down. “Absolutely not.”

Betty looks around at the game in progress. The player furthest to her right is done at twenty-four and looking unnecessarily angry about it, too. Next to her, there are an array of high-teens, and then there’s her sitting pretty at sixteen.

She watches carefully, internally chanting the numbers to herself as the dealer flips over his own hand. Ten, she counts, then eight.

Eighteen.
Damn it.

The house wins.

“Oh,” she says, dejected and shaken out of her trance when the dealer swipes up her two sad chips. Maybe she’d played it a little too safe by staying on sixteen.

“Here,” Jughead says, holding out a hand to stop her from giving up her place and digging into his pockets for his own two chips. “Go nuts.”

“Don’t you want to play?” Betty asks, even as she hungrily eyes the chips he’d placed on the table. She’s always been competitive, and she’s never handled losing particularly well.

“It’s more fun to watch you,” he says as the dealer presents her with her pair of cards.

Fourteen.

“Hit-” she starts. “I mean-” Betty taps her fingers on the table, and huffs up a puff of air at her forehead when the dealer reveals her card, the five of clubs. It’s not bad at all.

Nineteen.

She should stop – she knows this is as good a place to, because the chance of the next card in that deck being exactly the one that she wants is slim to none. The smart thing to do, the rational thing to do would be to stay right where she is and call it a day if she ends up losing because of it.

But, she counterpoints with herself, she’d played it safe just moments ago and that’d gotten her nowhere at all. She has a twenty in her purse she’d brought with the sole intent of donating it to the children so they won’t be losing out even if she ends up losing the game. It’s a matter of principle, too – she’s no one if she can’t jump in with both feet and take a risk when there’s nothing on the line for her to even lose.

With hesitant fingers, Betty taps her fingers twice against the table and holds her breath as her card makes its way to her.

“That’s ballsy,” she hears him commenting behind her.

It is, she supposes, but at the end of the day, isn’t that the point of the game? Be bold, take a chance. The house may always win, but is that any reason for her not play?

No, she answers to herself, for herself. That’s not what life is – it’s not supposed to be an amalgamation of moments of shirking away from risk just because she’s afraid of the possibility of losing, of failing and falling flat on her face. It’s a balancing act, life, it’s a combination of playing to the safe moments, and confronting the ones that downright scare her at the right time.

Even when she’s playing at something as unimportant as a game of Blackjack at a charity auction for ten dollars.

And, she thinks, as she watches the dealer flip her final card over, there’s that little thing called fate; that thing she’d all but forgotten about and written off, that thing that presents itself in the strangest and most unpredictable of times. There has to be such a thing as fate because there’s no other explanation for this.

The two of hearts.
“Oh my god!” Betty shrieks, bouncing on her seat as all thought of where she is and how she should be behaving, as all thought of Alice Cooper’s drilled-in politeness and decorum falls straight out of her head. “Oh my god! I won! Jug!” she says, grabbing onto his hand and shaking violently. “I won!”

She’s getting side-glances through upturned noses from all angles. But when she turns to him, her eyes expectant and eager, he’s smiling widely at her and doing absolutely nothing to hide his amusement at her overreaction.

No one looks especially happy for her.

But he does.

Betty thinks that the twenty-dollar bill she’s won is the prettiest one she’s ever seen. It’s slightly torn at the right corner and crumpled, it’s slightly ill-gotten, but it’s all hers. She took a chance, and this is what she has to show for it.

“So what now?” she asks.

“We could play another game,” he suggests, scanning the room. “I saw Roulette over there. All you have to do is pick a number for that one. I’ll even let you bankroll since you’re clearly rolling in it now.”

“We could,” she says slowly. “Or I could donate this money to the kids and we can track down all the appetizers and rank them all from best to worst instead.”

Betty pauses, eyebrows still raised in question when he stops and turns to her, and she thinks, horrified, that she might’ve said exactly the wrong thing. Maybe twenty-three is the age where it’s now unacceptable to play rank-the-appetizers at a formal event and she’d simply missed out on that memo? Maybe since this is a work event that means no funny business at all, even though more than half the crowd seems, nicely put, completely hammered?

But then, with the most familiar of smirks growing across his face, the same one he’d once worn as he’d climbed through her bedroom window in the dead of night while her mother slept two doors away, none the wiser –

“You’re on.”

It’s not so much his indulgence that has a wild grin breaking across her face but the fact that even in his suit, even as they weave in and out among the rich and mildly famous – he’s still just him, her very best friend. “Grab a napkin,” Betty instructs. “I think I have a pen somewhere in – oh look, there goes the mini quiche, go, go, go.”

She pushes him a little harder than she’d intended, but she realizes as she follows after him in a half-power-walk, half-run, just how much fun she’s having with him. There’d been fun in their past, and plenty of it – prom had been fun, graduation had been fun – but there’d always been a looming presence hanging over them, too, that ominous, grey raincloud named a long-distance relationship, named different colleges and different cities, named the inevitable goodbye, that’d
never seemed all that far away even in the face of fun.

Betty is proud of what she’s accomplished this year. She’s proud of the job she has and the slow but steady strides she’s making there, she’s proud of the friendships she’s methodically mending, and she’s proud of the fact that she can now run multiple miles without ending up doubled-over and thinking that death might be upon her soon. She’s proud of the life she’s created for herself and completely by herself, but she’ll be the first to admit that this year hasn’t been one she’d describe as *fun* in any sense of the word. Difficult, yes, and trying and heartbreaking at times, too, but not especially fun.

But that’s so completely untrue of this past month. Whether they’ve simply sat across from each other talking quietly at some nondescript Starbucks halfway between her apartment and his, or exhaustively argued their case for the last egg roll only to have Archie deftly dive in and stomach the thing with two monstrous bites, she’s had nothing short of the time of her life with him this time around, free of worry, free of doubt, full of fun.

“That may have been the first time I’ve ever actually run after food,” he tells her, sliding over the pastry onto her palm.

“That’s not true. Remember my lemonade stand?”

“Not at all.”

“You probably blocked it out,” she says, already halfway to laughing at the memory. “We were seven, remember? Polly and I set up this lemonade stand – she was in charge of making the lemonade, and it was, *god*, just so bad. I don’t know how we sold any. I made brownies.”

“Bells aren’t ringing, Betty,” he says, but she can tell from the way he’s poorly hiding his smile behind bites of mini-quiche that they are.

“Let me remind you, then,” she says playfully. “It was near the end of the day, and I had, oh I don’t know, maybe three brownies left. You were at Archie’s and you both came over – he had money, and you didn’t, remember? You went on and on about how you had your dollar and you lost your dollar but I didn’t believe you. So I took my brownies, marched them straight back into the house, and you, glutton that you are, chased me all the way across my front lawn, arms flailing, begging for just a half. I think you might’ve cried on the doorstep, too.”

“Okay,” he says, hiding his laugh behind a poor attempt at a serious tone. “One, I didn’t cry. Or flail. And two, I can’t believe you didn’t give me a brownie after I’d lost my dollar. That’s just cruel, Betty.”

“Fatal flaw, Jughead Jones,” she says, brushing off the crumbs from her fingertips. “Don’t forget that I was standing outside all day. I saw you spend that dollar when the ice-cream truck rolled around.”

Jughead laughs then, fully and wholeheartedly, and whether it’s at the absurdity of the memory – of their little seven-year-old selves caught up in something so inconsequential as baked goods – or the fact that they’re here in a suit and gown rehashing it now some sixteen years later, she doesn’t know. But she doesn’t care. He’s laughing and it’s such a beautiful sound. She’s missed it so much this past year. He doesn’t laugh nearly as much as she wishes he would and it’s always been completely calming and completely soothing to her. She isn’t surprised that’s still true now.

“It’s nice that you remember that,” he says eventually. “I mean, it doesn’t paint me in the best of lights, but I like that you remember it.”
“Well, I like that you remember that night in Atlantic City.”

There’s that familiar feeling again, the one she’d first felt when he’d told her about that forgotten night in Atlantic City, that bubbling, heady desire clouding her every thought telling her to kiss him. And, when she steps back and puts some distance between them because she in no way trusts herself not to fall right into him right now, there’s a moment where she’s utterly sure that he’s feeling the same way, too.

_You could kiss me_, she thinks fleetingly. _Even in this room full of people we don’t know, and people we probably shouldn’t be kissing in front of – you could kiss me._

_I’d kiss you back._

“So,” Jughead says eventually after a round of throat clearing. “What did you think?”

“Of what?”

_Wait, was I just thinking about kissing him?_

_The quiche?_

_That’s problematic, to say the least._

“Oh!” Betty says, shaking her head quickly. “A ten, for sure.”

_It’s probably just an old habit, though, and it’s a given that those die hard._

“Really?” he asks. “A ten?”

_And the atmosphere, and the continual walks down memory lane – those aren’t helping either._

“Why not?” she says, shrugging. “It was good.”

_It probably doesn’t mean anything._

“Don’t you want to try some of the others first? You can’t just give out the only ten without knowing how well this actually stacks up against everything else.”

_Probably._

“Hold on – the only ten? Why is there only one ten?” she asks. “Why can’t there be multiple tens? There could be more than ten appetizers floating around for all we know.”

_Definitely._

“Fair point.”

“Ten it is,” she says. “Turn around.”

“You know, there’s a table three feet to your left,” he tells her over his shoulder as she crouches to ink the word ‘quiche’ and the number ‘10’ neatly onto the napkin against his back.

Truthfully, Betty hadn’t noticed it. “It’s easier this way,” she says, brushing her hand over the fabric of his jacket, smoothing out the slight wrinkle she’d left. “Next?”

“Next,” he agrees. “If we can find any – there’s one,” he says, then they’re quickly taking off
across the ballroom, weaving in and out of the crowd.

It’s only after they’ve stepped in front of the unassuming waiter’s path in an ungraceful tangle of silk trains and quick feet that she realizes that she’s been holding onto his hand the entire time.

“Sorry, we just wanted to try this,” Jughead says to the waiter, and when he moves to scoop up the last appetizer sitting on the tray – they’ll have to share – Betty watches as he realizes what she herself had clued onto only moments before.

“Sorry!” He drops her hand and pulls his back his own like he’d just brushed over fire.

“It’s fine,” Betty says quickly, plucking the lone appetizer off the silver tray.

“I didn’t-” he continues. “I – sorry.”

“Really, don’t worry about it,” she says dismissively. “It's not a big deal.”

Li ar, she thinks.

Shaking her head, Betty bites off half the cracker as neatly as she can in need of something to do to break the uncomfortableness.

It’s as good a distraction as any because the moment she does, she can’t think about anything other than how much she wants to spit it out whatever she’s eating. It’s one of the worst things she’s ever tasted.

“This is awful,” she says in between slow, measured bites – maybe she’ll experience less of it that way. “Here, try it.”

“What? No!” he says, slightly panicked. “I’m not going to try something you just said was awful.”

“You tried my terrible martini.”

“That’s different,” he explains. “It’s much harder to screw up a martini than it is food.”

“Jughead,” she tells him plainly, somewhat sternly and seriously. “You have to try it. It’s against the rules if you don’t.”

“What?” he says, huffing out a half-laugh of disbelief. “What rules?”

“The ones I just made up. So-” Betty says again, holding out the cracker to him and waving it gently between her fingers.

“I’m not touching that,” he says, holding up both hands in surrender. “I can smell it from here.”

“Well, what do you want me to-”

“Here,” he says, glancing around the room and tipping his head forward. “Just-”

Before she can even remind herself of the fact that as friends, there’s a very distinct, definitive line that she shouldn’t be crossing with him, before she even registers and realizes exactly what she’s doing, she pops the cracker into his open mouth and brushes a stray crumb off his bottom lip.

Well, crap, she thinks as he pulls a face, working his way through the bite. That was definitely far too familiar.
“I can’t believe you let me eat that,” he says, chasing down the cracker with a swig of his drink. There’s an elegance in the way his fingers close around the glass, evenly spaced with a hint of strength, and it’s one that she’s never noticed before.

“That’s definitely a one,” Jughead continues. “What the hell was that?”

It’s an elegance she can’t stop looking at.

“Betty.”

She shakes her head quickly, snapping herself out of her reverie. “Huh?”

“I said that I thought that was a one. You okay?”

“You have nice hands,” she hears herself responding.

Wait, what?

“Do I,” he says, and the undertone of suggestion in his voice has her wishing she hadn’t checked Veronica’s stole at the door because she’s sure there’s red quickly creeping up her neck that she’d very much like to hide.

“I mean, yeah,” she covers hurriedly. “That was a one. Or maybe a two, there could be something worse out there that we don’t know about.”

“You can keep going with that deflection while I write this down,” he teases, plucking the pen from her hand in a dramatic show of flexing fingers and rolling wrists. “I heard you though.”

“Oh, stop,” she says, tapping him lightly on the arm. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Right,” he laughs. “Whatever helps you sleep at-”

“Jughead!”

Oh well.

Oh, thank god.

There’s a mask of surprise and seriousness that crosses his face as he turns at the interrupting voice. Then, easily and seamlessly, he passes her the napkin and pen behind his back and transitions into a handshake he holds against. It’s impressive in a way, Betty notes as she tucks away the evidence of their game away into her clutch. She’s seen the way his hand once lost the same battle to her father’s, and even though she’d never paid much mind to it since it was Hal don’t-date-until-you’re-thirty-honey Cooper shaking hands with her then-boyfriend, Jughead’s grip is strong now, firm and sure.

I’m staring at his hands again, she thinks. I have to stop.

“Bill,” Jughead says warmly in a greeting that she thinks is more for her benefit than anything else. Bill, she remembers – his boss. “I told you I’d be here.”

“I didn’t expect you to actually show up,” Bill says, and Betty is momentarily distracted by how much the man looks like Fred Andrews. “And with a date, too.”

“Bill, this is Betty Cooper,” he says. “She’s a writer for the New York Post.”
“It’s a pleasure, sir,” Betty says on cue, reaching her own hand out firmly. “It’s an honor to meet the man behind the Empire. I just love the magazine.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Bill replies to her, then to Jughead, clapping him once on the shoulder jokingly – “you told her to say that, didn’t you?”

“I wish I were that smooth, but that’s all her,” he matches, and when she glances up at him, she recognizes that there’s something that looks very much like pride in the way he’s looking back at her.

“Jughead never mentioned he had a girlfriend,” Bill says. “I wouldn’t have given him such a hard time about never leaving the office if I knew.”

“Oh,” she says slowly and measuredly. She should’ve seen this coming. “I’m not – I mean, we’re not-”

“We’re just friends,” Jughead fills in easily, and even though she’d spent so much of the night convincing herself of exactly that – just friends, she’d told herself, we’re just friends – there’s a sharp sting that comes with the word, too, one that’s undeniably difficult to ignore.

But, she reminds herself, she’s read too far and too literally into his words before and that had led to their fallout just months ago. She shouldn’t be hurt by the word now – they are friends. This is what she wanted.

They’ve been happy like this and everything’s been going so well. This is what’s good for them.

“We’re just friends,” she repeats.

“Well, either way,” Bill continues, and she’s sure he doesn’t believe either of them. “My hat’s off to you, Ms. Cooper – you’ve got him smiling and that’s rare.”

“And it’s such a shame, too,” Betty says, reaching up to pat his cheek playfully for emphasis. “He has such a beautiful smile.”

“She’s a keeper, Jughead,” Bill says, and even though the possessiveness of it all turns her off a little, she thinks that his response is one of the loveliest things he’s ever said to her.

“She is,” Jughead says simply. “She always has been.”

After they’ve given out one too many sevens and made their way back around to the mini quiche one too many times, Betty leads him to one of the tables and collapses into one of the chairs.

“You know I’m not saying that those aren’t nice,” Jughead starts as she stretches out her feet under the table. “I just don’t get why you wear them when they hurt you so much.”

“It’s all part of the wonderful journey known as womanhood,” she jokes. “And nice? Socks are nice.”

“Pretty?” he tries again.

“Much better.” He’s never had much of an eye for fashion, so she’ll let it slide. “By the way, I’m
sorry you lost the Tarantino basket.”

Jughead shrugs, and she’s glad that he looks amused rather than disappointed. “And I was so close, too,” he jokes.

The basket had gone for an insane two-hundred flat but she appreciates his easy humor.

“Hey,” he says, leaning back in his chair and brushing his hand over her back lightly, drawing her attention. “Thanks for being so cool with Bill earlier. And for being here tonight.”

“I was pretty cool, wasn’t I?” she concurs confidently, garnering her half a laugh. “You’re welcome, Jug. I’m having fun.”

“Even though your feet hurt?”

“Even though my feet hurt,” she says. “The appetizers make up for it. And so does being here with you.”

There’s quiet that falls between them then, punctuated only by the soft swell of the music, and finally, she no longer feels the need to fill it. There’s no pressure for her to crack some witticism or to make small talk even though she doesn’t have anything particularly profound to say; there’s no pressure to break the silence. It’s comfortable now, comfortable in the way that it’d been between them so long ago, when she’d just known from a wordless touch, a smile, from the existence of peaceful quiet itself, that everything was okay. She didn’t need the words to know.

The music dips into the valley of the melody’s end, and when it begins to climb at the next song, she starts thinking about fate again. Maybe she’s simply looking for it subconsciously, or maybe it really just is coincidence. But maybe, there’s some kind truth to it, to fate, too.

There must be, she finds herself thinking again, because how can there not be? That card, this night, this man.

This song.

_Moon River._

“Mmm,” Betty hums, letting her eyes flutter close as she loses herself in the melody and the memory. “It’s beautiful in every incarnation.”

“Dance with me,” he says suddenly, extending his upturned hand to her across the table, and for a moment, she’s twenty-one again, in a different ballroom and in a different time.

For a moment, she’s in a different life, altogether.

“Oh, no,” she refuses quickly. _Friends_, she reminds herself, _just friends_. “I really can’t.”

“You can’t? We’ve danced to this exact song before so I know that’s not true. Come on.”

“Jug-”

“One dance, Betty. I know your feet hurt, but for me?”

He’s smiling at her so brightly and there’s such a beautiful dichotomy of confidence and nervousness written across his face, imbued in the way he holds his hand out to her with the slightest, most imperceptible of tremors. She can’t say no to him, not when he’s looking at her like that. Not when she knows just how much he’s putting himself out there by asking her this right
now.

“One dance,” she agrees, covering his open palm with hers.

Betty breathes shallowly as he guides her to their own corner of the dance floor, and as he gently spins her to face him, she forgets almost entirely the need to continue to inhale and exhale.

“I thought you loved this song,” he says as his hand brushes against her waist, coming to rest there lightly but steadily. “Why the hesitation?”

“No – no hesitation.”

“Betty.”

“I really shouldn’t tell you this.”

“You can tell me anything,” he says, and there’s so much sincerity in his voice that she can’t help but be perfectly honest with him.

“It’s just a song. But I just-” her voice falls to a whisper then, protecting a now meaningless, wasted secret meant for only him. “I just always thought this would be the song we’d dance to one day if we ever... you know-”

She can’t say the words. But she knows that he knows what she means.

“Got married?” he supplies softly.

“Yeah,” she whispers. “It’s so stupid.”

“It’s not stupid. I didn’t know. About the song, I mean. And that you thought about things like that.”

“What, marriage?”

He swallows hard and looks anywhere but at her. “Yeah.”

“How could I not have?” she says simply, and she thinks what she really means is how could I not have thought about marrying you, about building a family with you, about spending the rest of my life with you when I love you the way I do.

Loved.

Love?

“Did you ever think about it?” she asks.

“All the time, Betts.”

She doesn’t think she’s ever been so heartbroken by such a beautifully romantic honesty before.

There’s a life they could’ve had together, a life that they’d both thought about and maybe never talked enough about, a life that now seems so unreachable and unattainable, one that seems entirely lost to time and circumstance and immutable mistake.

“I wouldn’t have asked you to dance if I knew,” he says, and there’s only a hauntingly sad kindness in his voice. “I’m sorry, Betty.”
She lets herself rest her head on his shoulder, memorizing the feel of him against her, the sound of his steady heartbeat to the music because if this is all she gets then she’s going to enjoy it while it lasts.

“It’s okay. This isn’t so bad,” she says, but the deflection dies and cracks painfully in her throat.

“Maybe you can still have that.”

She doesn’t know if he means that she can still have that with him, or with someone else. But there’s so much about this moment that’s beautiful and there’s so much about this moment that won’t last – she doesn’t want to taint what little of it is left by trying to clarify what he meant or by letting him know that she could never dance to this song with anyone else in her life but him. It’s a moment that she thinks they’re just meant to enjoy without thinking about the rest; no past, no present, no future, just this moment suspended in time and space, this moment that they were, arguably, never even supposed to have in the first place.

“Maybe,” she whispers against him.

Betty knows that she’s teetering the edge of overly dramatic but she just can’t recover after the dance. It feels far too hot in the room all of a sudden, and there’s much too much of everything going on, so she mumbles something about fresh air and how much she likes the Battery Park boardwalk less than five minutes away.

She feels terrible for dragging him out of the event that he’s supposed to be seen at, but she figures they won’t be gone for long at all. They’ve been there for hours, anyhow, and they’ve already made small talk with his boss, too.

He’s quiet as they stroll the boardwalk with hands tucked into his pockets, and gaze turned towards the dark water. It’s beautiful, she thinks, the most simple and natural of contrasts against the bright lights of the big city behind them.

“What’s on your mind?” she asks.

Betty doesn’t expect what comes next. “Remember that morning I fixed your shoe?” he asks. She nods in return – how could she forget? “I told you I kept the scarf because I loved that memory, but you wouldn’t tell me what you would’ve kept. What was it?”

“Losing sleep over this, Jug?”

“Not a lot, but I’ve wondered,” he tells her honestly.

She could tell him and it’d be fair, too, since she knows what he’d kept – it’s currently hanging over her desk chair right now and it’s the first thing she sees every morning when she wakes up. She could even be smart about it and tell him that the thing she’d have kept is something he’s already seen tonight.

But that overwhelming mix of claustrophobia and dizziness sets back in again with full force as she works up to the words, and she’s suddenly left without the courage to tell him.

“Guess,” she says simply.
Jughead glances over at her and even through the dull light of the street lamps, she can tell his instinct is to challenge her and push her to own up to the two of hearts like he’d done with the scarf. But something stops him, she doesn’t know what, but she’s grateful for it.

“That grey hoodie you threw in the dryer that made all the letters peel off?” he plays along.

“Nope,” she says. “I’m still sorry about that, by the way.”

“Hey, I’m not complaining – purple’s not really my color. My blue flannel shirt?” he tries again. “You wore that one all the time.”

“Hmm,” she hums, remembering. “I love that shirt, but no, that wasn’t it.”

“I know,” Jughead says, and the tone of mischief underlying his voice tells her that even he knows this isn’t it at all. “It’s the PlayStation, isn’t it? You miss all those nightmare-inducing sounds of war and death and Archie yelling profanities at the game he singlehandedly tanks himself.”

“While you yell at him for tanking the game,” Betty finishes, smiling. “I do miss the PlayStation,” she admits. And all the memories that went with it.

“Okay,” he says accepting her answer, and she knows that’s the end of the guessing game, at least for now. “I’m going to figure it out, though.”

“I’m counting on you to,” she responds and when she does, her teeth chatter together from the rush the wind that blows over the water.

The stole is a completely useless invention, she thinks then.

“Cold?”

“I’m fine,” she says, but her hand on his arm does nothing to stop him from shrugging out of his jacket and draping it over her shoulders. “Really, Jug, it’s – aren’t you cold?”

Jughead shrugs. “Developed an immunity over the years,” he says, and she knows what he really means is yes, I am, but you clearly are too, and that’s more important to me.

“Still on a winter jacket embargo?” she teases lightly.

“Hey, I bought a jacket this year.”

“A winter jacket, Jug. Like one with insulation and Gore-Tex.”

“Oh, you mean the kind that your mom used to dress you in that made you fall over?” he teases.

“Well maybe not quite like that,” she clarifies.

“I’ll put it on the Christmas list,” he says.

“Speaking of,” she prods gently. “Are you coming home this year for Thanksgiving?”

Jughead sighs, turning his attention away from her and back to the water. “No,” he says. “It’s Toledo this year. My dad’s driving there.”

“Oh,” she starts slowly. Betty knows that unlike her family, there’s very little pretense in his about
what exactly divorce means. There’s no coming together for Thanksgiving and Christmas just to pretend for a day that they’re the perfect little nuclear family again, that there’s nothing wrong at all with her dad sneaking out of the house with a Tupperware of leftovers to spare them all the heartache of the illusion breaking. In his family, there’s just animosity and hostility, and she’s sure that this misguided attempt at a joint Thanksgiving will be nothing but horrible for him and JB.

“I’m sorry,” she offers simply; there’s not much else she can say to make this better for him.

“Don’t be,” he says shrugging. “We all have our crosses. It’s not like you don’t have your own family drama to deal with. But remember you can always escape to Archie’s if it gets too bad. Don’t try to tough it all out on your own, Betty, not when you don’t have to.”

He does a convincing enough job of keeping his voice light, but there’s an undercurrent of concern there, too, one that she thinks is incredibly sweet.

“I won’t,” she says. “Besides, I have four days of Kevin lined up. I’ll be okay.”

“How’s he doing, by the way? How’s his dad?”

“They’re both okay. His dad is on desk work now but that’s probably better for him. And for Kevin, too, he doesn’t have to worry him as much now.”

“I’m glad,” Jughead says.

“I went home for the Fourth,” she hears herself admitting to him. “Kevin really let me have it when I was there.”

“How so?”

“I let him fall to the wayside while I went on with my own life,” she says in an incredibly abridged summary of that night at Sweetwater River. There’s too much about what she talked about with Kevin that revolves around him and she doesn’t want or need to get into that now. “I should’ve been a better friend to Kevin. To everyone, really.”

Betty thinks he’s about to make an excuse for her because that’s what he’s always done, and his simple shrug surprises her. “Maybe,” he halfway agrees. “But you’re doing something about it now and that’s what matters.”

Accountability. She’s not sure he’s ever given it to her before.

She likes it, she decides. It’s a painful kind of honesty but it’s honesty just the same, and in the long run, she thinks the responsibility will make her a better person.

“Did you ever notice it?” she asks. “The horrible friend I was being to him? The horrible person I was being to everyone around me?”

_The horrible person I was to you?_

“Okay,” Jughead corrects quickly. “Don’t take it too far – you’re not a horrible person, Betty, and no one thinks you are. We all make mistakes. If you really want a benchmark for character,” he says, twisting his lips in search for the right words. “I think it’s what you do with that understanding once you’re faced with it. So you were a lousy friend before – now you’re doing something about it.”

_But is that enough?_
“What about you?” she asks.

“What about me?”

“Jug, I was horrible to you in June. I don’t know how I could’ve done that to you, after everything you’ve – after everything we’ve-”

“Hey,” he interrupts, turning her to face him, turning her chin up so that her eyes meet his. “Don’t do that to yourself. Part of all that character building is knowing when to forgive yourself for your mistakes. It’s about knowing when to move on.”

Move on. Move on from your mistakes, yes, she thinks. But what about the things that aren’t?

“Did you ever think that we were a mistake?” she whispers, almost afraid of his answer. “Those six years – they ended, and now we’re right back where we were before them. Were they, were we a mistake?”

“Betty,” he says firmly with his thumb stroking gently across the ridge of her cheekbone. “No. Of course they weren’t. I wouldn’t trade or take back any part of those six years for the world. Not a second of us was a mistake.”

In that moment, unthinking and completely instinctively, she moves her heart and not her head. She wants to kiss him because she’s been fighting the feeling the entire night and she’s tired of the battle now. She wants to kiss him because he’s still right there in her heart and soul, tucked away and guarded but there just the same; still always steady and always constant, like the undercurrent of a rhythm to a melody.

She wants to kiss him, and so she does.

Betty presses her lips to his lightly, giving him the chance to back away if he wants to, and for a heartbeat, she thinks he might. She’s never felt him so still against her before.

But in the next breath that she forgets to take, both of his cold hands cup her face and draw her to him, and she’s lost in a kiss that she’s never quite felt the depth of before.

There’s a charged urgency in the way she kisses him, in the way he kisses her in return. There’s power in the way his mouth moves over hers, like he’s wrestling for the control she’s unwilling to relinquish because it all just feels so good, and there’s an electricity she feels coursing and running through her, emboldening her, as he pushes her up against the railing lining the boardwalk, the only thing keeping them from tumbling into the still, black water beneath them.

She’s reminded again of energy when she plucks apart the taste of him – champagne, chocolate covered strawberries they’d nabbed from the dessert tray before they’d been tersely shooed away for eating one too many, and something else that’s just simply and familiarly him. He’s kissing her and it feels like a shock right to the heart; there’s a current that thrums from her mouth, from his hands running down her back and holding her to him so strongly that sets every inch of her skin sparking with static and fire.

The break between them is slow, and even as they catch their lost breath in erratic gasps, her hands are still fisted in his shirt collar and his are still wrapped around her back, pressing her right up against him.

Then –

“Shit.”
He whispers it against her mouth, and even though they’re still so close – she can feel him breathing against her, so much so that they’re sharing the same clouded, heavy air – every single part of her runs cold at that one word.

He pulls away and steps back from her then, and the chill that comes from the loss of him around her starts to clear her spinning head.

Maybe the story of them wasn’t a mistake.

But maybe their break-up wasn’t either.

“I’m-” she starts, shaking her head in the vainest of efforts to shake off her stammer. “I’m sorry.”

What else is there to say? What else can she say?

“Don’t be,” Jughead says, turning away from her to lean on the railing he’d just had her pressed up against moments before. “I just... I – I can’t.”

“You can’t,” she repeats flatly. “You can’t what?”

“I can’t. I just... I can’t get over you again, Betty. It was too much the last time. You don’t know how hard it was.”

The first emotion she turns to is anger because if there’s anyone that knows just how hard this has all been, it’s her. She knows all about the sleepless nights she’d spent missing him beside her, the nights she swore she still felt his arm draped gently over her hip. She knows about the memories that’d all but assaulted her in the most unsuspecting and inconvenient of times and places, and how those had felt like stab wounds out of nothing and nowhere. She knows all about how hard it’s been, because she’s been party to this break-up, too; she’s missed him in ways she can’t even describe to him, so how dare he insinuate now that she doesn’t know how hard it is?

Then after all the anger, there’s something close to pity. She’s not thinking straight yet and she still doesn’t have her thoughts completely together, but even now she knows that she’s just sorry that he’s had to feel anything close to the pain she’s felt from missing and losing him. It’s been hell, and as confused and angry as she is, she still wishes that he’d never have to feel that way.

“What am I doing here?” she asks to no one in particular, except maybe the sky above her. “What are we doing here?”

“Is this what you wanted?” he asks quietly, gesturing to the empty space between them. “Us? You and me again?”

Not like this, she doesn’t. “I don’t know,” she says.

Then, there’s silence.

“Maybe this was a mistake,” he says eventually, still facing the water. “I thought we could be friends, but-”

A mistake.

Move on from your mistakes, he’d told her just moments before. Know when to move on.

“Yeah, well, maybe you’re right,” she bites back. “Maybe this was a mistake – us trying to go back to what we were before. Maybe we just can’t.”
She holds his jacket back out to him and when he refuses to accept it back from her, keeping his unmoving, stubborn hands shoved into his pockets, she drops it at his feet. Gathering up her train in a clumsy scoop, she turns back down the boardwalk and toward main road.

“Betty,” she hears him calling to her.

She doesn’t look back even though his voice sounds just so broken. She can't. There’s no point.

There’s no recovering from that kiss, there’s no pretending it didn’t happen, there’s no hiding her feelings anymore.

Now, there’s simply nothing.

It’s something of a miracle that in her blur of short, staggered breaths and cloudy eyes, she manages to hail a cab and mumble out her address to the driver who asks her for it no less than three times because he can’t understand her strangled words.

“Are you okay, miss?” he asks. Why isn’t he going, she thinks. Just go, please just go. “Do you feel sick?”

He thinks I’m drunk.

“No,” Betty says, indistinctly even to herself. “No, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? If you’re going to throw-”

“I’m not drunk,” she snaps back, and finally, the car starts moving. “I’m not sick, so just go and-”

Alone in a cab with the hem of her gown caught in the door, a tear escapes her right eye, then her left, and just like that, she’s finally and so very uselessly crying over Jughead Jones.

The volume of the sound is deafening and somewhere in the back of her mind she thinks that she feels sorry for the driver who has to listen to her heaving sobs and gargled, failed attempts to choke them back down.

I love him, she thinks as she shakily fishes from her purse the only thing resembling a tissue she has with her to dry her eyes – the cocktail napkin she’d tucked away neatly there, the smoking gun of a memory she doesn’t want to remember anymore.

I love him.

It’s not a realization so much as it is her finally admitting that very plain and simple fact to herself. She loves him not in the way that she loves her family or in the way she loves Veronica or Archie, but in the way that a man loves a woman and woman loves a man, in the way that characters in fairy tales and Shakespearean tragedies are in love with one another. She’s in love with him in the way she’d hopelessly tried to convince herself she hadn’t been, because life would just be so much simpler that way. She’s in love with him in the way she’s always been in love with him, ever since he’d stood by her side at sixteen and kept her grounded while their world fell apart around them.

She wishes so desperately she hadn’t kissed him – maybe everything would hurt a little less if now if she hadn’t reminded herself what being completely consumed by him felt like.
She’d just so wrongly thought he’d wanted her, too.

This is why she hates gambling, she thinks – the volatility. How it takes next to nothing for the house of cards to come tumbling down. How even when you’re flying so high, you can lose everything in faster than the blink of an eye.

How you can be left with nothing but empty pockets and an empty, aching soul when you overplay your hand and your heart.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from "As Time Goes By" by Herman Hupfeld.
I’d spend a lifetime waiting for the right time.

In hindsight, he thinks he sees his misstep.

‘Let’s be friends,’ he’d said to her. Let’s go back to the way we were back then, the way we were before everything else.

Only, the way they’d been before everything else hadn’t really been much of anything at all.

Before everything else had been the girl next door wrapped up in the fantasy of the boy next door, it had been him on the outside of their little picket fence world on Elm Street looking in. It’d been him thinking that she could do so much better than Archie Andrews, not because he thought Archie was unworthy of her in any sense, but because Betty Cooper cared so deeply for everyone around her – she deserved someone who did the same for her, too.

Before everything else had been her turning to someone else for love, friendship, for support, first. He’d been there, he’d been the quiet and often times frustrated third-wheel in the saga of his two friends dancing around each other for years on end, frustrated because only the thick-headed, oblivious Archie could be that unaware of what Betty really felt for him. But he hadn’t been the first call she’d make when she needed a shoulder to cry on. That’d been Archie. He hadn’t been the confidant she’d share her secrets with first, he hadn’t been the first person she’d thought of when she needed a go-to-guy. That’d also been Archie. He’d been the second, maybe, if Kevin hadn’t swooped in and relegated him to third. But before everything else, he’d never been the first.

And that’s what he’d really wanted, he’d realized only after everything had come crashing down to the ground – he’d wanted the friendship that they’d had not before everything else, but one that came after.

He’d wanted back the relationship that had her calling him instead of Archie first in times of sunshine and sadness, the nights they’d sit in companionable quiet with the low ruminings of a movie or documentary playing in the background, just them and no one else on the couch, together. He’d wanted back the phone conversations they’d carry into three a.m., her bright ‘good morning, Jugpie!’ texts followed by a string of incomprehensible emojis, he’d wanted back the way they’d wander the city, aimlessly but hand-in-hand with so much left for them to discover.

He’d wanted them back. The them in which he gets to love her as his friend and the them in which he loves her as so much more than that, too - as simply the woman who holds his entire heart in her hands, the woman that he’s completely in love with.

It’s a shame, Jughead thinks, the biggest, most profound shame of his life that he’d only realized all that after she’d dropped his jacket at his feet and walked away without looking back once.
It’s a sad sort of Friday night – lame is likely right word to slap on it if he’s really trying to define it.

Pathetic works just as well.

“So you blew it.” Archie comments flatly.

“Shut up.”

“I’m not trying to be a dick,” Archie continues, and Jughead thinks seriously about flipping Archie off and telling him that it doesn’t matter if he’s trying to or not, because he’s being a jackass regardless of his intentions. “What the hell happened? I thought you guys were, like, friends again.”

“We were,” Jughead offers unhelpfully. “And now we’re not. Didn’t Veronica fill you in on all this?”

Veronica had definitely filled him in on all of the very pissed off feelings she’d been party to when her ‘best friend and roommate and girl who’s closer and more important to her than any sister could be’ – her words, not his – had arrived home in a mess of tears and with blue ink on her face, courtesy of a disintegrated cocktail napkin she apparently couldn’t let go of.

‘She’s been crying all night, Jughead,’ Veronica hissed at him the next morning in what had been one of the handful of times he’d ever spoken with Veronica on the phone. ‘She literally cried herself to sleep at four in the morning because of whatever it is you said or did. If I didn’t want to leave her right now, I’d already be on my way over there in my Manolos to kick your ass.’

Her Manolos, he’d recalled, because Veronica had once said something about how in her entire, very vast shoe collection, her blue Manolos had the sharpest and highest heel, perfect for kicking his ass all the way to Timbuktu.

‘Just stay with her,’ he’d told Veronica. ‘You have my full permission to kill me later, but please just make sure she’s okay.’

‘She’s not, Jughead,’ Veronica had told him flatly. ‘Betty is the strongest person I know. She never cries and she’s crying because of you now. She’s not okay and that’s entirely your fault.’

He doesn’t know if he’s ever felt more terrible in his life than in the moments after Veronica had hung up on him. He’d never intended for that night or for their misguided foray into friendship to end with even a single tear shed on her part.

He’d tried calling her, well into the afternoon after she’d had the chance to sleep off her four a.m. bed time but she’d sent him straight to voicemail. Then, he’d called her later that evening wanting nothing more than just to apologize for making her cry, and once more before he’d tried to chase the sleep he knew would already be unreachcable.

He’d given up when Veronica had texted him two very harsh but effective words.

Just stop.

And so he did.

“Honestly, Ronnie didn’t tell me much,” Archie says. “I don’t think she knows that much because Betty hasn’t said that much. I know about the kiss, but that’s about it.”
“There’s not much more to it than that,” Jughead says. “It happened and then everything went to shit.”

Jughead watches as Archie reaches for the remote and turns down the volume on what he thinks might be the frattiest show he’s ever had the displeasure of watching, and he’s seen Animal House, too.

“I don’t get it,” Archie says slowly.

“What’s not to get?”

“I thought this whole friends thing was just you guys taking the longest route to getting back together. Like an aphrodisiac or something. Wasn’t it?”

“I have no idea anymore. And an aphrodisiac? No.” He wonders if Archie really knows what that word means.

“But if you thought there was a chance you guys could get back together, what’s the big deal about a kiss?”

The big deal is that she’s not talking to him anymore. The big deal is that he incredibly rudely and cruelly rejected her after she’d put herself on the line by initiating a kiss he still feels the rushing energy of to this day. The big deal is that he thinks he might’ve broken her heart and he has no clue how to fix that. He doesn’t know if he should even try.

“I overthought it,” Jughead admits eventually.

“Why were you even thinking?”

“What?” He knows thinking isn’t Archie’s favorite activity, but still.

“During the kiss. Who the hell has time to think during a kiss?”

He does, apparently.

“Shouldn’t you be with Veronica right now?” Jughead deflects. “Aren’t you going home tomorrow? Isn’t she going to Mexico tomorrow?”

“I saw her last night,” Archie says. “Also, you can’t get out of this that easily. Seriously, Jug, you always do this every time anyone tries to talk to you about anything.”

“Do what?”

“Change the subject. So, tell me why all I’ve seen Betty do for the past three weeks is mope and sad-clean her apartment.”

Jughead sighs and looks to the show that Archie hadn’t even bothered to stop - something Mountain State, he remembers. Maybe blue, but it could just as well be green. They make it look so easy, these frat guys, these bros that can sleep around without feelings involved, without involving other people’s feelings.

He’s never been that way. He’s never thought nothing of a lingering look, or a kiss, or sex; he’s never been able to divorce those actions from the emotion and feeling that follows. And at the end of the day, he doesn’t want to be that way, either. It’s not who he is and it’s definitely not who he wants to be.
“It was my fault,” he admits. “We had a moment and I... didn’t react well to the moment.” An understatement, but he figures the sentiment conveys. “Everything just happened so quickly.”

“Did it, though?”

“Were you there?” Jughead snaps back.

“Don’t be a dick,” Archie says and the sternness in his voice makes Jughead pause. Archie is rarely this serious with him. “Honestly, Jug, how could this have ended any other way than how it did? You asked her to be your date to the ball-”

“Charity auction,” he mumbles.

“Whatever,” Archie dismisses. “You texted all the time. You talked on the phone until two a.m. all the time, unless she was talking to some other Jughead. Seriously, you guys think you’re covert but you’re not. And she was here watching movies with you every Friday and Saturday night for weeks.”

He doesn’t think that this is the right time to bring up the fact that one of those movie marathons had ended up with them both asleep through the majority of *Vertigo*, him carrying her to his bed in the dead of night, and him lying awake on the couch thinking about how much he craved the feel of her body curved around his.

“Honestly,” Archie says. “It was basically like you guys were dating again.”

“I get it,” Jughead bites back. “I screwed up. I led her on. I’m a jackass. *I get it, Archie.*”

He’s on his feet, breathing heavily, and facing off with Archie by the end of his outburst.

“I never meant for this to end with Betty hurt, ever,” he continues. “I love her, Archie – I’d rather myself hurt than her. I just – I don’t know, I freaked out. I – what?”

“You said you love her.”

“What are we, ten years old? *Yes,* I love her. Of course I do.”

“Then what is there to freak out about?”

Jughead retracts the hand he has flung out wide and drops it to his side. Trust Archie to be the one to boil it down to the most straightforward form. He loves her, plain and simple, no ifs ands or buts about it. The right thing for him to have done in that moment was to own up to how he really felt instead of thinking at length about everything else.

“There were good things about this year,” Jughead starts, flopping back down into the worn armchair – the couch feels too close for comfort right now. “But there’ve been a lot of fantastically shitty things, too. It was just so hard to get over her. It was so hard to stop thinking about her. I don’t think I ever did – she was just always there in my head. Even when I was mad at her, and I was pissed at her for months. Even when I tried to forget her. She was always there.”

Even now, she still is.

He waits for some kind of smart retort from Archie or at the very least some look of judgment or mocking for bearing his soul the way he’s doing now. But when Jughead cautiously brings his eyes up and over, there’s only something that looks very much like understanding written across Archie’s face.
“I overthought it,” Jughead repeats. “Everything was just starting to feel right again. Being with her again felt right. That moment with her felt right. Everything about her felt right. But it’s felt right before and that never stopped everything from dissolving into nothing. Relationships are the most volatile thing,” he says, coming forward to rest his elbows on his knees. He’s already prematurely sorry for what he’s about to say next - it’s still a sore spot for Archie. “I mean look at my parents. Look at Betty’s parents. Look at your parents. More often than not, relationships aren’t built to last.”

“Maybe,” Archie says carefully. “But maybe sometimes, they are. Ronnie and me are still together.”

Archie gets a half smile for that. Jughead never would’ve pegged the perennially oblivious, anything goes Archie Andrews to be one to commit to a long-term relationship this early in life, one that outlasted his own no less.

But love is love, he supposes. And when it’s right – when it’s with the right person, at the right time – maybe things can work.

It’s rare, but maybe.

“None of this matters, anyhow,” he says, and it surprises him how crushing it feels to finally admit that out loud into the void. “She doesn’t want to talk to me, so that’s that.”

“Well, what do you want?”

A lot of things, he thinks.

“She had this theory that you should be selfish in love,” Jughead recalls slowly. Her voice had sounded so confident and sure that night while his heart had been beating in a nervous, erratic overtime. “She said that you get out of love what you put in. You get out of life and love what you fight for.”

I want to take back every moment I’ve hurt her, every moment I’ve caused her even an ounce of pain. I want never to feel the pain I felt this year again – I never want to go through this again. I want to not feel as terrified as I do now.

“That sounds like Betty,” Archie says. “That’s what she used to say to me when she taught me how to read. If you work harder, Archie, and practice more,” he says, voice high-pitched and affected. “You’ll be better at it. But you have to earn it.”

“That’s your best Betty impression?” he mocks.

Archie shrugs. “Close enough.”

“I used to think love was about being selfless,” Jughead says. "That it was about listening to what she wanted and respecting that. I used to think love was about letting her be, even if that wasn’t what I wanted.”

I just want to know it’ll work this time.

“Maybe it’s both,” Archie offers thoughtfully. “Maybe love is just about picking when to be selfish and when to be selfless.”

“That’s very Solomonic of you,” he says.
I want to know that I can sleep at night holding her without thinking about whether or not she’ll be there the next day or the day after that. I want to be there for her when she needs a helping hand, I want to be the one she turns to. I want to be someone she can rely on, always. I want to be there with her when she does great things, because I know she’ll do so many of them.

“Neither of you is ever really wrong about anything. Ever,” Archie says. “Seriously, you guys are probably the smartest people I know. So if you’re both not wrong, then you’re probably both right, just in different ways.”

“You deserve only what you earn, and you earn what you fight for.” he repeats quietly to himself. “You deserve the love that you fight for.”

*I want her. I still want to love only her.*

*I still am in love with only her.*

“So what are you going to do?” Archie asks.

He thinks back then to biology class, to one of the very few things that he actually remembers from all the useless frog dissections and Punnett square worksheets he’d mindlessly slogged through. When under stress and under fire, he remembers, human beings either retreat or they attack – the fight or flight response.

He’d run that night they’d kissed at the Battery – that had been his instinct.

He has a choice now, though. He can control what he does in the here and now in a way he hadn’t been able to that evening when he’d been feeling too much of everything.

Fight or flight?

Be selfish or selfless?

“I’m going over there,” Jughead says, standing up so quickly that he scoots the armchair back a few inches. “I need to talk to her.”

“What, right now?” Archie says, following him so closely that he ends up stepping down on his heel. “It’s one in the morning. They’re having a girls’ night - *I’m* not even allowed over there. Plus Betty goes to sleep early.”

Far be it from him to intrude on the very sacred girls’ night, but this is too important.

“I know,” Jughead says, distracted as he wrestles his jacket. *Where the hell is his wallet?* “I just need to do this right now.”

“What are you going to say?”

Jughead pauses, foot stuck between the front door. “I’ll figure it out on the way there,” he says. “Honestly, I don’t know.”

All he knows is that he’s not letting this end without putting up the fight of his life first because that’s what she’s worth.
The journey over isn’t a short one, but he wastes it half-terrified and completely preoccupied about what she’s going to do when she sees him. He wouldn’t blame her if she slammed the door right in his face or if she didn’t even bother opening it at all. It’d be well-deserved, but he hopes so desperately she’ll just give him a chance and hear him out.

Hear out the words he hasn’t decided on yet.

Even as he’s knocking on her door, he’s still not sure exactly what he’s going to say. He figures he’ll open with an ‘I’m sorry,’ because he really is sorry for how downright awfully he’d reacted to their kiss that night. He’s sorry that what had otherwise been a beautiful night together had ended with her in tears.

Beyond that, he doesn’t know. He figures the words will come in the moment.

At the very least, he hopes they do.

“Hey,” he rushes out as the door opens. Talk fast, he thinks, and say as much as you can before she kicks you out of her building. “I know you don’t want- Veronica.”

Of course it’s Veronica.

“Archie called,” she says simply, arms crossed in front of her robe.

And of course Archie called.

“I need to talk to Betty,” he says, figuring that there’s no need to beat around the bush or try to pull over any bullshit on Veronica – he never has before and he’s not about to start tonight. He highly doubts it would work, anyhow.

“She’s sleeping. I was sleeping, for that matter.”

“I know,” Jughead says. “I’m sorry. I’ll wake her up. Or you can. I just – I need to talk to her right now.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said no,” Veronica repeats. He stands on his toes then, doing his utmost to peek around Veronica’s head and the door she’s so narrowly holding open.

“No offense, Veronica, but you really need to realize that not everything in life is your business. This, for example, isn’t. This is between me and Betty so just-”

“Jughead,” Veronica interrupts, holding her arm out firmly over the door frame. “Betty is my best friend, so that makes this my business.”

“This is ridiculous,” he says. “Betty!” he shouts through the sliver of open door. “Bet-”

“Are you crazy?” Veronica hisses at him, slapping her hand over his mouth. “Just stop and listen to me for a moment. She doesn’t want to see you. She doesn’t want to talk to you right now. I realize there’s a beanie covering it so it might take longer than most, but get that through your head.”

“Your lotion is disgusting,” he says, fighting the urge to spit and splutter out the remnants of scented perfume still caught in his throat when her hand falls away.
“I’ll have you know it’s La Mer.”

“That means nothing to me.”

“Look,” Veronica starts, and when she steps out into the hall, propping the door up against its lock, he has half a mind to pull it swiftly shut behind her just so that she’d have no choice but to wake Betty up to get it open again. “I know you want to see her right now, but you have to understand that she doesn’t want to see you. She doesn’t want to hear whatever mangled, tortured apology you have for her. She doesn’t want to have anything to do with you.”

“Is this just you making decisions for her, or did she tell you that?”

“She told me that,” Veronica says plainly. The honesty in her voice makes him stop. He knows full well how just how riddled with mistakes and missteps the entire history of them is, but never, as angry as she’d get with him, as disappointed as he’d make her at times, never has she not given him the chance to make it right. Never has she not heard him out, even if she would sit there on the opposite side of the couch, arms crossed over her chest, and staring daggers at the floor.

It’s chilling, he thinks, and it’s terrifying and soul sucking all at once to face the realization that he might finally be out of time and out of chances, now when he needs it most.

“What did you expect?” Veronica asks quietly. “After what you said to her, would you want to see you?”

“I always want to see her,” he says, and it comes out so naturally, so genuinely that he thinks he sees even the gatekeeper’s eyes soften. “No matter what she’s said or done.”

“Jughead,” Veronica starts, and he just knows from the tired resignation in his voice that he isn’t going to be getting what he wants tonight. The gates aren’t falling open as much as he begs and broods. “I’ve watched you both deal with this break up I didn’t really understand at first. Admittedly, it’s been a strange kind of privilege and I haven’t always enjoyed it. But I think I get it now. This was something you both needed to do for your own selves, independent of each other, and I respect that.”

He doesn’t think he’d ever live to see the day where Veronica Lodge openly admitted that she respects him, and there’s an odd sense of pride that comes from it, if only because he knows that her respect is not easily earned.

“That being said,” she continues. “I also know that this hasn’t been easy for either of you. I know it’s been hard for you, but it’s been so hard for her, too. Ridiculously so. Insurmountably so. You haven’t had to live with her every day and watch the proof of that unfold. And after all of that, after finally getting back on some kind of solid ground with you again, you shut her down when she put herself out there. You and I both know how hard it is for her to do that – how do you think she feels right now?”

Likely terrible. Likely heartbroken and hating him. Likely all of the above.

“I just want to apologize. I just want to tell her I'm sorry,” he says quietly. And I just want to tell her that even if she doesn’t know if she wants them again, I do. More than anything.

“I understand that,” Veronica says. “But you have to understand that she just doesn’t want to hear that from you right now, as well intentioned as it may be.”
“I’m not winning with you tonight, am I?” he says, and it’s more a statement than it is a question.

“No.”

Jughead stares at her then, and even though there’s so much of him that’s absolutely furious at her right now, he can’t hate the girl who’s so staunchly and loyally protecting Betty, even if that shuffles him in a hellhole of a purgatory with her.

There’s selfishness and selflessness he thinks, but there’s a distinct middle ground bridging the gap between the two poles, too. Veronica is petite – he could brush right past her now and weasel his way into the apartment, he could incessantly and childishly ring the doorbell an inane amount of times just to get Betty's attention, hell, he could even break down the door with one swift kick, because it’s not like he hasn’t done that before.

But he knows that when she’d been talking about selfishness that night, she hadn’t meant any of that. Fight for love, yes, but know when to give up. Fight, but fight with dignity.

“Fine.”

“I’ll tell her you came by,” Veronica says.

“I’m sure you will.”

“Jughead,” Veronica calls as he turns for the elevator. “I will tell her, and I’ll even leave out the part where you started screaming like a banshee. I can’t tell you that she’ll do anything with that information, but I promise I will tell her.” When Veronica speaks again, there’s an unmistakable kindness in her voice, devoid of any snark or sneer that forces him to turn back to her. “You know, I was rooting for you,” she tells him. “For both of you.Honestly, I thought that’s where this was all headed after your birthday.”

“Yeah, well,” he says.

I singlehandedly ruined all that.

“She’s hurt right now. You just have to let her feel that for a while. You have to let her decide what she wants to do now. But I still am rooting for you. That night in November aside, she’s happiest when she’s with you. And you’re happiest when you’re with her.”

“Thanks,” he mumbles out as the elevator doors slide open in front of him, inviting him back down to the world he doesn’t want to return to yet. Not like this. “I mean, don’t get me wrong – I couldn’t be more pissed at you right now, but thanks for being there for her.”

Veronica nods at him, once, curtly. “You’re welcome,” she says. “And for the record, I’m pissed at you, too. I told you not to hurt her. But,” she continues, with the briefest of smiles crossing her tightly drawn together lips. “I’ve decided that I’m not going to hurt you. I think you’re going through enough of that on your own.”

“How generous of you.”

“Goodnight, Jughead,” Veronica says, and even though he thinks there’s something that may look like hope on her face as the doors close on her, it fails to fill him with the same.
He doesn’t sleep all night and when he watches the dawn of the new day he has no desire to greet 
creep up through his window frame, he thinks seriously about calling in sick.

He doesn’t, eventually, and he refuses to be sent home at noon because he ‘and I mean this 
affectionately, Jughead, ’ Bill had prefaced, looks like complete and utter crap.

Tossing his bag to the corner of his room, Jughead flops back down onto the bed he’d been so 
loathe to leave mere hours before, thinking now how much he’d rather be anywhere but here.

There’s too much time to think here alone, there’s too much time to wallow in his own self-pity.

This can’t be the way it all ends.

It’s such a pathetic kind of ending, so completely nondescript and mediocre, to be turned away at 
the door by Veronica of all people without the chance to even see her. He’d be a poor excuse of a 
writer to assume that every story ends with a scream instead of a whisper, but surely theirs must. 
There’s just too much there, volumes on volumes of memories, of good times and bad for it not to. 
There’s too much feeling, too much love and pain and happiness for everything to slip away 
quietly into nothing.

There’s so much he wants to tell her now that it’s too late. How transcendent and otherworldly the 
cradle of her love feels and how he’s sorry that he faltered for even a second in deciding whether or 
not he’d wanted it in his life. He does, he always does, and he’ll be sorry for the rest of his life that 
he’s made her question that. How her just her presence beside him, even if she’s saying nothing at 
all, calms and stills him like a lullaby penned just for his heart and soul alone.

It’s a different kind of terror he faces now as he stares up into the ceiling, a restless, unshakeable 
kind of terror that has him fighting the desire to topple his furniture and tear at fabric just so he can 
do something with the boundless energy he feels right into his fingertips. She’s so rooted into 
every aspect of who he is, even now, a year removed from his life entwined with hers. What he 
knows about life, he knows from her – what it means to be generous, to be kind, to be both selfish 
and selfless he knows because she’s shown him what that all really means.

Everything he knows of love he’s learned from her, and what he knows now is that in his life there 
will never be a love like her again. He’s not so misguided or dramatically tragic as to think that 
he’ll never love again, but he knows that the way he loves her, the way she loved him is a once-in-
a-lifetime kind of deal. It’s an awesome and gargantuan, an all-consuming love he’s so unprepared 
to give up now that he has to. And that’s the very terrifying thing – to have to give up the love that 
he wouldn’t have had to if only he’d been brave enough to reach out and take it.

He’s let himself down. He’s let her down so magnificently when she’s so rarely done the same to 
him. He’s always counted on her and when she’d counted on him to fight for them with her, he’d 
let her down.

As he’s tracing the bumps of uneven paint on his ceiling, it comes to him then - her voice, crystal 
clear, sweet and soft, as if she were right next to him whispering into his ear.

‘I’m counting on you to,’ she’d said to him, voice bestowing only the most sincere, honest 
confidence in him as she’d looked at him encouragingly, the breeze from the waterfront blowing 
her hair out in front of her face.

‘I’m counting on you to.’
He sits up then, so quickly that he has to kneel right back over, head hanging off the side of his bed to counteract the rush of blood to his head.

She’s still counting on him.

She’s counting on him to find the thing she’d keep.

Retrieving the box from the back of his closet is a process – he’d stuck it as far back as he could get it to go. Out of sight, out of mind.

Opening the box is another – he’d duct-taped it shut to the nines.

When Jughead wrestles it open, he dumps out the contents on his bed and studies each one carefully. There’s not much, but there’s enough.

What would she keep?

It’d be something small, he reasons, because anything too large or too obvious would be all too conspicuous for her to own up to having. It’d be too hard for her to look at every day.

He throws off the hoodie and flannels from the mix onto the floor. He knows she’d said as much that night they’d walked by the water, but he hadn’t been sure if she’d been playing along, too, with the game she singlehandedly designed – veer him off course, just a little to see if he could really figure it out, to see how well he really knows her.

It’d be something sentimental because at the core of it, his Betty Cooper is a girl who’s ruled by her heart, not her head. It’s definitely not the tangled mess of spare headphones or his watch because those things don’t really have meaning to her other than the fact that they’re his. It’s not the small Swiss army knife his dad had given him either, although he’s glad he finally knows where that’d walked off to.

There’s not much left after that – his worn copy of *On the Road* he’d read when he couldn’t sleep. His red pen, the one that she’d siphon whenever she’d sit down with a stack of his papers on her lap because she liked the way the ink flowed when she edited and drew smiley faces, a small notebook with his jumbled middle-of-the-night thoughts, bearing some of the most horrendous displays of his handwriting.

Maybe the book, he thinks, picking up the paperback and turning it over in his hands. She’d even scribbled notes in the margins for him from time to time, ones that challenged the comments he’d penned, ones that simply encouraged him. He runs his fingers over the flat outline of her handwriting – ‘good point,’ she’d written, with an arrow pointing to one of his own notes.

Maybe it’s not something that’s even in the box. Maybe it’s something intangible – a memory she’s now forgotten, a feeling, a fleeting moment that has come and gone long ago.

No.

In his heart of hearts, he knows – it’s not the pen and it’s not the book, and it is something that she’d handed back to him. She’s true to her word, and this he knows he can take her for at face value. This isn’t something she’d play some kind of game over. This is important, too important for
her to shroud it in mystery and riddle.

*Ruled by her heart*, he thinks.

Betty Cooper is ruled by her heart.

Hearts.

He’d been running late to meet her.

“Hey, sorry,” he’d said, out of breath. “Long and short story – Archie and his keys.”

“No worries,” she’d said smiling. “You’re here now.”

“Why’d you want to meet here?”

“I have my reasons. This place is important.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Because,” she’d said tugging his hand and drawing him down beside her on the bench. “This is the place where when I got stuck with copy-editing and was feeling sorry for myself, you believed in me, no questions asked. Even then, you knew there was something more for me and you never once believed that I wouldn’t get there. This is the place where you told me I’d find my way.”

She’d brought her hand to his cheek then, just as she always did when she’d wanted to tell him something meaningful, something important, almost like she felt that words alone wouldn’t be enough.

“The way you love me is powerful,” she’d said softly. “I wish you knew just how much so. The way you believe in me so unconditionally – there’s a strength that comes from that, and it’s one that’s so hard to find in myself sometimes. I know what you’re going to say – that I’m strong all on my own, that I deserve the things I do because I work hard for them, and maybe you’re right. Maybe I do. But I want you to know that in the moments I feel like giving up, in the moments I feel broken and beaten down, the way you love me gives me power. You give me strength.”

She’d reached into her wallet and slipped out the playing card he’d given her years ago.

“Thank you for giving me this,” she’d said. “Thank you for what you said to me that day. It means more to me than you’ll ever know.”

She’d kissed him then, a simple thank you to accompany the words that’d she’d so softly and gently said to him. He’d understood from the blinding way she’d smiled at him, from the card he hadn’t known meant so much to her, from her words, what exactly she was saying to him.

Why she was saying this to him here and now.

“Congratulations, Editor-in-Chief,” he’d said as her eyes fluttered back open, and that bright smile of hers was all he needed to know that he’d guessed right. “I knew you’d get there.”

“You did,” she agrees. “Even when I didn’t, you did.” Then, softly and shyly as she’d slipped the card back into her wallet, she’d whispered the words she hadn’t wanted to share with anyone else but him.

“With you, I always find my way.”
He’d forgotten the card had even been in the box in the first place because before he’d sealed the
damn thing shut with an entire roll of duct tape and relegated it to collect dust, he’d taken out just
one thing. He’d taken out the one thing he didn’t want sitting in there, lost and forgotten, because
she’d loved it so much. Because it always made her smile when she looked at it.

He almost trips over the hoodie in a mad dash to find his wallet, and somewhere in the back of his
mind he thinks that the mess strewn on his floor is really an apt symbol for his sorry state of affairs
right now. He breathes out a sigh of relief when he sifts behind his MetroCard, behind his debit
card and license and finds it – tucked away but still there, always, like she still is in his own heart –
the worn playing card he’d given her all those years ago.

The two of hearts.

“Archie!” he calls out, throwing open his bedroom door. He desperately hopes that today isn’t the
day Archie has learned to pack fast. “Archie! You still here?”

“Yeah,” Archie says, voice muffled from below his bed. “Have you seen my Converse?”

Just this once, god bless Archie and his mess. “I kicked them under the couch,” Jughead says, and
without any malice or judgment, even though he’d tripped over them last night and almost sent a
perfectly good plate of pasta flying in the air.

“You’re driving Betty back to Riverdale, right?” he asks.

“Yeah, why?”

“Can you give her this for me?”

“Why?” Archie asks, weary.

It’s private, Jughead thinks, but doesn’t voice because it makes him sound like he’s ten years old.

“Christmas present,” he says instead.

“This?”

“Yeah.”

Admittedly, it isn’t much. But it’s also everything.

“Is it going to make her cry?” Archie asks. " Seriously, if this is going to make her cry again, I don’t
want to-”

“I don’t know,” he admits. “I hope it doesn’t.”

“Jughead, maybe you shouldn’t-”

“Archie, come on. Just give it to her. I promise this is the last weird go-between I’ll subject you to
ever again.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”
“When have I ever?” he questions firmly. “This is it.” And he means it – this is it. He’s hurt her and put her through the ringer too many times with him – for him – and if this doesn’t work, then he’s going to stay out of her life for good and let her move on with hers.

There are fights you fight, and there are the ones you just have to throw in the towel.

“Fine,” Archie says. “What should I tell her?”

“Tell her,” Jughead begins, trailing off as soon as he’s started.  

_Tell her what?_ That he still loves her just as much as he did the day he’d first walked away in January, maybe even more so because he now knows exactly what he’s lost? That he’ll be waiting for her? That all he wants is a chance to make it right if she’ll let him? That he’s sorry?

But at the end of the day, she knows him as well as he knows himself, maybe even better, and he thinks she’ll understand.

“Tell her that I know this is what she wanted to keep.”

Archie’s brows furrow, and he doesn’t even blame his complete confusion. “That’s what you want me to tell her? Not-”

“She’ll know what it means.”

He thinks he hears Archie mutter something along the lines of _‘you guys are so weird’_ as he slings his duffle over his shoulders. “You sure you don’t want to come home this year? My dad won’t mind.”

“We’re going to press the day after Christmas.”

“If you change your mind, your old air mattress is still somewhere in the garage.”

“Thanks,” Jughead says. “And not just for the air mattress. Thanks for everything this year, man. I know I was a lousy friend for most of it but really – thanks.”

“Hug or douche-nod?” Archie asks, smiling.

They’re not surrounded by their entire high school this time and they’re not sixteen anymore. They’re roommates and brothers, and after everything that they’ve gone through he’s man enough to give his best friend a hug.

So he does.

“I’ll tell her what you said,” Archie promises, clapping him twice soundly on the back. “And good luck, with – you know.”

_Her_, he intuits. _Everything._

“Thanks, man,” he says, because at the end of the day, there is a degree of luck in love – in the timing of it all, in the moments and the stars above lining up just so, and tonight, he feels like he might need a little luck on his side.
He gives Archie a thirty-minute head start before he steps out the door himself, armed with nothing but a leather jacket and hope.

The leather jacket because she’d been right all along – it does suit him because one’s past always does, no matter how dark it may be; his past is as much a part of him as she is.

Hope because even though he knows he’s out of chances with her, she’s always given him hope – in the way she’d simply smiled at him after he’d kissed her for the very first time even though he’d been so afraid to open his eyes, in the way she unfailingly and unflinchingly believes in him. She’d been right about that, too – there’s a visceral, tangible kind of power that comes with that kind of belief. It makes him think and hope that he can always be a better person.

Hope because there’s no one else in the world who calms him, who’s there for him when he’s the most broken, who understands who he is to his core, who loves him like she does; all he can do now is hope that he’s fighting hard enough for her. For them.

On the bench where he’d found the card and given it to her long ago, he sits down slowly and runs his hand over where it’d once been. He runs his hand over the place where she’d once been.

He looks to the arch in front of him, at the two pillars facing each other strong and steady, equals on opposite sides, curving and combining to meet in the middle.

He hopes she does the same. He hopes she meets him halfway. He’d told her once here that she’d always find her way.

He hopes now that she finds her way to him.

He inhales in deeply and exhales, watching his breath cloud in front of him.

It starts snowing.

He waits.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from "It's Now or Never" by Elvis Presley.
It feels like home to me, it feels like I'm all the way back where I belong.

All things considered, she doesn’t gamble.

It’s not in her nature to and it never has been. She’s never been to Vegas or had any desire to go, she’s never wanted to play the slot machines or shoot craps because there’s just so much risk involved, and the idea of putting something out on the line like that unsettles her.

She likes lists. She likes plans, preferably plans she can pencil into her day-calendar so that she can actually see concrete proof of them. She likes thinking things through and stipulating for every eventuality. She thinks, sometimes, it’s why she’d been hung up on Archie for as long as she had been – Archie was part of her plan, the plan her little second-grade self had made and convinced herself it’d been what she wanted. One day, she’d marry Archie in the cutest little backyard wedding halfway in between her house and his, and they’d live happily ever after in Riverdale, alternating Sunday night family dinners at his dad’s and her parents’ house.

It hadn’t been a great plan, she realized when she started falling in love with her best friend’s best friend, but still – it had been a plan.

If there’s one thing she knows about herself is that Betty Cooper likes to stick to The Plan.

But she’d gambled because even if it isn’t in her nature to embrace risk with open arms, that in no way means that she shouldn’t do it every once in a while.

She’d gambled, she’d sat down at the table nervous and excited for the very first time and doubled her donation to the kids and their books. That’d worked out better than she expected.

What hadn’t was her gamble on him – the one she’d thrown out there against every voice in her head telling her she was betting too much too fast, that there was no way she could possibly be just friends with someone she’s still so in love with.

She’d bet on him and she'd lost.

She doesn’t even know why she’s surprised at the outcome because she knows enough about gambling, about the world to know that the house always wins. If she’s being honest with herself, she supposes that she’s not so much surprised as she is hurt. Confused as to why exactly she had bet in the first place when she knew the odds, angry at herself for playing the game when she knew she’d lose.

She’s sitting on her floor surrounded by neatly folded stacks of her clothes when Veronica knocks on her half-open door.
“Packing troubles?” Veronica asks.

“I always over pack,” Betty explains, sighing. “I’m trying not to this year.”

“Well,” Veronica says, gesturing to her four suitcases standing ready outside the door. “I’m clearly not the person guide you there. But there’s something to be said about being prepared for every eventuality.”

*True*, Betty thinks, and it’s only packing. It’s nothing to stress about or lose sleep over.

“So,” Veronica begins, daintily stepping over her piles and piles of cardigans to claim her seat on the bed. “You had a visitor last night. A very loud, very annoying visitor who thought two in the morning was the right time to wake me up the day before an international flight.”

Her hands, carefully working at refolding a sweater she’s decided against still and stop, and it falls in a heaped mess into her lap. She knows exactly who this visitor was based on just Veronica’s tone alone.

What she doesn’t know is what to do with the fact he’d been at their door in the early hours of the morning.

“Oh?” Betty says, voice ticking up in polite question. Any time she can buy right now is useful time.

“I think he wanted to apologize,” Veronica says gently. “I’m honestly surprised he didn’t kick down the door.”

She sighs and joins Veronica on the scrap of bed that isn’t covered in her clothes. In her heart, she knows he’s sorry. He’s likely *very* sorry if she knows him at all. She doesn’t need to hear the words from his mouth to know how sorry he is for making her cry or for subjecting her to a cab ride home alone even though they’d decided before that they’d split a car together – she knows.

And those are things she can forgive him for. Those are things she thinks she has already has forgiven him for because she knows he’s been trying hard to make it right – he’s called, he’s texted her, he’s shown up at her door at two in the morning – she just hasn’t wanted to hear him out. But it’s not for a lack of effort from him.

That’s the easy part – forgiving him for that night. She can’t hold the way he’d reacted against him when she’d caught her own self off guard with a kiss she still wakes up in the middle of the night thinking about. That’d been natural after everything they’d been through, that’d only been human; history has such a way of coloring the present. She doesn’t blame him for falling victim to it.

But it doesn’t erase the fact that her forgiveness doesn’t mean much at all. She can forgive him until the universe collapses into and onto itself and it still won’t do anything to change the fact that she’s in love with him and that he isn’t with her. Or that even if he is, he’d rather not do anything about it.

“Love sucks,” Betty says flicking back her ponytail and lying back on the bed, legs dangling off the side. She watches as Veronica mimics her motions, her dark hair fanning out and weaving together with strands of her own. There’s something beautiful about it, the mixing of dark and light so effortlessly, so easily.

“Parts of it do,” Veronica says, and the easy agreement she offers is surprising. Betty has once, maybe twice seen Veronica and Archie fight or otherwise be anything less that perfectly put together. At sixteen, seventeen, she’d never thought that they would be the couple to look up to, if
only because Archie had always been more the flavor-of-the-month type and less so the commitment type.

But even the outwardly perfect love, Betty figures, experiences bruises and bumps along the way, whether outwardly or behind closed doors.

“Love does suck. But when it’s good, love is the best thing in the world,” Veronica says. “And with you and Jughead, there were ups and downs, yes, but you had a good love.”

“Veronica—”

“I know this isn’t what you want to hear from me right now, but that’s never stopped me from saying what I want to say,” Veronica interjects. “I’m on your side here and I always will be. But as someone who’s on your side, I feel duty-bound to tell you that I very nearly let him in despite your strict orders to not. Betty, he looked legit miserable last night. Maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to just hear him out.”

“What’s the point?” she asks. “So he apologizes, so I forgive him. Then what? It doesn’t change the way I feel about him. It doesn’t change the way he feels about me. It doesn’t change anything about the way we are now.”

“You know, he might have more to say to you than just ‘I’m sorry, I’ve been such a monumental dumbass,’ B.”

Betty pauses, turning her eyes to the ceiling. There’s a chip there, small, but right above the center of her bed. She wonders why she’s never noticed it before given the number of days she must’ve woken up staring right at it. She wonders how much in her life she should’ve seen and already missed.

“I’m just tired,” she says quietly. “I’m exhausted. Playing this game with him is exhausting, feeling this way is even more exhausting. Maybe it’s better this way, even if he does have more to say. Maybe there are just some people in life you’re not meant to carry with you past a certain point.”

“Maybe,” Veronica says diplomatically. “But I also don’t think that he’s one of those people for you.”

She never thought he would be. Of all the people in her life, she never would’ve bet that he’d be one of the people to simply fall away and out of it. All that history, all those moments that exist between only them and them alone to dissolve into the ether, into plain nothingness – even now, it still doesn’t seem right to her.

But neither does anything else. Love, she thinks, the type of love that she wants in her life is one that’s reciprocal. It’s a partnership of equals, it’s two people on the same page. There’s hard work and fight that goes into making a relationship work even when they’re standing on the same solid ground. But to fight the fight when he’d so clearly told her that he can’t be with her again, that he doesn’t want to be, feels like wasted energy even before she’s spent any.

“Just think about it,” Veronica advises. “No one would question you, least of all me if you decide you never want to speak to him again. All I’ll say to you is what I said to him. I’ve seen you both together and apart, and in this frankly strange limbo of apart-togetherness these past two months. You’re happiest when you’re with him and he’s happiest when he’s with you. For what it’s worth you both just... glow when you’re together. You don’t look like that with anyone else but each other.”
Veronica squeezes her hand once, firmly, before rising up off the bed. *This is up to you, Betty* thinks she’s saying. *This is your love and this is your life. But either way, I’m standing by you until the end.*

“You’re sure you don’t want to wait?” Betty asks, pushing herself up and crossing her legs under her. “Archie will be here in like, an hour.”

Correction: Archie will be here in *hopefully* an hour because he’s never excelled at the whole uncomplicated concept of showing up on time.

“The jet waits for no one,” Veronica says. “Besides, we’ve said our goodbyes.”

Oh, she knows. She knows all about how Veronica and Archie had said their goodbyes all night long on Thursday while she’d been preparing for a meeting with her hands clamped tightly over her headphones.

She’s gotten better at blocking out the white noise, though. She’s had a lot of practice this year.

“Anyhow,” Veronica continues. “If you change your mind about Cozumel, I can and will send the jet for you, no questions asked. I could use some best-friend time to escape all the family time.”

“It’s crazy that you aren’t speaking metaphorically.”

“Don’t you love that you have a friend like me?”

“Yeah,” Betty says. Honesty is a hard thing to convey in just tone alone but she hopes she’s succeeding because she means this so much. “I really do, Veronica. I don’t know that I could’ve made it through this year without you.”

Veronica smiles, the white gleam of her teeth a perfect match against her pearls. “Of course you could’ve, because you’re you. You’re a survivor and you always have been. You would’ve been just fine even without my excellent advice.” Betty questions the conviction of Veronica’s confidence in her then because she feels like she’s leaned on Veronica more times than she can possibly count. It’s nice, though, that Veronica has such an unfailing faith in her. “I love you, B,” Veronica says, a lovely undertone of genuineness lacing through her voice. “Just don’t forget that other people do, too.”

Veronica lingers at the door, plum-painted lips pursed and hand paused against the frame. “Do you remember? We were right here in the exact same spot almost a year ago and you said back then that you didn’t know who you were. I know exactly who you are and I always have. But that was never the question,” she says thoughtfully.

“Who are you to you, Betty Cooper?”

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Betty doesn’t realize that she’s fallen asleep until she hears the front door slam shut. She bolts straight upright and kicks out her legs so spastically that she nips her lampshade and sends it spinning from side to side.

“Betty?” Archie calls, rapping twice on her bedroom door as she lunges forward to catch the lamp. “You here?”
“Yeah,” she says, diving back onto the floor and into the center of her piles of clothes. She’s not done packing yet, not even close, and she’d damn well better look like she’s been working hard at it. “Yeah, I’m here. Come on in.”

“You didn’t pack?” Archie asks, breezing into her room and flopping down on her bed without invitation.

“I’ll do it fast. I fell asleep,” she admits.

“I know,” he says. “You didn’t answer the front door when I knocked. And you have a sleep line on your face.”

Her hand rushes to her face, slapping over her right cheek. She hopes there isn’t a line of drool caked on her face right now, because she’s been known to wake up to those, too.

“Sorry,” she says again, at minimum for assuming that Archie would be the one holding them up on the road home.

Archie shrugs. “I’m in no rush. By the way,” he says, shifting to his side to reach into his back pocket. “Jug wanted me to give you this.”

She’s in the middle of stacking her Christmas presents for her parents into her suitcase when she turns to Archie and sees exactly what he’s holding out to her. There, caught between his two fingers and a little worse for the wear, is the playing card she didn’t think she’d ever see again.

Betty pushes herself up on her knees and reaches across the distance towards Archie, forcing him to reach the rest of the way. She can’t bring herself to do more – halfway is about all her heart is capable of right now.

It slips from Archie’s fingers into palm, and just like that it simply back in her hands again after she’d spent so many months of dreaming and thinking about it. The card, a card that that exists in every single deck of cards in the world, the card that means so much to her not for its beauty or its value but because of the story and strength behind it, is there and finally real, finally tangible. It’d finally found its way back to her.

“Why did he give this to you?” she whispers.

She thinks she knows why. But maybe Archie has the words to go along with it.

He shrugs. “He said he knows this is what you wanted to keep.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“Just that you’d get what he meant by that.”

She thinks she does.

She knows she does.

“She asks. "Right now, where is he?"

“I don’t know, at home?” Archie offers, confused. "He’s not going back to Riverdale this year.”

He isn’t at home, she realizes once Archie ventures that incorrect guess. But she knows exactly where he is.
She twists the card between her fingers, thinking far too fast, breathing far too shallowly.

*Who are you to you, Betty Cooper?*

She’s Elizabeth Cooper. She’s Betty Cooper.

She’s a writer for the *New York Post*. She’s a baker, one who makes what Archie deems the best brownies in the entire world, brownies that Veronica will break her diet for without second thought. She’s someone who taught herself how to use a sewing machine because paying someone to do what she can do all by herself is ludicrous. She’s someone who can change a flat tire like nobody’s business. She’s someone who should have no trouble running a half-marathon now, because she can already run more than that.

She’s someone’s daughter, someone’s sister. She’s her niece and nephew’s aunt, and she’s even a cool aunt at that, so they’ve told her. She’s someone’s friend – she’s multiple people’s friend.

She’s someone who’s in love. She’s someone that’s in love with another someone who understands not just her head, but the very depths and hidden corners of heart and soul, too.

She’s someone who loves every part of a man fighting for her right now, a man fighting for them. She’s someone who’s not about to throw away the possibility of love, of not just a good love but really great one because she’s afraid to roll the dice and take a chance.

*No.*

She’s someone who’s going to go after it. She’s a survivor, she’s a fighter.

She’s going to fight for him.

“I have to go,” Betty says, pushing the piles of clothes off her lap, kicking them out of their folded stacks as she turns wildly around her room in search of her coat. “I have to go right now.”

“What?” Archie asks, voice high-pitched and full of disbelief.

“Don’t wait for me,” she says, readjusting her sleep-skewed ponytail. “Go on home without me, I’ll find a way there.”

“Wait, go back to Riverdale without you? Betty, I thought we were going together. I made a whole road trip playlist.”

“I know. I know!” Where the hell is her coat? “I just-” she stops her frantic stampede through her room when Archie stills her with his hands on her shoulders. “I have to go,” she tells him, trying and failing to pull out of his grasp. “I have to do this.”

“Do what? Betty, just slow down for a minute.”

“I have to go to him,” she says. There’s a strain of nearly wild, crazed fervor in her voice, but she doesn’t bother trying to hide it – she’s sure that Archie understands how important this is to her. “I think he’s waiting for me, Arch. I have to go to him. I have to talk to him.”

Archie’s smile is delayed as he works through her jumbled thoughts and incoherent words, but once he does, it’s quick and blinding. It’s one of the most genuine smiles she’s seen on him in a while.

Archie, her biggest cheerleader now and always. *Their* biggest cheerleader.
“What are you waiting for, then?” he asks, helping her flip out the collar of her coat she’s turned under itself. “Go.”

Betty breathes out a loud sigh of relief when Archie pushes her gently towards the door because having her best friend support her right now despite everything she’s put him through this year – despite everything they’ve both put him through – means the world to her.

“Thank you, Arch,” she whispers, launching herself right into him. He’s waiting, but there’s still time for this – there always is and there always will be. Hugging Archie has always been comforting - when her arms wrap around him, they wrap around her entire childhood, too. “Thank you for always being there for me. I could never ask for a better friend than you. I will never have a better friend than you.”

“You deserve this, Betty,” Archie says, squeezing her back tightly. “Both of you do. You deserve the love that you fight for.”

“Where did you hear that?” she asks, arms still resting on his shoulders.

Archie smiles and turns her back towards the door. “You know where.”

She does.

She knows that tapping more than once on the elevator’s buttons won’t make the thing come any faster, but she tries regardless. It’s taking too long. It’s going in the exact opposite direction. It’s stopping on what feels like every floor.

*Screw it,* she thinks as she turns for the stairs, eighteen flights down, but she’s not counting. The movement feels good right now, it feels like her feet are moving at the same speed as her heart and that’s exactly what she needs.

Outside her building’s door, the winter air is sharp and biting against her face.

She’s left her scarf and gloves upstairs, and she’s wearing pink suede ballet flats, the ones that are prone to slipping off the backs of her heel if she walks too fast in them. She’d figured wearing them today wouldn’t be an issue since she’d be sitting in a car for the better part of three hours, but there isn’t time to change them now. There isn’t even time for walking.

She starts to run.

When she emerges from the depths of the subway, lunging and bounding up the steps two at a time, it’s snowing again.

She remembers how at one point in her life, the snow would’ve slowed her – she’s wiped out one too many times in the snow to not remember the feeling of her tailbone cracking down hard on the unforgiving ground, arms akimbo, legs flying spread-eagle into the air.
But he’s waiting for her, probably wearing nothing more than one of his jackets so wildly inappropriate for fending off the winter weather because he’s just so wonderfully stubborn and refuses to wear anything else. He's waiting for her.

She starts running again, kicking up powder with every turn of her foot.

She doesn’t fall this time because she’s been practicing for months now, and she and the New York streets have learned the push and pull of each other, how to give and when to take.

She doesn’t fall because he’s waiting for her, cold and alone and maybe questioning everything, questioning her - there’s isn't enough time for her to stumble and pick herself up right now. She doesn’t want to keep him waiting any longer. Right now, she needs more than anything to get to him before she loses him once again, and that alone is enough for her to keep her balance.

She doesn’t fall because the road in front of her is clear, snow white and unblemished, unmarked; she doesn’t fall because she knows exactly where she’s going and who she wants to be.

Who she wants to be with.

There isn't much of a moon fighting against the night sky, but there’s a Christmas tree standing tall and center, lights bouncing off the white marble of the arch, and that’s more than enough to guide her way.

She doesn’t have to look hard for him, though, because he’s exactly where she knew he’d be. He's right there on the bench they’d sat on when she’d been doubting herself and when he'd never doubted her, when he’d given her the card.

He's right there on the same bench they'd been on when he'd believed in her when she hadn’t found the strength to believe in herself, when he’d loved her exactly the way she needed him to.

Betty sees him first and she’s so glad that she does because the moments before he realizes that she’s there, that she’s finally there, are moments she knows she’s going to want to remember for the rest of her life.

He looks hopeful, she thinks, even though his elbows resting on his knees and his head hung down try to convince her otherwise. He looks cold, he looks like he might’ve been waiting for her for a while.

He looks just like the man she loves.

“Hi,” she calls out to him. His head snaps up at her voice and there’s a measured and slow smile already waiting there for her.

“Hi,” he says, coming to his feet quickly.

Then, it’s just them standing in across from each other with the snow falling and building in between them – two red, beating hearts standing their ground in a field of white.

“Were you waiting long?” she asks. There’s a lot she wants to, and it’s as good a place as any.

He’d been quick to stand, but he’s slow to close the distance between them, moving hesitantly
through the space between. She meets him halfway because it’s only fair. That’s what a relationship is, that’s what a partnership is – he gotten the card back to her and he’d waited for her. She needs to show him now that it hasn’t been in vain.

Jughead shrugs. “I would’ve waited all night,” he says. Yes, I’ve been waiting for a while, she hears. But that’s okay. You needed your time. “I would’ve waited as long as you needed me to.”

“And the card?” she asks.

“It was the least I could do,” he answers. “You said you were counting on me to figure it out.” He sighs then, his shoulders moving heavily with the action. “I’ve taken up so much of your time. I’ve taken up so much of your life, Betty. But I wanted you to have it even if you didn’t want to see me. Was I right?”

“You know you were.”

She watches as he smiles to himself at that, a barely-there smile that she’s learned to catch over the years, one he’d use when he’d find the perfect word for something he’d been writing, one he’d use when she said or did something that he thought was especially sweet.

“I’m sorry about that night,” he says, adding another two steps to the distance. “I’m sorry that it ended the way it did. I’m sorry I ever made you doubt how much I care about you, because I do. More than you’ll ever know.”

She knows exactly what word he’s avoiding, but there’s a comfort she finds in that rather than a sting. He’s scared just like her, scared of this love that seems even bigger than both of them at times, this uncontrollable, gargantuan love that exists between them, one that has never faltered even through the distance and hardship they’ve put it through.

“I’m sorry, too,” Betty concedes. “We both probably went too far. What ended up happening wasn’t just your fault.” She adds two steps to match the ones he’d taken before. “Did you really mean what you said that night?” she asks quietly. “That you can’t do this again? That you don’t want to?”

There’s a beat, heavy with feeling, before he answers. “In a way, yeah. I did mean some of it,” he says. “If we do this again, you and me, and if it doesn’t work again, I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

She watches as he runs his hand over his head, scooping off his beanie and tucking it away into his back pocket. He’s so beautiful like this, she thinks – without armor, without a shield – just him before her.

“It’s just been so hard,” he says. “Everything about this year has been hard. I didn’t think it would be. I didn’t think you’d always be there in my head every time I tried to fall asleep or every time I tried to move on. You were always there even when I didn’t want you to be. I was terrified of having to live like that again. I still am.”

She understands. To live without love, to live without the person you’re in love with has been the most difficult thing she’s ever endured. It doesn’t leave you, the pain, and there’s never a reprieve from it. It never dulls or hurts any less.

Jughead exhales then, quietly, but she can make out the shakiness of his breath from the way it fogs in stutters in front of him.

“There’s been a lot of good that’s come from this year,” he continues. “But it’s also been the
hardest year of my life – harder than the year my mom took JB and left, harder than the year I lived in a closet at school. Betty, living this year without you has been the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do,” he says. His voice is so gentle, so soft. “But that fear of having to do this all over again one day, that fear of something that may or may not happen is a truly idiotic reason to not be with you right now.”

Her breath grows short then because he’s said his piece and it’s her move now. It’s her turn to say what she has to say.

“Do you remember what you said to me?” Betty asks, holding out the playing card between them. “The night you gave me this?”

It isn’t an olive branch, but maybe that’s okay because that isn’t the sentiment she’s going for – they’ve already made their peace.

This is about love, the way she loves him – the way she’s always loved him – the way she hopes he still loves her. The twin hearts, equally red and equally whole on either end of the card are the right symbols for this moment now.

He shakes his head gently in recollection – I’d never forget, she reads. How could I?

“I remember,” he says.

“You said that you’d bet your heart on me,” she says, because even though he remembers, she wants to remind herself, too. “You know me, Jug. I don’t gamble. I don’t bet, even though it’s built right into my name.” He smiles then - alliteration will never pass him by without a smile.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen with us,” she continues. “I don’t know if this is the right thing to do. I can’t promise you anything. I’m scared too, of having to do this year all over again one day. I’m terrified,” she admits, and it feels so good to tell him that, it feels so good to be on the same page as him again.

“But I do know that I still want you. I know that the way I feel about you hasn’t changed – I loved you then, and I love you now. I told you that we earn the love that we fight for and I meant that. So this is me fighting the best I know how to by putting my heart on the line – it’s yours, if you still want it. It always has been,” she says, letting out a shaky breath.

“This is me betting my heart on you.”

She forces the hand and the card she has extended out to him steady, even though everything in her wants to nudge it forward, just even an inch closer to him. Take it, she wills him. Just take it.

But she’s said her piece, she’s shown her hand and now it’s his turn.

She watches the snow drop, melt, and fade on the card.

She listens to the beat of their breaths, the soft murmurs and sighs of the night.

She looks at him and thinks about every part of him that’s moving in this moment, even as he faces her, perfectly silent and perfectly still.

A blink.

A breath.
A thought.

A heartbeat.

All at once, the card is out of her hand and replaced by his own, cold to the touch from waiting for her out in the snow. He crosses the remainder of the distance, pulls her to him, and for half a moment she marvels at how warm the entire of her becomes when he presses her up against him; the warmth runs through every part of her, coursing from head to toe, and she’s so safe as his hands frame her face and guide her mouth to his.

She remembers how electric the kiss by the waterfront had been, how it’d felt like a shock to the heart, like an electric current running through her system – this kiss is nothing like that. This is like the slow, languid Sunday mornings she’d wake before him and think just how sublimely peaceful he looked sleeping there next to her, with a shard of sunlight painting a diagonal across his face. It’s like the nights they’d sit side by side next to each other in bed, shoulders touching in the most comfortable of silences as he typed and she read, as she typed and he read.

It’s like feeling the wind on her face as she’d held on to him tightly, digging her chin into his shoulder as he drove them around the town they’d first fallen in love in on an old Ducati, the rumble of the engine vibrating through her legs and straight to her heart. It’s like waking up at three in the morning just to edge closer to him, because even though she’s slept in different beds in different rooms in different houses before, nothing feels quite as safe in the uncertainty of the night as his arms holding her close.

It’s like coming home.

He kisses her sweetly, his mouth tentative and slow as it moves over hers, almost as though he’s savoring the moment, savoring the taste of her. The hand that she doesn’t have fisted around the collar of his jacket finds its way to his cold cheek out of instinct, out of habit, out of memory, and just as she always has, she’s lost to the world around her as she’s consumed into the world of him.

She’d forgotten to take a breath before he’d kissed her and when he gently tugs his mouth from hers, she’s instantly light headed. But he’s still holding her, hands pressed firmly and tightly against her back, forehead tipped against hers, and she needs nothing more than that to stay steady.

“You’re a safe bet, Betty Cooper,” he whispers, and the words fall right from his mouth into hers. “I’ll always bet on you.”

She doesn’t know how they end up back at his apartment, just that they do. Maybe she’ll be able to piece it back together later – the moments they’d stopped in the middle of the streets to steal a kiss, the thrill of rebuilding their world drowning out the frustrated honks around them, the way that he’d almost slipped in the snow and had grabbed onto her to break his fall instead of the other way around.

*It’s unbelievable*, Betty thinks as they crash through his front door in a flurry of tangled limbs, how excited she feels right now in the arms of the man she’s kissed thousands, maybe tens of thousands of times before, how nervous she feels about having sex with him again even though she’s never done that with anyone but him.

They’re not as practiced as they used to be, but she simply smiles as the chain of her necklace
catches on her sweater as he tries to peel it off, and he just laughs gently as her hands fumble clumsily at his belt buckle. It's okay, she thinks, because even though their rhythm isn't quite there yet the way it'd once been, she knows they'll get it back in time. And they'll have fun working at it.

“Hey,” Jughead breathes out against her mouth in an effort to get her attention. “Hey, hey, hey, listen to me for a moment.” At the urgency in his voice, Betty forces herself to pull back from him, to tip and glue her head against the wall because if she doesn’t, she’ll just fall right back into him again. “I love you, too,” he tells her, hand on her cheek, turning her eyes to his. “I need you to know that – I never stopped. I never could. I just – I need you to know that.”

She knows.

But it doesn’t make hearing it any less marvelous, especially since it’s been a beat since she’s heard those words from him. They’re like music, a harmony and melody inspired by and composed for just for her and her alone.


“Good,” he says.

Then, he kisses her again.

There’s a trail of clothes from the front door to the hall and they never make it to his bed.

The floor right outside his bedroom door works just as well as anything else.

After she crawls into the bed they never quite make it to, she watches, dressed in her underwear and a sheet wrapped tightly around herself as he browses his dresser drawers, sweatpants slung low over his hips. He’s beautiful, she finds herself thinking again, and a little possessively, too—he’s mine. He’s my love, he’s the man who loves me.

He loves me.

When he catches her, the knife edge of a smile dancing across his mouth, her hand rises higher on her chest and grasps on tighter to the sheet.

“What?” Jughead asks, amused.

Betty shakes her head. “Nothing.”

It’s so silly, she thinks. They’ve kissed hundreds of times and had sex hundreds of times before; he’s seen her naked body just as often. Arguably, he knows her body even better than she does. But it’s also been a while, more than a while at that, since he’s tracked her body with his hands, since he’s looked upon the lines and curves of her, and she wonders now what he thinks of her now. Does he see anything different? Is there anything better about her, anything worse? She likes what she sees of him, but does he feel the same way about her?

She’s shy, she realizes, shy in a way she hasn’t felt around him in years. She definitely hadn’t been in moments before when all she’d been focused on was feeling his skin against hers, when all
she’d been thinking, so primally and so wantonly, was how badly she just needed sex. Not that sex hadn’t been fun, because it had been although she’s sure her back will be paying for it soon, and not that she isn’t satisfied, because she is. But never has she wanted him so badly to throw all caution to the wind and just go at it on the floor.

In a way, it’s a womanly kind of feeling. To feel so desired like that, to feel so completely wanted like that by someone who loves not just her body, but everything that exists within and outside it, too, is extremely empowering.

“Here,” he says, tossing her one of his t-shirts. “I know you don’t like sleeping in your clothes.”

“I’m going to sleep well tonight,” she tells him quietly as he climbs into bed beside her.

“Me too,” he says. “Probably better than I have this entire year.”

When he moves to slip his arm around her, she instinctively twists and arches her back up off the bed slightly to allow him under her shoulder blades. It’s an old dance move and it’s one they haven’t rehearsed in a while, but like riding a bike, like picking up a pen and writing after summer vacation, it comes all back to her naturally.

She places her head right over his heart and turns her ear towards him, searching for the beat. There isn’t anything that she wants to say, there isn’t anything that needs to be said.

Right now, she just wants to feel.

It’s a funny concept she thinks – home. It’s the simplest of words, four letters long, and one that children learn to write not long after they learn their names. It’s a word that like so many others, has an entire world of meaning within it.

Home, she used to think, was simply a place – the place where she’d grown up, the one with a red door and a bedroom window that looked over and onto her best friend’s. Her home was where her mother and her father and Polly lived together under one roof, it was where they had dinner every night at seven on the dot, it was the room where she slept with her nightlight beside her, warding off the dark she never wanted to admit she was afraid of.

But, she realizes now as his heartbeat fills her ear and vibrates through her, home isn’t just the house where she grew up. It’s many things – it still is her colonial Cape Cod with the red front door, it’s still the window she’ll run right to and wave to Archie at because the familiarity of it all still feels so good. That will always be one of her homes. But now, it’s also the place that she and Veronica argued over throw rugs and end tables, it’s the place and the walls that hold the secrets that they’ve shared with each other over too many glasses of wine and too many imported bon bons. It’s the city that has gotten her down more than once but that has never beaten her.

Home is right here in his arms with her legs crossed over his, it’s the rise and fall of his chest under her fingertips. It’s where she feels like she can be her complete self, no holds barred, no judgment incurred, it’s the magnitude of comfort and calm that no one else brings to her life but him. It’s where she feels and knows she’s loved, it’s where she loves in return.

Home, she knows now, is simply him.
She doesn’t know how long they lay there in silence with his fingers tracing slow, steady circles along her shoulder blade, with her eyes blinking twice per blink just to make sure that he’s still there next to her but eventually, he breaks first.

“What’re you thinking about?” he asks quietly.

*How I could stay here forever. I don’t want this moment to end; there’s something very magical about this night. How I love you and you love me, too – it’s a wonderful thing, isn’t it? Love. How I’m happy.*

*How I’m so happy.*

“I’m hungry,” she whispers, a smile cracking across her face. There’s no need to voice the rest - she knows he knows it.

“How romantic,” he offers back dryly.

“I thought that would be to you!”

“And here I was thinking you were waxing poetic up there about the trials and tribulations of love or something else tragically Shakespearean,” he teases tapping at her temple before reaching across her for his computer, hand balancing his lean against her hip.

“This coming from the man who said food is the food of love, and not music.”

“And I still stand by that,” he laughs while idly flicking through menus. “What do you feel like?”

“Chinese? Thai?” she ventures, thinking out loud. “Oh – Pizza! Is La Margarita still open this late?”

It’s the best pizza in the city bar none according to her and she hasn’t had it in a year.

“Probably,” he says pulling up the number on his phone because of course it’s saved there. “They cater to the college masses and it isn’t even midnight yet. Same as before?” he asks.

She simply nods in return. That he still remembers the ‘*before*’ warms her. He has an elephant’s memory and he always has, but it isn’t any less meaningful that he remembers this about her. There’s a lot of mundanity about her to remember - the way she likes her coffee in the morning, after it’s sat out for exactly ten minutes so that it isn’t scalding, that she doesn’t like peas and if even one shows up in her fried rice, she’ll leave it in the fridge for someone else to pick at – and it’s all easily forgettable, too.

She’s sure that there are things about her he might not remember anymore. But doesn’t make it any less sweet that he remembers this.

She wonders as he rattles off her order flawlessly, without forgetting her side of mozzarella sticks just as she’s about to remind him, what now *is* different than before?

*A lot, surely,* she answers for herself, and there are certain things that she’s even willing to simply let lie and to discover in time as they unearth and present themselves.

But there are certain things she just has to know upfront, too, certain things that will shake her to her core if she finds out about them later down the road. Things that may only grow in size and depth if she chooses to leave confronting them for another day.
Betty waits for the pizza to arrive - this is a conversation fitting for breaking bread. She almost doesn’t want to say anything because he looks like he’s floating somewhere near bliss when he flips open the pizza box and inhales deeply, but that’s a poor foot for them to start off on. She needs to be honest with him and he needs to do the same for her.

“Can I ask you something?” Betty says, more for her benefit than his. She needs the prep time to work up to it. “When we were broken up, did you have sex with anyone else?”

She thinks, and in her heart, she hopes she knows the answer because while sex on the floor had been fun and certainly something very new, neither of them had lasted long at all. If his reason is anything at all like hers, she has her answer.

“Would it change anything if I did?” Jughead asks slowly, face impossibly blank.

No, she thinks immediately. It would hurt and likely a hell of a lot at that, but it wouldn’t change the way she feels about him. She’d come into this knowing full well it could be a possibility.

“We weren’t together,” she tells him. “I can’t hold anything you did this year against you.”

He raises his eyebrows at her then and tips his head slightly to the side. Can’t, she knows as well as anyone else, doesn’t mean that she won’t.

“I didn’t,” he says. “And I didn’t want to, either. I’ve never slept with anyone but you.”

“Oh,” Betty says, doing her utmost to keep her face as straight as possible.

“I’d say don’t tell Archie because I’ll lose my cred, but it’s not like he doesn’t know.”

“You talked to him about this?”

“Not really,” he says. “But even he can put two and two together. In that there was no two in here, ever. I did date,” he admits. “And there was one kiss. But that was it.”

“Just one?” she teases. Just one kiss. Just one. That’s perfectly fair. That’s something she can deal with since that’s her count, too. That’s something she can deal with because she knows exactly how meaningless a one-off kiss can be.

“The one and only.”

“She didn’t like your style, huh?” Betty jokes. “Too much tongue?”

“Thanks.”

She laughs then because even though she knows she’d work through it if his answer had been ‘yes, I’ve shared those kinds of moments with someone other than you,’ she’s just relieved that he hasn’t. So relieved. It’s something she thinks would slowly weigh less heavily on her heart with time, if he’d slept with someone else, and it’s something she’d just have to adjust her thinking over and build a new schema around. And she would. It’s certainly rarer for a person to share that kind of intimacy with just one other person in the span of a lifetime, and if he had they’d simply move from the minority to the majority.

But even so, she likes that those moments still belong to only them.

“What about you?” he asks. “Did you?”

“You’re still the only person I’ve ever had sex with,” Betty tells him. “But I did date someone for a
while and I did kiss him once.”

She answers bluntly, and right now she’s questioning why exactly she thought this was the right moment to have this conversation. But it’s one that might as well happen sooner rather than later. These aren’t easy conversations, but they’re necessary ones. And so far, they’re doing okay at tackling them.

“‘I know,’” he says, and somewhat easily too. “‘I think I saw you with him. Tall guy, taller than me even, blonde hair?’

“‘Yeah,’” she responds slowly. “‘How did you-’

“I was dropping off Veronica’s car, somewhere near the end of August. I was coming to see you, actually.”

Betty places her pizza down and brushes off the crumbs from her fingers over the open box. “I had no idea,” she says, her voice quiet but not out of shame or embarrassment. It must’ve hurt, she thinks, because she can only imagine how shattering seeing him with someone else out in broad daylight would’ve been. It must’ve hurt him. Even without knowing it, she must’ve hurt him.

He shrugs at her. “It wasn’t fun,” he says. “But I think it was something I needed to see. It made it real, the idea of really losing you forever. I needed to feel that.” He pauses then, placing his half-eaten slice next to hers. “Why didn’t it work out?” he asks. “I didn’t see much of you, but you seemed happy.”

“I wasn’t happy enough,” she says simply. “He wasn’t you.”

He’s never been one for blushing but she catches it on him now, the slightest tinge of pink across his cheekbones.

“Does that bother you?” Betty continues. “That I went out on dates with this guy?”

“You’re here now,” he says simply and without hesitation. “That’s all that matters to me.”

And that’s more than a good enough answer for her. That’s all she needs to know about that.

“A year of celibacy,” she muses out loud. “It sucked, didn’t it?”

He snorts once, shaking his head. “I’m tempted to say you have no idea, but you do.”

Betty laughs and when she does, he does, too. It builds in the room, traveling to all corners and spaces, like a balloon filling up with the sounds of them – their relief, their happiness.

“How does this work – you and me?” she asks. “Do we just pick up where we left off?”

Jughead shrugs, drawing up his knee to rest his elbow on. “I don’t know. I’ve never done this before,” he says thoughtfully. “But I will say that where we left off wasn’t a great place.”

No, she supposes, it hadn't been. And, where they left off destroys and deletes everything that came from this year, the lessons, the good and the bad, the heartache and happiness – she doesn’t want to forget that.

“Maybe,” he says, treading slowly. “We just start again from where we are now.”

Start again. Betty turns the phrase over in her mind, a phrase that encompasses both a new beginning and a past that she refuses to cast aside.
She likes that phrase. She likes that answer. She likes that feeling.

“Start again,” she repeats back. “Okay. Does that mean that I get to stay over when I want to?”

“Sure,” he says easily. “My bed is your bed.”

“What do I call you now? Are you my boyfriend again? Am I your girlfriend? Am I something else?”

She doesn’t know what that something else would possibly be, but it’s important to her that right now they be on exactly the same line, the same sentence on the very same page.

“Well,” he says cautiously. “What do you want to call me?”

“You can’t just answer the question with another question, Jug.”

“Okay,” he says seriously, but she knows from the hint of a smile that he isn’t upset with her. “I want to call you my girlfriend again because I’ve missed being able to call you that. I want to be your boyfriend again, but only if that’s something you want, too. I want to spend all of tomorrow doing nothing with you and at some point, I want to have sex with you again. Preferably in this bed, but honestly the floor works just as well. I also want to finish this pizza because I haven’t eaten anything all day and I’m starving.”

She watches as he picks up his half-eaten slice and bites from it, watches as him as he watches her for her reaction. She’s hadn’t expected him to deliver the way he had and she’s nothing but surprised at how candidly he’d laid out everything he wanted on the table.

She hopes he never stops surprising her.

“Okay,” she says, exhaling loudly. Those are all her questions, the burning ones at least and she’s done for now. “Okay.”

“You know,” he starts. “I don’t read Cosmo and I don’t take those Buzzfeed quizzes you and Veronica spend hours doing together, so I don’t know if there are rules for something like this. If there are, I don’t know that I care. Betty, I just want to be. You’ll be you and I’ll be me, and we’ll just be. Together. I want to love you just like this. The rest will come in time.”

Once, she remembers, and not long ago either he’d told her that she’d always said the right thing to him. He’d looked at her in a moment when she’d been completely unsure of if she could still be as honest as she been with him in the past, and he’d told her that she always said to him what he needed to hear most.

It’s a great and wonderful thing she thinks then, that he does the exactly that for her, too.

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Betty wakes when her foot knocks against his computer somewhere between two and three in the morning. Half-asleep and groggy, she fumbles as she closes the screen, still mockingly open on the receipt of her exorbitantly expensive Amtrak ticket home, and sets the computer down on the ground.
In the dark of the night she turns towards him.

The most peaceful she’s ever seen him look is in the moments she’s caught him sleeping; tonight is no exception. He carries his stress with him, the weight of his problems and everyone else’s, too, written and etched so clearly into the lines on his face, into the knots in his shoulders.

But, she reflects as she runs her fingertips over his eyes, his cheekbones - he’s peaceful when he sleeps, incredibly so.

“Hey,” she whispers as softly as she can, an old routine she wants to start practicing at again. “I love you.”

In the slice of moonlight shining through the crack in his curtains, she sees the drowsy curve of his smile.

“I love you, too,” he mumbles back to her, out of habit, instinct.

She shimmies back down on the bed and draws the arm he has slung over her hips up to rest up over her heart just like she always used to do.

The first thing she sees when she opens her eyes is light – she’d forgotten how bright his room gets in the morning when the sun swings and floods through his window.

The second thing she sees is him.

“Hi,” Betty whispers, turning onto her side to face him. She wonders if he knows how good it feels to see him there, looking at her the way he’s looking at her now.

“Hi.”

“Why are you dressed?” she asks, moving to sit up. “Where are you going? What -”

“Hey,” he says, gently pushing on her shoulder and sending her back towards the bed. “Relax. I’m going to get bagels, I just didn’t want you to wake up and find me gone.”

“Oh,” she says, curling her arm under the pillow. “Okay. I could eat a bagel.”

Jughead laughs lowly and nods. “Go back to sleep, it’s still early.”

“My early or your early?”

He smiles. “Your early. It’s eight.”

“Jughead Jones up with the sun on a Sunday,” she muses. “Don’t tell me that’s something I have to get used to now.”

“Please,” he says.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Betty asks, and even though fully intends to keep her voice light, innocent, there’s an unmistakable strain of worry there.
Had he not been able to sleep because of her? Had she kicked or whacked him in the face? It’s entirely possible - she’s become something of a violent sleeper now that she’s learned to sleep within the perimeters of an entire bed to herself.

“Best sleep I’ve had all year,” he says easily.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. Do you really think I’d be up now if it wasn’t? You know me.”

She simply hums her response back; there’s no arguing with the truth of that. Sundays, according to the Gospel of Jughead, are days for sleeping until noon and wearing sweatpants all day long. Not that she has any kind of a problem with that Good Book whatsoever.

“Any requests?” he asks her. “They stopped making that blueberry bagel by the way.”

“What? You’re kidding.”

“You wish.”

“But... why?” Her question comes out as an unintended whine and when his mouth quirks upward she knows it’s because of how childlike she’d just sounded.

“Believe it or not, I’ve never asked them why they got rid of bread infused with blueberries that have no business being there in the first place.”

“I don’t get why you knock it all the time.”

“It makes the bagel look moldy. And it’s too sweet.”

“You eat cinnamon raisin bagels.”

“Not happily.”

“What a bummer,” Betty says, stretching and arching out her back. “Cinnamon raisin then I guess, although it really is such a subpar bagel.”

“And they say I’m dramatic. Go back to sleep,” he suggests again, hand lazily twirling the ends of her hair. “I won’t be gone long.”

The second time she wakes up it’s to the smell of bagels – he’s running one right underneath her nose like a jar of smelling salts – it’s to his laugh, and it’s to a takeaway cup of freshly squeezed orange juice with the pulp lovingly strained out.

They spend all day in bed falling in and out of naps, falling in and out of conversation. She’s never realized it before, but a bed can be a very versatile place. It can be a dinner table and a breakfast table, a surface that’s infinitely more comfortable to have sex on than the floor, a nap pad, a movie theater, a bubble where the most serious and the most inane conversations take place.

But she knows he’s reaching his threshold for supine positions and the confines of his four walls
when his foot starts tapping restlessly against the sheets.

“Do you have stuff for hot chocolate here?” she asks, twisting in his arms and turning her head up to him.

“We can check,” Jughead says. “I can go get some if we don’t.”

“No need,” she says, but the fact that he’d without second thought break the bubble of their indoor world and brave the outside doesn’t escape her. “Come on.”

It’s a jarring thing to see the empty spaces that she’d once claimed as her own, but they’re there, glaring and evident - the barren fridge, the sparse kitchen cabinets. She hadn’t realized how present she’d been in those spaces through the cookies and Ziploc bags of dried fruit she’d stashed away for midnight studying fuel, in the juices and seltzers she’s stocked her corner of the fridge with and it fills her with a sense of excitement that someday soon, she’ll get to put herself back into the emptiness.

“Sorry,” Jughead says sheepishly as she pulls open another empty cabinet. “Clearly I haven’t gone shopping recently.”

“It’s okay,” Betty says shrugging. She hadn’t meant for this to turn into a takedown of his bachelor lifestyle and she does her best to brush past it now.

“Actually,” he says, reaching up past her. “I think Veronica had some– here.”

There’s a single packet of hot chocolate in the box, the instant kind because Veronica doing anything more than boiling water will end in a kitchen disaster unless she’s there to supervise. It won’t be anything near the kind she’s famous for, at least within the circle of their friends, but it’s good enough.

“Remind me to replace this for her,” Betty says, tapping on the box.

“Why the sudden hot chocolate craving?” he asks, leaning up against the kitchen island.

“I thought we could watch the sunset,” she says. “And it’s cold out.”

Betty watches as he slowly works through her words, as he slowly discovers her driving force for suddenly wanting to watch the sunset at this moment in time. It’s not that she doesn’t want to watch it or that she couldn’t use a breath of fresh air because she does and she could. But she’d also been perfectly content to stay in bed, unmoving and within the cradle of his arms all night long, too.

But he’d been restless and what a waste of a simple solution, of a moment where she could do for him something without his asking her to.

His returning smile to her is steady and bright.

At the window, propped up open with a volume of Shakespeare’s complete works – a sacrilege, really, but at the end of the day, it’s also the biggest book in the apartment – she hands him the mug before stepping through herself.

“Thanks,” she says, humming contentedly to herself when he doesn’t remove his arm from her shoulders after draping a blanket across them.

For the past twenty-four hours, she’s been bridging and waffling between feeling completely at ease and ready to jump out of her skin from the excitement, from the sheer nervousness and
incredulity of being here with him again. But right now, with her shoulder brushing against his and huddled under the same blanket Archie had carted all the way from his Riverdale couch to his New York one, she’s simply calm. She breathes in deeply, savoring the crispness of the winter air mixed with the sweet, cloying scent of synthetic chocolate, and she’s at peace.

“Tired?” he asks her.

She shakes her head and brings the mug to her mouth with both hands. “Happy.”

He responds, but wordlessly with a simple squeeze at her shoulders. *I’m glad you are,* she thinks he’s saying. *I am, too.*

“How is it?” he asks, taking the mug from her.

“I mean, it’s chocolate water. It’s not great.”

But this moment here with him now is, and that’s all that matters to her.

She watches as he sips and pulls a face before passing it back to her. “I can’t believe Veronica of all people would drink that.”

She has no argument for that because she can’t believe it either – Veronica is a chocolate snob through and through. It’s a funny thing, she thinks then, to learn something new about someone she thought she knew everything about. Veronica buys imported chocolates from Paris but has a weakness for Swiss Miss instant hot cocoa. Archie loves scary movies but *It* had been an absolute no-go for him because, apparently, clowns give him the creeps. Jughead, or at least the Jughead she’d known a year ago had never been ticklish before, but he is now – she’d discovered that when she’d poked him in the side earlier and he’d so unexpectedly burst out laughing.

It’s a privilege, she realizes, to have so many people in her life that she loves, people that even after all this time she can still discover new things about. That she will continue to discover new things about as they change and grow.

“Sorry it’s not much of a sunset,” he says, squinting at the slice of fading sun between the rows of buildings.

Betty shrugs against him. “It’s not like you can control the sun, Jug,” she says. “Besides, I kind of like it. It’s a Manhattan sunset.”

“A Manhattan sunset?”

“Yeah,” she says. “I know it’s not the same kind of sunset that we’d see at Sweetwater River, but it’s no less beautiful. There-” She traces the line of a dark shadow floating over the façade of the building on the block over. “See how that shadow curves? It’s like a perfect semi-circle. And at that window over there – look at how the light reflects off the one across from it. You can’t get this kind of sunset back in Riverdale. It’s different. But it’s still beautiful.”

She turns to him to see if he’s following her at all. But he’s looking at her instead, head tilted to the side and with the gentlest of smiles setting across his face.

“What?” she asks.

“You see beauty in the things I don’t,” he says softly. “You see beauty in a way I don’t and when you do that, you make the world an infinitely more beautiful place for me. I hope that never changes.”
He kisses her then, his hand cupping around her neck, thumb brushing against edge of her jawline, and tasting of chocolate and something else unidentifiable; something else that she simply labels as the taste of him in love with her.

Nothing has ever tasted quite as good as that.

They sit there, quiet and with her inching closer to him as the air chills, as she chills along with it. *How does one make a moment last forever*, she wonders, *how does one bottle and store a memory forever with surety that it won’t disintegrate with time?* She’d like to know because this moment, cold and balancing four stories up on a fire escape hanging over the city is a moment she wouldn’t mind lingering in forever. It’s one she wants to revisit again and again for the rest of her days.

In the empty mug she’s set down on the step in front of them, she watches the first snowflake fall from the sky and dissolve into nothing when it lands on the handle.

Then, and so suddenly too, it’s snowing all around them.

“Want to go for a walk?” she asks, turning to him.

“Right now? It’s snowing,” he says.

“I know.” Betty smiles as she climbs back through the window. “That’s why we should go.”

This time, she’s the one leading him back to Washington Square Park.

“I should’ve known,” Jughead muses as the marble arch comes into their view, drawing closer as they step in time with each other. “You wanted to look at the Christmas tree, didn’t you?”

She likes that even after all this time it feels like he knows her as well as he always has.

“Mm hmm,” Betty hums. “I didn’t get much of a chance to yesterday.”

And, she thinks to herself, this is something she wants to share with him. This is a memory she wants them to create together.

With his hand in hers, she guides them back to their bench, the same one that she still has no idea how long he’d waited for her. But when they get there, she frowns and rises onto the tips of her toes.

“Can’t see?” he asks.

Betty sighs. “No, not that well.”

“Well, just- here,” he says, brushing off the layer of snow from the bench and stepping up onto it. “Hop up.”

“Jug, we can’t stand on a bench. It’s public property.”

He looks so boyish when he smirks back at her, so much like the youthful version of him that had handed her a bike helmet, that had climbed up the garden ladder to her window her father had forgotten to put away. “There’s no one around,” he says.
She double-checks, ponytail whipping from side to side as she scans the perimeter of the park. He has a better vantage point than she does though, and he’s right. In one of the most densely populated cities in the world, in a city where even when she’s completely alone she’s still feels a prickling sense of overcrowd, tonight, there’s no one there but them.

It’s just him and her.

She takes the hand he has held out to her and steps up onto the bench next to him – if there’s ever a time that she should take advantage of the moment and break and bend the rules just a little, it’s this one.

“How’s the view now?” he asks.

She turns to him before she answers. “Perfect.”

They’re silent as they look to the arch in the distance, the Christmas tree standing tall in the center, its flickering lights brightly wading through the darkness. *It’s beautiful,* she thinks, *it’s all so wonderfully calm and quiet.* Everything is finally still; serene. Time moves so slowly like this, when the world decides to take a moment to fall from a run to a walk, and life becomes so much more beautiful when it does. It becomes more meaningful, it becomes richer with thought and feeling.

Out of the corner of her eye, she smiles when she catches him looking at her. She may not get to spend Christmas with him, but how very lucky she is that she gets to share this moment with him now, share with him this memory that they’ll both get to keep together from here on out.

“Cold?” he asks her. She always is – she’s one of those perpetually cold people, and right now, she’s absolutely freezing.

But she doesn’t want to go back yet. She doesn’t want tomorrow to come just yet. She doesn’t want this moment to ever end.

“No,” Betty says pointedly, but it’s then that her entire upper body decides to shake and her voice right alongside with it. “Never been warmer.”

“Mmm,” he hums. “Your nose is running.”

“Okay, I’m cold,” she admits. “But that’s not an invitation to – no Jug, seriously, stop. I’m not taking your jacket, it’s snowing out.”

“And you’re shivering.”

“It doesn’t matter, I’m not taking it,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest as she stares at the jacket in his hand. Really, it’s a good lesson for her – she should never leave home without a coat that’s warmer than she thinks is necessary. Somewhere, her mother is laughing and basking in the glory of her biggest, most well-earned I-told-you-so.

“Still as stubborn as ever, huh?” Jughead says. “Close your eyes.”

“I’m going to give it back to you if you-”

“Just trust me.”

She studies him the best she can through the snow falling across her vision, through the dull lighting from the street lamps. He looks so sure of himself right now, confident and just a little
cocky, too, like he has something up his sleeve.

He looks so happy.

“Okay,” Betty says, closing her eyes.

She trusts him.

In the darkness, she hears the whistle of the wind dancing and pattering across the snow-brushed ground, the soft rustle of his jacket as he swings it back over his shoulders.

Then, after a few muted and unfamiliar sounds she’s unable to place, she’s warmer. Just like that.

It happens so suddenly that it nearly breaks her balance – she’d been expecting his hands on her shoulders, defiant of her wishes, and when she feels them brushing against her ears instead, tugging down something soft over her head, it nearly sends her tumbling off the bench. But he’s there and he pulls her towards him before she has a chance to fall too far back.

When she opens her eyes, he’s smiling widely at her.

In all the years she’s known him, in all the years she’s been with him, she’s worn his beanie a sum total of once, maybe twice, and only ever behind closed doors as a joke, as an endeavor out of curiosity.

She’s so rarely seen him out in public without it and there’s a tangible weight, a warmth that radiates straight from her heart and outward through her bloodstream that comes from looking at him now without it, his hair slightly mussed, blowing gently and so freely in the wind.

“It’s a little big,” he assesses, inexpertly loosening her ponytail to fit under the knitted fabric. “But it’ll keep you warm. Did you know that you lose something like seventy percent of your body heat through your head?”

“I thought that was just a myth,” she says softly.

“And now?”

“Maybe they were on to something after all.” Maybe, because she doesn’t know if the warmth she feels now is from the hat over her head or from the act of thoughtfulness, of pure love in and of itself. “Jug,” she says, her cold hand on his cheek turning him to face her – she knows what this hat means to him. “Thank you for keeping me warm.”

He shrugs, but there’s a quirk of an eyebrow and the beginnings of a shy but proud grin that he doesn’t hide well. “If you won’t take the jacket, then that’s all I can offer. It’s not a big deal.”

But it is, she thinks. A hat at the end of the day is just a hat, but this hat to this man also means so much more than that. It’s important to him, it’s a part of him, and it’s something that like her ponytail does for her, always brings him comfort.

A blanket over her shoulders, a glass of orange juice without pulp alongside her bagel may just be afterthoughts, little moments that come and go in seconds, but they’re also the most beautiful, damning indications of him thinking about her, thinking about the things that she likes and loves. It’s him doing for her the things that make her feel safe and happy without her ever asking, without her even expecting him to.

This, she knows, all of this, every small but completely thoughtful and wonderful thing he does for
her is simply love. It’s love in its most beautiful and its purest form, it’s love that builds her up and makes her feel strong, invincible. It’s love in exactly the way she needs it and wants it, and that to her will never be something she takes for granted.

“It may not be a big deal to you,” she tells him, leaning her head onto his shoulder. “But it is to me.”

She takes his hand in hers.

It’s her turn to keep him warm.

In the morning, she opts to spend an extra half-hour in bed with him instead of trekking home on the subway.

It’d seemed like a lot of time when she’d turned off her alarm and mentally brushed aside her MetroCard lying in wait for her. But after a round of morning sex, always a little slower and a little more languid as they slowly come to wakefulness together, after lounging in the afterglow for not nearly as long as she’d have liked, she’s scrambling for her sensible layers as her phone blares at her that her Uber driver has arrived.

Jughead throws on a mishmash of clothes he has scattered over the floor and walks her down to her cab. Even though she insists that he doesn’t have to, he’s always been a gentleman and he insists that he does; not-so-secretly, she’s grateful for the few extra minutes of him it affords her.

“Be safe,” he tells her at the car, hand cupping her cheek as he pulls her to him for a kiss. It’s quick, it’s one that stays nicely within the confines of appropriate for public despite the fact they’re the only ones up and about on his street. “Even though I know you always are.”

“I don’t want to go,” Betty tells him quietly as he pulls the door open for her. It feels so childish, her getting emotional and sappy over a single week apart. But she’s just gotten him back and she hasn’t had enough time to re-learn him yet, to re-love him.

She’s not sure that a lifetime would be enough, but she knows that twenty-four hours definitely isn’t.

“I don’t want you to either,” he says. “But it’ll be okay. We’ll be okay.”

In her heart, she knows that they’ll be just fine. But it’s a gloriously reassuring thing to hear from him just the same, to hear that he thinks and knows so, too.

“You’re sure you don’t want to come?” she tries one more time, throwing on her most winning smile. “You could stay in Polly’s room, they’re at Brian’s this year. Or with Archie – I’m sure Mr. Andrews wouldn’t mind the return of the second son.”

“There won’t be a January issue of the Empire if I don’t send it to the printers,” he reminds her. Then quietly, a promise just between them – “Next year,” he says, thumb brushing over her cheekbone. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Okay,” she concedes. “I’m holding you to that.”
“I’m counting on you to,” he says. “Oh, and here. This is yours.”

She smiles as he pulls the two of hearts from his pocket and hands it back to her. One day, she thinks, when the time is right and when they’re ready, she’ll frame it and put it somewhere they can both see it every day. The card might’ve been just hers once, but he’s held onto it and cherished it now, too. And love, their love, isn’t something that belongs to just to him or her. It’s something that they both share in and work at together – it belongs to them both.

But until then, she’ll keep the card safe.

She kisses him once more before getting into the cab. He hesitates just as much as she does, closing the door for her with a deliberate, lingering slowness, but she barely has time to look back up at him in thanks before the cab lurches forward.

Betty twists against the worn seats and looks back at the road behind her, watching as he fades out of her view. But it’s okay – he’ll be there when she gets back. They’ve weathered through storms so much more turbulent than this – a week apart is nothing compared to what they’re capable of surviving.

When he’s no longer even a dot in the distance, she falls back against the seat with a satisfied sigh, looking to the road ahead bordered on either side by shoveled snow. She knows they won’t fall into a rhythm that works for them right away. There’s a whole lot about them that’s different one year out, so much that’s different about both of their lives.

There’s their routines for one. She runs in the mornings now and he hits the snooze button at least four times on a good day. A year ago, she’d been happy lying in bed and lounging away an extra half-hour with him, but she doesn’t think she’ll be doing that anymore. Maybe some days, some very special days, but definitely not all the time. She’d started running partly as a way to distract herself from sitting home and thinking about him, but she likes that she has this thing she just does for herself now. She’s not going to give it up.

They’ll probably clash a time or two for who gets to use the shower first. That’d never been an issue before thanks to their staggered college schedules and the fact that he’d purposely never scheduled a class before noon if he could help it, but now they’re both operating on the same be-in-by-nine schedule.

Realistically, they may end up spending fewer nights together. At the end of the day, her office is just far closer and more convenient for her to get to from her apartment than his, and if she’s too tired to travel, or if he is, or if she doesn’t have a spare change of clothes, separate beds will just have to do. This isn’t college anymore and repeating outfits on consecutive days will be noticed. It’ll be tacky and talked about. They’re going to have to plan more now and that’s going to take some getting used to.

But she has no doubt that in time, they will.

As the cab rounds the corner towards the direction of her apartment, she thinks there’s a part of her that’s unsurprised, a part of her that thinks deep down she’s always known, or at the very least hoped, that the road to herself would also be the road that would one day lead her right back to him. She reaches for her wallet and tucks the two of hearts in front of the two of spades she’d found months ago, a tangible reminder that even though she’s found her love again, she’s found herself, too. They aren’t mutually exclusive concepts, she realizes now – they’re complementary, they work in tandem because some of the best versions of her are the ones that shine through when she’s with him. It isn’t an easy thing, balancing herself and her love for him, his love for her – it’s a learning process. And they’ll learn it. It’s a growing process. But they’ll grow with it.
There’s a lot they’ll have to figure out.

But that’s okay – she knows that they will. Together.

They both want this enough. They’re both willing to fight for it.

And, they have all the time in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from "Feels Like Home" by Chantal Kreviazuk.
Fall back in love eventually.

January.

They spend the entire first month back together having sex.

She hadn’t realized just how much she’s missed sex, missed the feeling of moving in time with him and the way he whispers her name when they do. She had no idea how much she missed the feeling of simply connecting with him like that. But she has, and for the first month back together, she can't keep her hands off him.

She wakes him up early in the morning and he wakes her up in the middle of the night, full of want and full of desire, and for this month at least they put Archie and Veronica to shame.

But it isn’t all sunshine and roses. Finding out what works for them as the people they are in the here and now, settling into new edges and grooves is challenging, just as she’d expected it to be.

She’s late for work on an especially cold Thursday morning because she hadn’t expected to have to wait her turn for the shower when she’d returned from her run, cheeks pink and sweat dotting her hairline.

She falls asleep on her couch one night and wakes up to him at her door only after the rom-com du jour ends two hours later and television falls quiet.

“I’m so sorry,” she says, words tumbling out of her mouth even before she has the door open. “I had the TV on and I didn’t hear and I’m just so, so sorry.”

She fully expects to be greeted with huffiness and a sullen, moping mood for having waited outside her door for hours and without dinner no less, but he simply pushes himself off the ground and kisses her through a smile. “Don’t worry about it,” he assures her. “You gave me time to write.”

There have their share problems and bumps in the road.

But they’re problems that they solve easily enough.

She gives him his key back to her apartment and he does the same for her.

And instead of waiting around and confronting the inevitability of lateness yet again, she makes the informed decision one morning to join him in the shower after her run. It’s nothing she hasn’t seen thousands of times before, she tells him plainly when he asks her what she’s doing, shampoo running down the side of his face, and joint-showers help with the water bill, anyhow.

It’s a better solution for them both, but not for Archie and his vision that they apparently ruin when they step out of the bathroom together.

Archie’s words, not theirs.
And there are the wonderful things, too, so many wonderful things about them falling into this new version of them.

Her little single-serve Keurig, the one she’d shoved behind her stand mixer out of sight and out of mind, makes its way back to his apartment after a thorough dusting. Betty thinks that Archie might be the most thrilled of all about the return of her coffee maker to his morning routine.

The framed photo of the four of them on her twenty-first birthday, the one he’d turned face-down and buried under his socks shows back up on the windowsill one evening next to the worn volume of Shakespeare.

And, after almost knocking over the flat-screen TV and eliciting the shrillest, most ear-piercing shriek from Veronica, his PlayStation settles back into the empty slot on the console where it’d lived before. Coming home to the sounds of Archie and Jughead slinging barbs of the ‘I told you not to go that way,’ and ‘duck when he shoots at you, dumbass’ variety are some of the most wonderful sounds of all.

It’s a little strange sometimes to have him back in her life again just like that but at the end of the day, she wouldn’t have it any other way.

Towards the end of the month, she finds herself forced into working late on a rewrite that gets dumped on her desk as she’s quite literally one foot out the door. After a round of feeling immensely sorry for herself, she calls him, frustrated and apologetic, because it’s Thursday night and they’d planned on pizza and a movie.

And she doesn’t know about him, but she’d planned on sex, too.

“Hey,” he tells her as she pouts to herself. “It’s not a big deal. We’ll do it tomorrow. You just do what you have to do, Betts. Want me to wait up?”

Betty sighs, staring at the pages in front of her littered in red. “No, that’s okay,” she says. “This is going to take hours and I have an early meeting tomorrow. I should probably just go back to my apartment.” When she says it, she realizes then how much she doesn’t want to. “First night apart since Christmas,” she muses out loud.

“Honestly, I’m surprised we made it this long. Call me if you need anything?”

She promises she will.

It’s okay, Betty tells herself when she finally makes it home and flips on the light to her empty bedroom. Spending time apart is a good thing for them – absence and the heart and all that. A night alone won’t kill them.

And at the very least, it gives her the opportunity to clean her room.

There isn’t much in the name of wayward mess – some unfolded clothes she’d tossed over her dresser and a stack of books on her nightstand in need of re-shelving; she is by both nature and nurture a neat person.

It’s only after she flops back onto her bed that she catches a fanned-out stack of papers on her desk. Betty considers just leaving them there like that because she’s forgotten how truly comfortable her bed is, and she's feeling every minute of her day in her back and shoulders, but she also knows herself.

The mess is going to bother her until she fixes it.
It’s the list, she realizes when she rolls off her bed and scans over the typed words, it’s her list. The one she’d made in the middle of a sleepless night nearly a year ago, the one with all the things she’d wanted to do and accomplish, the one that had guided her for better or worse through the past year of her life.

Laughing gently to herself, she reaches for a pen and starts checking the boxes off one by one.

She’s not done yet, she realizes as she methodically works her way down the pages, but in a way she prefers that. The unchecked boxes mean that she still has something to do - many things in fact. And, she has so many more things she wants to add now, too.

That in and of itself is monumentally exciting.

When she flips over to the last page, she lingers over her final entry - the one that she’d tabbed down to hang on the very last line. Even back then, she’d known that she wanted to do this. She just hadn’t known how it fit in with everything else.

Tell Jughead I still love him, she’d written.

Next to her neatly typed words, in his scrawling and boyish handwriting, she smiles at his reply.

I still love you, too.

February.

He takes a page out of Archie and Veronica’s book this year and reserves a table at a restaurant with four dollar-signs next to its name on Yelp. Betty protests the idea when he runs it by her but he’d fully expected her to.

“I like what we used to do,” she tells him. “Just takeout and a movie. Just you and me. I don’t need all that other stuff.”

“I know,” he responds gently. “I know you don’t. But I just-”

Her head is pillowed in his lap and she’s looking at him with wide, trusting eyes as he struggles to find the right words.

“It’s just something different,” he says eventually, and it seems fitting because they’re now a different version of them. Different can be a good thing, a great thing, even. “And you never know - it could be fun.”

I know you’re more than happy with a ten-dollar pizza but maybe this could be a new way for me to show you how much I love you.

When she twists her lip in consideration, a strand of her hair catches in the chapstick she’d brushed across them. “You’re sure this place has no tacky Valentine’s Day stuff?” she asks - her circuitous agreement. “No heart balloons and violins?”

“None, and before you ask, I already called and checked.” That’s a deal breaker for him, too.

It starts off well on Valentine’s night. She wears a dress that he’ll remember for years to come and
when he tells her that she always takes his breath away but especially so tonight, she blushes violently.

“It’s the dress,” she tries to argue.

“It isn’t,” he responds earnestly. “It’s you.”

At the restaurant, they’re seated at a little table in a row of other dining couples and even though it’s dimly lit for whatever atmospheric reason they think they’re creating and failing at, he feels a little like he’s on display. He feels a little like he’s playing dress-up.

But even so, he's glad he's playing it with her.

They’d both somehow come to the conclusion that the best way to approach this dinner had been to not eat all day, in hindsight a completely idiotic conclusion, and before the bread basket is even set down in front of them they’re both hungrily grabbing at its contents and eliciting the complete judgment of their waiter.

Her fingertips bump against his when he reaches for a dinner roll.

She makes the first faux pas of the night when she asks nicely for butter.

“We don’t serve butter here,” they’re told. “It detracts from the flavor of the bread.”

“Seriously?” Betty asks, so incredulously that she draws the attention from the tables to both their right and left.

He makes the second when he asks if he can sub in fries for whatever the hell ‘boiled lemon potatoes’ are.

No, he’s told flatly. He most certainly cannot.

The third slip up is on both of them.

“Don’t be obvious,” Betty says, leaning forward across the table voice low enough to invite him to do the same. “But second table from the end on your side – if Reggie and Moose had a kid and that kid needed hair plugs at forty, don’t you think he’d look just like that?”

This time, he’s the one that draws the disdainful eyes from the couple on either side of them when he poorly masks his loud laugh behind a cough because she’s never been more on the money. She joins in, too and in the vortex of air their laughs create, the little tealight candle between them extinguishes and fizzes out.

“We’re so sorry,” Betty says as seriously as she can when their waiter brings by a matchbook to relight it. “It won’t happen again.”

But it does, of course, when he accidentally flicks condensation from his glass over the flame.

The waiter doesn’t come by with matches this time. Once, apparently, is all they get.

The food is fine. It’s not terrible and given that he’d half-expected it to be, that’s a win in his book. But the food isn’t fantastic either. Everything tastes like it’d been doused heavily in butter, the butter that they couldn’t so much as spare for the table, and the only word he can think of to describe it all is rich.

In both price and taste.
But the price at least doesn’t bother him that much. The last meal he’d actually taken her out for
that wasn't pizza or a hot dog from a street cart clocks back to roughly a year and a half ago, and he
has a feeling that it’ll be just as long before he’ll get to do this again for her.

“Jug, no,” she says, hand over his when he reaches for the check. “We should split this.”

He’d been prepared for this, too. He knows her well.

“Let me,” he asks her quietly. “We can split it if you really want to, Betty. But I wanted to do this
for you.”

She looks torn but she relents; he figures that she knows how much this means to him.

In the cab he insists on taking because there’s slush and snow still covering the ground and he’ll be
damned if this night ends in her frostbitten toes, she asks him if the restaurant was everything he’d
hoped it’d be and more.

Jughead considers her question carefully. The only thing he’d wanted the restaurant and this entire
night to be was something that made her feel loved and special. He’d wanted tonight to be
something that made her happy.

He thinks right now with her looking at him like that – eyes slightly hooded and lips tugging up at
the corners – she is.

“I had a good time with you, Betty,” he tells her. “I always do. But honestly? I’m still hungry.”

“Really?” she asks, voice rising in volume and excitement.

“Yeah, why?”

“I am, too.”

She redirects them to some address she looks up sneakily on her phone, body twisting to
completely face him so he can’t peek over at her screen. But he knows her, he knows them, and
he’s almost certain that he knows where they’re headed.

But that in no way diminishes the feeling that comes from being right when they pull up at La
Margarita, the very best pizza in town according to her.

And according to him, too.

“Shall we?” she asks, her nose as pink from the winter chill as she tips her head towards the door.

He has it held open for her before she finishes her question. “After you.”

She pays this time.

They eat the whole pizza, watch half a movie, and because it’s Valentine’s Day, he lets her have
the last slice.

And Archie has the gall to say he isn’t romantic.

“So,” he whispers to her, relishing the feeling of her head heavy on his chest later that night. “Just
takeout next year?”

Her laugh vibrates so warmly against him. “I thought you’d never ask.”
He’s glad they tried something different this year. He's glad ventured into the great unknown. They aren’t the same people they were a whole two years ago, the last time they’d celebrated this particular red-and-pink-day together, and he knows as well as anyone else that just as people change, tastes do, too.

But even so, there may just be things that will always and forever remain the same, and that, he thinks, can be a great thing, too.

March.

Veronica upholds her end of the promise, and at seven-thirty on a cold spring morning decked head to toe in brand new athleisure, they both stand ready at the start line with thirteen-point-one long, long miles ahead of them.

Betty runs the entire thirteen-point-one miles, jogging in place next to Veronica when she stops to walk and groan at every other, and even though she knows she could have done so much better than four hours, three minutes, and seventeen seconds, it doesn’t matter. Because at the end of the day, what does matter is Veronica by her side, raven hair still perfectly coiffed as they both step across the finish line together, and the smiling faces of Archie, cold cheeks as red as his hair, and Jughead waiting for her with every warm layer she’d asked him to hold onto.

“I’m proud of you,” Jughead tells her as Veronica dramatically collapses into Archie’s open arms next to them. “I mean, I think you’re both crazy to actually do this for fun, but I’m still proud of you.”

They go for burgers because they all deserve it – her and Veronica for running half a marathon and living to tell the tale, Archie and Jughead for waiting patiently in the cold for them to do all their running. Veronica hops on Archie’s back before they’ve even left the park, and even though she thinks her friends look nothing short of ridiculous walking through the Upper East Side on piggyback, she relents halfway there and reluctantly eats her own words when she climbs onto her own boyfriend’s back.

"It isn’t the mileage, she argues with herself, so much as it is the fact she’d been moving non-stop for the past four-plus hours. She can do the thirteen-point-one miles in her sleep now, but she hadn’t factored in that she'd be running at Veronica’s pace, not her own.

“You know,” he says quietly to her and out of earshot of Veronica and Archie, who angel that he is, has the girl on his back’s shoes around his neck, too. Blisters, she cringes to herself, although she had very explicitly warned Veronica not to wear new shoes on today of all days. “I think you can’t walk right now simply because the human body shouldn’t be forced to run for that many hours straight.”

“You mean this human body can’t run for that many hours straight,” she teases, poking him gently in the side.

“Very funny.”

It’s overly crowded in Shake Shack, but that’s just business as usual. What isn’t is the overabundance of half-marathoners, covered and draped in silver thermal blankets like she is, trays
piled high with mounds of french fries.

“Ronnie, you can see better than I can up there,” Archie says over his shoulder. “Anything?”

“I don’t see- oh my god, there,” Veronica barks out. “Archie, go. Go!”

They’re just barely beat to the booth by a group of girls who are so clearly and plainly hungover, their rolled sweatpants and unkempt top knots a dead giveaway. Betty is usually sympathetic to the plight of the hungover because she’s never handled her own particularly well, but not today.

“We need this table more than you do,” she tells the sweatpants brigade firmly, and with a calculated quirk of her eyebrow the table is theirs.

It’s not Pop’s, not by a long shot. It’s another booth in another city. They’re older and wiser. But it’s the four of them laughing over burgers and milkshakes like they’ve always done, and that at the end of the day is all that matters.

_____________________________

April.

He’s late leaving work one night but he hopes that the news he’s bringing home to her makes up for it.

_I have something to tell you_, he types out to her on the way to her apartment.

He’s instantly bombarded with a slew of questions from her in individual texts because she isn’t a consolidator like he is, and they’re all of the what is it, good news or bad news, should I be happy or should I be sad variety.

He considers cluing her in, especially when he racks up another ten messages from her on the subway alone but he decides against it. He wants to surprise her, he decides, he wants to see her face light up because he knows without a doubt, it will.

He wants her right there by his side when he tells her.

She’s standing in the doorway and calling out questions to him before he’s even stepped off the elevator.

“What’s the thing?” Betty asks, hands fluttering at her sides. “What’s the thing you have to tell me?”

He laughs then and thinks how glad he is that he’d waited to tell her in person. “Hi,” he says easily, breezing past her into her apartment. “Eager much?”

“Very,” she says. “So what’s the thing?”

“Is Veronica home?” he asks. He doesn’t mind if she is since technically this is her apartment, too, but he just wants this moment to between him and her before the rest of the world finds out.

“They’re at your place,” she tells him. “So-”

“So,” he continues, his hand on her lower back as he guides her towards the couch and seats her
down across from him. He’s made her wait long enough. “I was late because I was talking to Bill.”

“And?”

“And we talked about my work so far,” he says. “He loved that piece you helped edit for the March issue.”

“Jug, that’s great,” she says, smiling widely. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks,” he says. “But that wasn’t the thing I wanted to tell you.”

“Oh?”

She’s leaning so far forward that he thinks were she to add an extra degree, she’d tip over into his lap entirely. Her eyes are wide, impossibly so, and there’s unmuted excitement in every part of her, from the way she clasps her hands tightly in her lap to the way she bites down on her bottom lip.

God, he loves her.

“Apparently, I’ve been doing a great job with handling submissions lately, so Bill wanted to know how I felt about being bumped up to Assistant Editor.”

He doesn’t think that he’ll ever forget the sound of her squeal – it’s shrillness, the way it rings loudly in his ears, so loudly that he has trouble hearing anything else but it for more than a few moments. But it’s the sound of her excitement. It’s the sound of her pride and happiness for him and in him, and shrill as it is that’s simply his music.

“Oh my god!” she exclaims as she all but tackles him straight into the armrest of the couch. “Oh my god! I’m so happy for you!”

His thanks is muffled by a sloppy kiss. She misses half his mouth, but he can’t bring himself to care.

“I’m so happy for you, Jug,” she tells him, her smile so wide and so genuine across her face. “I’m so happy for you. And I’m so proud of you. I never doubted you could do this.”

That’s one of the things he loves about her most – her unfailing, never ending belief in him. To have someone see the good in him like that always, to know without a shred of doubt that he’s capable of doing the things he doubts he can sometimes, to simply have her support him – it makes him feel like he can do anything in the world.

“No,” he says to her. “You never did.”

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May.

The late nights become more and more frequent.

Those, she doesn’t mind. She understands that comes with their age and the new territory he’s currently traversing. They’re young and still working their way up the ladder – their schedules aren’t quite their own yet. It’ll take him time to get used to juggling everything he has on his plate now, it’ll take him time to learn what exactly an Assistant Editor does and exactly he makes the job
his own.

She knows that.

But she’s a worrier by nature and she worries about him. She worries that he’s working too hard and running himself into the ground, and she worries about him when he she’s greeted by radio silence when he’d said he’d be home close to two hours ago.

It’s close to midnight when he walks through his door, head down and focused on his phone in front of him.

“Hey,” she says, flipping down her computer screen and sliding up off the bed to greet him. “Where were you, are you okay?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?” he asks, stumbling back slightly from her hard barrel into him. “I was working late.”

“I didn’t hear from you,” she says. “I thought we were starting the Game of Thrones rewatch tonight.”

She doesn’t care about the show. She couldn’t give a crap about the show.

But she does care about him.

“Shit, sorry,” he mumbles back. “I forgot.”

“You forgot?”

“Betty, I’m exhausted,” he says, gazed focused on undoing the at the buttons on his shirt. “Please don’t do this now.”

That’s what sets her off – his casual dismissal of the past two hours she’d spent trying to push out images out of her head of him lying in a ditch somewhere beaten and broken. She has a life too, doesn’t she? She’s exhausted too, she’s had a long, hard day at work too, and she’s been the one sitting here and worrying about him.

She doesn’t deserve that.

“You could’ve called,” she bites out, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I didn’t have time to,” he tells her shortly. “We were on a deadline.”

“So you were on the subway for half an hour and had time to listen to music the entire way home, but you didn’t have twenty seconds to let me know where you were?”

“Jesus, Betty,” he says rounding on her, voice rising. “Could you not come at me the second I walk through the door?”

“How am I coming at you, Jughead? I asked you a simple question.”

“And I gave you a simple answer!”

“Why are you yelling at me?” she asks. Hypocrite, she thinks – she’s yelling right back at him, too. “I was the one that waited here for you. I was the one here worried about you while you zoned out to music for an hour on the way home!”
“I forgot,” he says again, letting his bag fall to the ground. “Can you just let it go? I was tired.”

“Well, you know what?” she says, reaching for her own bag and violently shoving her computer inside. She has other things lying around his room, a book over there and her clothes for work tomorrow neatly hanging in his closet, but she can get those another time. “If you’re so tired, then you’d better have this whole goddamn bed to yourself tonight. Enjoy your rest.”

“Betty, come on,” she hears him calling to her behind the bedroom door she slams shut. “Don’t do this.”

She makes it all the way to the front door before pausing.

She makes it all the way to the door before realizing that this isn’t what she wants to do. It’s still cold out – spring has been taking its sweet time to show up this year – and she hadn’t brought a jacket. She doesn’t love taking the subway at this hour and she’d really meant what she said to him – she’s tired, too.

But more than that, she doesn’t want to leave things with him like this. She doesn’t want to go to bed angry with him.

She’s frustrated. She's a little bit furious. But walking out the door isn’t the answer right now. She’ll calm down and he will too, and when that time comes, she doesn’t want to be halfway across town regretting the fact she’d childishly slammed the door in his face and walked out of his apartment just to make a point.

She drops her bag by the door and lets the front door fall shut. The fire escape, she figures, is as good a place to cool off as any.

She doesn't know how much time passes, but he emerges from his room eventually. She watches through as he makes his way to the kitchen and even smiles, just a little and just to himself, when his foot catches on the corner of her tote.

“Betty?” she hears him call.

She thinks about tapping on the window and letting him know where she’s temporarily set up camp, but she decides against it. The book propping the window up is a dead giveaway if there ever was one, and she’s sure he’ll figure it out.

He does.

“What are you doing out here?” he asks.

“I’m mad at you, Jughead,” she tells him, staring straight ahead at the building in front of his. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to up and leave just because I am.”

He blinks a handful of times, and she thinks it’s because he hadn’t expected that answer out of her.

*That’s a fair assessment,* she admits to herself – he has no reason to thinks she’d still be here. She *had* just slung her tote over her shoulder and slammed the door in his face, and in the past she’d always left after fighting with him. She’d always pack up all her things and stomp out the door in a huffy whirlwind, just like she’d almost done tonight.

“Here,” he says, passing her the throw from the couch before stepping out onto the fire escape. “It’s cold.”
The olive branch, she thinks, and it’s up to her to take it or leave it.

“Thanks,” she says, catching the blanket when he lets it fall from his hand to hers.

When she drapes it over her shoulders, he uncertainly takes his seat on the step next to her.

She doesn’t say a word to him because she doesn’t have anything she wants to say yet that won’t only add fire to the flame. But she doesn’t move or shy away from him either.

“I’m sorry,” he relents eventually. “I should’ve called. I know you worry when I don’t and you don’t deserve that. And I’m sorry I snapped at you, too. I’ve just – I’ve just been stressed,” he says. “But that’s not an excuse. I didn’t mean to take it out on you. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

She breathes in once, twice before turning towards him. He is exhausted, he hadn’t been lying about that. Rarely has she seen the dark marks circling his eyes look so deeply cut and engrained into his skin like they are now. And, she can tell that he’s truly sorry, too. It’s written on his face, something she’s learned how to find and read over the years.

Slowly, she reaches her arm over his shoulders, draping half the blanket over him.

Her peace offering to match his.

“I’m sorry, too,” she says, scooting closer to him on the cold metal step. “I shouldn’t have jumped on you the way I did. I know you’ve been stressed, I know, Jug. I just – I thought something happened to you.”

“Feel completely free to jump on me when I get home,” he says. “Just maybe not quite like that next time.”

She laughs then, softly and gently, but when he joins in she knows that just as quickly as their fight had started, it’s now over. Just like that.

“I’m sorry I made you worry,” he says, voice low and serious again when they’re only left with the muted echo of their laughter. “I promise I’ll call next time. Or text, or send a messenger pigeon. I don’t want you to spend your energy worrying about me - you shouldn't have to. You don't deserve that.”

“Thank you,” she says, looping her arm into his. “But just so you know, I’m always going to worry about you.”

There’s tiredness laced into the kiss he presses against her temple, but as always, there’s all the love in the world there, too.

“You wouldn’t be you if you didn’t.”

She’s never liked fighting with him and she’s completely unsurprised to find out that she still doesn’t.

But it’d been different this time, as horrible and exhausting as fighting with him still is.

Never once did she think that they’d be anything short of just fine come sunrise.
June.

On a night where the whispers of summer first start calling, she walks through his door at seven. He isn’t expecting her for at least another hour and a half and he knows without even seeing her that something is wrong. Maybe even very wrong.

She’s always right on time.

“What’s up, Betty?” he hears Archie’s voice ask, and when he doesn’t hear a bright, chipper response back, it only confirms what he already knows.

He’s still tugging down his t-shirt as he pulls his door open; he’ll leave kicking his work clothes under his bed for later. “What’s wrong?” he asks her. There isn’t any need for any other greeting right now. “Are you okay?”

It happens like it always does. She’s perfectly composed one minute and in the next she’s simply not. The sound breaks the woodenness of her pose first, then her entire body moves and shakes with her sobs, a tree bending and breaking in the wind.


“No,” she chokes out, an ugly, hoarse cry originating from the back of her throat. “No one died. I just – I just got fired.”

She walks straight into him with her hands fisted and furiously swiping at her eyes, and over the top of her ponytail, he watches as Archie’s mouth rounds in shock and as he backs away from the scene cautiously.

This is your territory, man, Jughead thinks Archie is saying. You know what to do here.

Except he doesn’t. Not really.

She’s so strong, and while he’s done his fair share of comforting and consoling her, he’s rarely done it with her tears involved. It unnerves him, her red-rimmed eyes and mouth pulled down in the unh holiest of frowns and he’s at a loss as to how to make something like this better for her.

He doesn’t tell her it’s okay because he knows to her it’s not. “Did they tell you why?” he asks instead, rubbing a hand gently down her back. It’s what he’d want her to do for him if he’d been the one standing in her shoes.

“Downsizing,” she says, voice muffled against his t-shirt. “They said it was nothing about my work or my effort. They said I’ve been great. Great - it’s such a bullshit word, don't you think?”

What he thinks is that her question is probably of the rhetorical nature, so he keeps his mouth shut and lets her continue.

"But how can it not be about my work?" she continues. "If I was really that good, I’d still be there.”

The realization alone is more than enough to set her off again - even more so than before if the tears and snot staining his shirt are anything to go by. He figures that privacy and as much of it as he can give to her is the best thing for her right now, so he ushers her towards his room, arm over her shoulders.
He expects her to make a beeline for the bed but she doesn’t. It’s the floor tonight with her hair fanned out messily around her head, a medieval sort of self-imposed punishment, he thinks.

“Can I do anything?” he asks, laying down next to her on the hardwood. “Just say the word and I will.”

“I’ve been walking around Brooklyn for the past three hours,” she says, voice still heavy with the remnants of her tears.

“Why Brooklyn?”

“I wanted to see what was at the end of the subway line. I figured I have the time now.”

“And?”

“Full of hippies,” she says. “I think you’d like it there.”

He reaches for her hand then, side of his palm scraping against the floor. “I like it right here.”

“I’m so embarrassed,” she whispers, and he knows for her to voice that out loud even if it’s only to him, really means that she is.

“I know you are,” he says. “But it wasn’t anything you did. There wasn’t anything you could’ve done.”

“I have to tell my mom,” she says. “She’ll be so disappointed.

“You don’t know that.”

“I have to tell my dad, too.”

“Betty, this happens to everyone. Don’t beat yourself up over this.”

He knows that he’s said the wrong thing even before the end of his sentence leaves his mouth because it’s a lie – one he hadn’t completely thought through and one she’s probably thought too much about.

“It didn’t happen to everyone,” she says. “It didn’t happen to Archie or to Veronica. Or to everyone else who went home today with a job to go to tomorrow. It didn’t happen to you – you just got promoted.”

He’s quiet then, not because she’s offended him but because he knows that sometimes she just needs to vent. Sometimes, the best thing he can do for her is simply listen.

“I’m sorry,” she tells him eventually. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know you didn’t.”

“What am I going to do?”

He can’t remember the last time he’d heard her voice this filled with absolute dejection and defeat and it breaks his heart to hear it now. He doesn’t think she deserves this. He may be biased, but he also knows how hard she works and how much she cares.

“You’ll feel sad about this for a little while, but you’ll pick yourself up – you always do,” he tells her, and he hopes she knows how much he means that, how much he believes that. "I've yet to see
you fail at anything you put your mind to, and before you say it - this wasn't a failure, Betty. It wasn't. This was just... life."

Then cautiously – “Bill might know of something,” he ventures. “Or at the very least, he might know of some people you could talk to. I could ask if you want.”

“No, Jug,” she says. “This is my mess. I need to figure it out.”

“And you will,” he encourages. “But you don't have to do it alone.”

He listens to the sound of her breathing next to him steadily but shallowly. “Okay,” she says, pushing herself up off the floor and tucking her legs under her. “Okay.”

Bill arranges an information interview for her. He knows she's nervous - it’s been a while since she’s done this. And, it’s the very first time she’s had to sit across from someone with a black mark against her name.

At the end of it all, at the end of all the smiles and pleasantries, they tell her that don’t have anything for her, but they’ll keep her in mind should anything open up.

“I’m sorry, Betty,” he tells her after she reads the email out to him. “But they won’t all turn out like this one.”

“I know,” she says, and this time she sounds like she believes it, too.

She follows the chain of informational interviews and first round screeners for weeks and as frustrated as she gets, as hopeless as it seems at times, she never gives up. She’s never been someone without the will to hustle, and he’s never seen her hustling harder than she is right now.

He hates the disappointed looks on her face when she’s hit with yet a stone wall, when she simply shrugs at him and tells him it’s all okay when he knows it isn't. But she's brave and she's tough, she's a survivor through and through. And he’s never been prouder of her.

By the end of the month, she’s Slate’s newest staff writer.

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July.

After stopping halfway to switch drivers, they make it to Reggie’s annual Fourth of July party.

Two hours late, but she isn’t counting. What’s important is that they make it - she hadn't been sure that they would.

“If you say even one more thing, Jughead,” Archie had said, white-knuckled and with both hands gripping onto the wheel tightly. "I will leave you on the side of this goddamn road."

“Then let me drive!”

"No!"

"Why?"
“Fine!”

“I told you, Arch,” she’d said, leaning forward as far as her seatbelt had allowed. “You should’ve just let him drive in the first place. It always saves time.”

“I’m not that bad,” he’d tried to defend himself.

She loves him, so much.

But she doesn’t love the fact that he backseat drives.

But they make it, with Veronica tipsy and already passed out in the backseat from sipping Grey Goose she’d funneled into a plastic water bottle. They make it with all their friendships still intact.

“Happy freedom day!” Reggie greets them with a beer in either hand, beers that he doesn't offer to any one of them. “Veronica, that crop top could be shorter.”

“Remind me again why we come out here every year?” Veronica asks, hands on her hips.

Reggie shrugs, amber liquid spilling over onto his hands with the movement. “The free booze and the fact that this house looks bomb in your ‘grams?”

She’s up next, she figures, when Reggie and his drinks, plural, turn to her.

“B. Coop!” Reggie says loudly, arms flung out wide. “Off the market again?”

Her response is a simple smile and a nod, but she thinks that's enough to get through to even Reggie.

“I mean, maj bummer for me, but good news for you, Jugaroo,” Reggie continues and she wonders then how he can still get away with say things like that without wearing twin black eyes on a constant basis. “Have fun, you two – drink, drink, and be merry. Betty, feel free to free yourself from that bikini whenever you want. And keep the PDA to a minimum.”

“Always a pleasure, Reggie,” Jughead says.

“Oh, and don’t bang in my parents’ room,” Reggie calls over his shoulder, sliding door to the deck wide open for all to hear. “But the all the others are up for grabs.”

They don’t end up having sex in any of the rooms.

But they don’t keep the public displays of affection to a minimum either.

The party has never been either of their scene, but she figures why not just get into it this year? After a round of beer pong – Archie and Veronica versus her and Jughead – after shotgunning a beer with Archie, and somewhere in the haze of the summer’s heat, in the haze of her drunken revelry, she finds herself pressed up against a wall with her hips grinding into Jughead's somewhat indecently.

Definitely indecently.

“I missed you here last year,” he tells her, a secret brushed against her lips.

“Oh yeah?” she says, egging him on. “How much?”

He doesn’t tell her.
But he does show her, mouth working over hers hungrily and resolutely even in the midst of catcalls and orders to go upstairs and get a room.

Just for that day, she feels a little like she’s in high school again, a little like she’s in college again. It’s a nice feeling, she decides, to feel that wash of a time past fall over her.

And, it’s the most fun she’s ever had at one of Reggie’s parties.

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**August.**

He doesn’t get sick. He refuses to believe he’s as malleable to something as common as the flu.

It starts off as a simple cough, one that comes on most acutely in the mornings. “It’s nothing,” he tells her when she places the back of her hand against his head on the third day he wakes up hacking his lungs out. “I’m fine, I promise.”

There’s a brief period where DayQuil is involved that he thinks he sees the light at the end of the tunnel. But that ends quickly and by day five he’s progressed from ‘just a cough’ to the worst he’s ever felt in his entire life.

He knows it’s bad when she shakes him awake one night – or morning, he can’t tell by this point – voice loud and chanting out his name over and over again.

“What?” he mumbles. It even hurts to talk.

“Jug, you’re burning up,” he hears her tell him. He can just barely make out the shape of her, crossed-legged and crouched over him, hand firmly planted on his forehead. She looks so worried, he thinks, and he hates making her worry.

He knows when she flicks the light on because it pierces him right through eyelids. It’s so bright all around him. And it’s so, so cold.

“Oh my god,” he hears her mutter, her hands on his face as she turns his head towards her. “Jug, don’t fall back asleep, okay?” she instructs. “We’re going to the hospital.”

“No,” he mumbles. “No need. Could you just get me the DayQuil? It's on the desk over-”

“Screw the DayQuil!” she snaps, and through half an open eye, he sees her tugging on a hoodie and throwing her hair up in one of the messiest ponytails he’s seen on her to date. “Your lips are blue. And you’re so hot.”

“Thanks,” he manages to cough out, but he fails to elicit the laugh he’d been hoping for from her.

“Come on,” she says, threading his tired arms through his jacket and weighing them down around her shoulders. "We have to go.”

“I’m fine, Betty, really,” he tries to argue once more. “This feels unnecessary.”

“Jughead, it’s really not.” She used Jughead – that means she’s very serious. “We’re going right now. Do you want me to get sick too?”
He sees right through her tactics; she knows him too well. He knows she isn’t concerned about that at all, he knows that right now as he sways against her halfway to delirious and shaking from hot and cold coursing through him all at once, the only thing she cares two straws about is getting him better again.

But he cares about her never feeling as horrible as this.

“Okay,” he says, shuffling his feet halfway into his shoes and out the door. “Okay, we’re going.”

He tries his best to lean as much weight as he can off her, but by the time he’s stumbled his way down too many flights of stairs, by the time the chill floating within the wisps of the night air hits him straight in the face, he’s flat out of energy.

“Sorry,” he says as he slumps against her heavily.

“It’s okay,” she assures him. I’m strong, he thinks she’s telling him. You can lean on me.

It’s midnight, but there’s still a wait at the hospital.

He spends it with his head tilted on her shoulder. He’d spend it on the floor and curled up in the fetal position if he could, but she stops him from tipping too far forward even as she fills out his forms in her neat, loopy handwriting.

She doesn’t falter once over any of the information and when she writes herself out as his emergency contact without so much as a second thought, he smiles. It’s a pained smile but a smile just the same.

It feels like an endless wait and it’s deathly cold all around him. A hospital shouldn’t be so cold, he thinks. Doesn’t that only exacerbate the sick?

“Aren’t you cold?” he asks her when he’s sure that she must be feeling it, too. She isn’t wearing much, a thin hoodie that he isn’t even sure she’d layered anything underneath and she gets cold so easily.

“No,” she says slowly, hands fussing all around him again. “Are you?”

He thinks he nods.

“Oh,” she says firmly, pushing him back against the plastic seat. “You wait here.”

He couldn’t go anywhere if he tried.

“Listen,” he hears her say, maybe to a nurse, maybe to doctor. “He’s been waiting for over an hour. He’s sick – he’s very sick, and all I care about right now is finding someone who’s going to fix that.”

“Ma’am, if you’d just sit back down someone will be-”

“No,” she interrupts. He forgets sometimes how fierce she can be when pressed. “I’ve been sitting down and that clearly hasn’t gotten us anywhere. I’m done sitting down. I’ll sit down when you find me someone who can actually help him.”

It’s pushy, but that’s just her – she’s always been a little pushy. No daughter of Alice Cooper’s could be otherwise. It’s a bit dramatic, too, but maybe that’s just him rubbing off on her.

But at the end of the day, he knows that these less than rosy sides of her are coming to the
forefront now because she loves him; she’s doing all this because she’s worried about him. And he can’t say that’d he’d do any differently if she’d been the one curled up in a plastic hospital chair.

He knows himself – he’d probably be doing a whole lot worse. There’d be profanities for one, of that he’s absolutely sure.

Betty’s pushiness and dramatics work though, and within minutes he’s carted off in a wheelchair that he’s endlessly thankful that Archie can’t see him in. They’ve both had their fair share of hospital visits over the years – a broken bone there, a horrible stomach virus there – but so far, he’s the only one that has had the pleasure of seeing Archie wheeled away in a hospital gown, bare ass exposed for the world to see.

He hadn’t ever planned on relinquishing that privilege and he’s glad that he’s holding onto it now, at least for one more day.

They run him through a barrage of blood tests and x-rays he’s only partly conscious for, but that’s okay. She asks enough questions for the both of them – she has every detail he doesn’t have.

That is, every detail except where the hell he picked up pneumonia – neither of them can figure that one out.

It’s nearing daybreak by the time he’s finally sent off to a bed. She’s already there waiting for him, head resting in the crook between her knees that she has pulled up right to her chest.

“Hey,” she starts, and even though he can hear the positivity in her voice, there’s leftover worry still present in her wide eyes, too. “How’re you feeling?”

“Better,” he croaks out. “You were right. You always are. I needed to come here tonight.”

“I’m glad you’re feeling better,” she whispers back as she pulls the threadbare blankets up higher over his chest. There isn’t any need for her to respond to the rest – she’s never been an I-told-you-so kind of person.

She’s a natural at taking care of someone, he thinks as she brushes his hair off his forehead.

“You should go home,” he tells her. “Go back to my place if you want, it’s closer. Just get some sleep. You’ve been up all night.”

“About that,” she says. “I talked to the nurses and they’re going to let me stay. Veronica can bring me some clothes, I’ll just go to work from here.”

“Betty, you really shouldn’t.” He doesn’t even want to know how she’d managed to talk her way into that. “Trust me, you don’t want whatever this is.”

“I don’t care,” she responds flatly.

“But I do.”

But he also knows her. He knows just how stubborn she is, and short of him calling security and having them carry her out of the room, he knows she won’t be leaving. She’ll sleep on the floor or the uncomfortable chair if she has to, but she won’t be budging from her post right there by his side unless she’s physically hauled out.
And even then, she’d probably just find a way to sneak back in. The Betty Cooper he knows can pick her way around any lock and smile and sweet-talk her way into almost anything she wants.

Every part of him aches as he shifts himself over on the bed expressly designed for one. “This is for me as much as it is for you,” she tells him as she tucks her head under his chin, and from his vantage point halfway between sitting up and laying down, he watches her tired eyes finally flutter shut.

For weeks after, he listens out for any sign that she’s about to fall victim to the illness that had brought him down, but she doesn’t so much as cough once.

She is after all, much too strong for that.

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September.

Autumn sneaks up on her.

She doesn’t realize the change of the season until a bronze leaf falls right onto her nose while she’s buried in her phone and trying her best to figure out east from west on her maps.

The new job has kept her busy. But she’s still loving every minute of it.

When she reaches the building that she’s been searching for after no fewer than three false turns, her eyes narrow and she rechecks her messages in confusion. But she’s made it to the right place, as little sense as it makes to her.

Even so, she calls him just to make sure.

“Hey,” Jughead says. *He sounds nervous*, she thinks, and she wonders why. “You here?”

“Yeah, but are you sure you sent me the right address? I’m standing in front of a brownstone.”

“No, that’s right,” he says. “Come on up – fourth floor, the doors should be open.”

She follows his directions all the way up the four flights of stairs and to the lone door waiting for her. When she taps on it, knuckle edging the wood open gently, she’s all but assaulted by an older woman in a blazer who comes up so close to her face that they nearly knock noses.

“You must be Ms. Cooper,” the lady greets, hand outstretched and nearly brushing against her stomach.

“Yeah,” she starts slowly, shaking back with her head tilted at him behind the unnamed face in question. “I mean no. I mean yes, but you can call me Betty.”

“Well, Betty,” the lady continues, pulling her by their still-joined hands further into the space. “I’ll leave you to it.”

She’d half-expected some kind of bizarre party thrown in her honor for reasons completely unknown to her, or maybe even a party Archie’s honor because his birthday is coming up.

But it’s just him and her in an empty apartment.
“Leave me to what, Jug?” she asks when the door clicks shut behind them.

“To look around."

And so she does.

In the center of the living room, as she examines around the four walls and the two doors that lead off it, both slightly ajar – one bedroom and one bathroom – she realizes then that she’s in exactly the right place.

“So my lease is up at the end of October,” he says eventually. He doesn’t need to, though. She knows what he’s asking her without him needing to say a word and she already knows what her answer will be.

She thinks he knows, too.

“And Archie’s okay with this?” she asks. “And Veronica?”

“They’re uptown looking at another place right now.”

She takes her time walking around the apartment slowly, flipping on light switches and poking her head into closets and under cabinets.

“You guys really thought this through, huh?”

He shrugs, but she knows they both had – Jughead and Archie, masterminds in real estate crime. Or something like that.

“It’s near Trader Joes,” he tells her, and that alone makes her laugh. “And it’s also closer to work for you if you take the express.”

She doesn’t need convincing, but she listens carefully to him because she knows how much time and effort he’s put into doing the research.

“And you?” she asks.

“Not too bad, two trains instead of three.”

“And you’re okay with that?” she presses. “There isn’t somewhere with, I don’t know, one train for both of us?”

“Betty,” he starts gently, moving towards her and taking both her hands in his. “If you don’t like this, we can look for something else. Or we don’t have to at all if you still want to live with Veronica. It’s whatever you want to do.”

She knows what she wants to do. Really, she’s known for months now.

But it doesn’t make the work he’s put into this any less monumental, it doesn’t escape her that he’s found probably one of the only places in Manhattan within their budget with a washing machine because he knows she hates carting her laundry down to the basement on a weekly basis more than anything.

That she’s wanted this for some time now doesn’t make this moment any less exciting, it doesn’t make her heart swell any less that he’s standing in front of her now telling her that he wants this, too.
Yes, she thinks. She can see them both living here.

“What I want is to live with you,” she tells him, and slowly so that he hears her every word. “I want to come home to you every day.”

His smile in contrast is quick and blinding. “Okay,” he says, nodding once.

“Okay,” she repeats back.

She calls Veronica who gives them both her blessing and an unequivocal yes at the idea before she even has a chance to ask the question. They’re all ready for this, Veronica tells her, and even though she’ll miss having her best friend as her roommate this just feels right.

They start the paperwork then and there.

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October.

His birthday falls on the same weekend they move and they end up missing the movie. After running back and forth all over the city and maneuvering dressers and tables into elevators and up staircases, they’re all too exhausted to even sit and stare at a screen.

Next weekend, they all promise each other as they finagle the very last piece of furniture through Archie and Veronica’s new apartment door – an end table that he’s more than thrilled that Betty had parted with because he thinks it’s absolutely hideous.

And just like that, with a wave and a smile and a ‘see you soon, man,’ Archie is no longer his roommate.

Now, she is.

And she doesn’t forget that it’s his birthday. That’s not her style, even though he’s already told her that her simply being there now when he comes home every day is gift enough.

It’s so much more than enough.

A few minutes before midnight, with the framed two of hearts standing guard and keeping watch over them from the dresser, with her legs crossed under her on the mattress on the floor, she hands him a single playing card.

“Happy birthday, Jug,” she says, eyes tired but bright all at once.

He smiles as flips it over to reveal its face. “I told you that you didn’t need to get me anything,” he says.

“But did you really expect me not to?”

“Of course not,” he says. “Because that’s not who you are. Out of curiosity, why this one?”

With a hand on his cheek and a smile on her face, in the room that’s no longer his or hers but now simply theirs, she tells him.
“Because you’re the king of my heart.”

**November.**

The theme is *Alice in Wonderland*, but the Blackjack table still makes an appearance – it’s how the gala makes the majority of their revenue, she’s told, which frankly makes complete sense to her.

She loses this year almost immediately, but that’s okay with her. The gamble doesn’t seem so scary anymore and at least in her book, that’s the real win.

They’re standing in line for the chocolate fountain when they’re interrupted by Bill clapping his hands firmly on both their shoulders.

“Jughead!” Bill booms, his voice just as loud as the year before. “Eating again?”

“As always,” Jughead responds, smiling. “Bill, you remember my girlfriend, Betty.”

“I do,” Bill says conversationally, taking her already outstretched hand. “I don’t remember her being your girlfriend last year, though. What did you both say again – *just friends*?”

Betty smiles at the memory. She smiles at just how far they’ve come – how completely miserable she’d felt at the end of that night, how indescribably content she feels now. “Something like that,” she says. “The line between friends and something more is, apparently, a fine one.”

Bill laughs easily and she can tell in a sea of put-on polite work-laughs, his is as genuine as they come. *She likes him*, she decides, **very much**. She thinks she even might’ve last year, but now she definitely knows. There’s a kindness to him, an unthreatening approachability, and she’s glad that he’s one of the people Jughead gets to work with every day.

**Jughead works so hard and he cares so much about his work**, she thinks. That he gets to work with someone who’s kind and kind to him on a daily basis is a wonderful thing. It’s exactly what she wants for him.

“I’m glad you both figured out the line, then,” Bill tells her, swiping up a mini donut from the display. “Enjoy the night, Betty. And make sure he doesn’t overeat.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s an impossibility,” she says nudging his ribs gently, and when he looks at her all she can see is pride.

On the cab ride home together, she rests her tired head on his shoulder and the only napkins they end up ruining this time around are the ones she’d siphoned away in her clutch, the ones that she’d wrapped around the stolen mini quiche that they feast on in their bed.

**December.**

Her mother doesn’t let them stay in the same room.
Betty argues with her fiercely; they live together now and whatever Victorian narrative her mother has been spinning in her head about separate bedrooms and chastity belts has been debunked as fiction a long ago. Ages ago, even.

“We can revisit this subject when you’re married, Elizabeth,” her mother tells her, voice full of finality, and that’s the end of that discussion – it’s Polly’s room or an air mattress on the floor of Archie’s room.

He ends up opting for Archie’s room in a move he claims has nothing at all to do with waking up to every shade of pastel under the sun on Christmas day.

“Why would that bother me?” he asks when she tries to catch him out on it. “I’m used to it. It’s not like this room is decorated in neutral tones.”

“They’re neutral-adjacent,” she defended, somewhat helplessly because she knows they’re really not. They’d gone with shades of blue for their room but still, she admits, they’re shades of pastel blue through and through.

He hadn’t minded, though. He’d been the one to help pick everything out. She’d been sure to check with him before clicking order on the baby-blue sheets they’d spent far too much on, on the blue accent chair that they only use to throw clothes on that aren’t quite ready for the laundry basket yet, and he’d signed off on it all.

The pastel reminds him of the sea and sky, the vital things in life, he’d told her, and that’s a nice thing to wake up and fall asleep to every day.

The pastel reminds him of her.

When they arrive back home in Riverdale with him helming the wheel since no one had wanted to put up with his incessant backseat driving, Fred Andrews beams so widely at the return of not one but two sons, and she knows then that he’d opted to stay at Archie’s not for his sake, or even Archie’s, but for the sake of the man who’d taken him in when he had no bed to rest his head on when he was sixteen, who’d fed him when he’d otherwise go hungry.

She’s proud of him for a lot, but she’s especially proud of him for this.

They’ll have so many other holidays and Christmases to spend together - she can let this one slide.

But on Christmas Day and in the earliest hours of the morning, she nearly falls right out of her bed when she’s jolted awake from a steady rap at her window. Her first instinct is that she’s dreaming. Her second, when she sees a dark face floating outside her window, is to scream.

But she doesn’t – his voice, the one that she knows as well her own even when muffled through a window stops her.

“Merry Christmas, Betty,” he says softly, one arm resting languidly over the top rung of the garden ladder. “Mind opening this?”

It takes her a second to adjust and to crash into wakefulness, then she’s scrambling out of bed and pushing open her bedroom window as far as it’ll go. Both for his sake and hers – it’s Christmas, but that has never diminished the wrath of Alice Cooper.

“What are you doing?” she asks, extending a hand to help him in, smiling at his flash of a smile. “And where are your shoes? It’s freezing outside.”
“I couldn’t find them, I kicked them somewhere under Archie’s bed,” he says, brushing down the flakes of snow caught on his jacket. “And I’m keeping a promise.”

“Oh?” she asks, pointing and gesturing wildly to her stubborn, creaking floorboard in case he’s forgotten. He hasn’t. “And what promise would that be?”

“I told you I wasn’t going anywhere. And I’m not, ever again.”

She doesn’t know that she’s ever felt her heart, felt the entire of her so warm as she remembers the quiet promise he’d made to her a year ago - the promise that she knew without a shred of doubt that he’d keep.

The promise that means the world to her just the same.

“I’m holding you to that,” she whispers back to him, even though she doesn’t need to.

He’ll keep his word.

He always does.

She breathes in deeply, feeling her back brush against him as he wraps and contours himself around her. There’s no bet now, she realizes as the rhythm of his heartbeat syncs in time with hers, there’s no gamble anymore. Now, there’s just this – him and her, and the most peaceful, comforting kind of calm; a tranquility and serenity that comes from simply knowing that for the rest of their lives, he’ll be there by her side through all the roads that lie ahead.

Fin.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from the song that majorly inspired this story, ‘Young Blood’ by The Naked and Famous. Also featured in the August chapter! If anyone cares to give this one a listen, I recommend the acoustic version from ‘Stripped’ for this chapter).

So... that’s the story! What a ride. I have a jumble of thoughts and I’m not quite sure how to best to say everything so... here it all is:

Road to Me is and was an important story for me, important in a lot of ways. I hope that whoever you are and wherever you are in life, there’s something to be gained from it. It’s taken me a long time to not fall victim to love and relationships that don’t work
for me, and in a way, this is a story about that. The right love, I think, is one that makes you stronger. It’s one that you exist in as an autonomous person, but it’s one that’s an equal partnership, too. It’s one that you can stand in on your own two feet.

Love is important - it really is. But I think sometimes that when we have love in our lives, it can be all-consuming. It can eclipse our personal wants and desires and we may forget to be selfish for ourselves; we may forget to make sure that we’re getting what we want out of love. We may forget to tend to our relationships with others, and very importantly, we may forget to grow our relationship with ourselves. And those other relationships are so important, too. That’s the story I wanted to write – a story about finding yourself outside of love, about taking agency for yourself in love, and finding the right love that allows for all these things even when opening yourself up to it may be a scary, terrifying thing. I hope I succeeded.

Finally, I wanted to end by thanking every single one of you that’s taken the time to read, comment, and just share in the journey of Road to Me. Thank you for trusting me with these characters we all love so much, thank you for trusting me with this story line that I know is in no way emotionally light or short. Thank you for your support, for your wonderful comments and insights – you all kept me going when I got very stuck and when I wanted to throw my computer out the window.

From the bottom of my heart, and I mean this so much – thank you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!