The clatter of feet, the tapping of keys

by SunlitGarden

Summary

Betty Cooper runs because she has to. It's the only time she can get out of her house, out of her head. Sometimes what she sees when she travels around Riverdale makes her heart beat just as fast as a sprint would. And sometimes it's because of a boy who looks at her so intensely it's like he's imprinting her on a page.

Jughead Jones writes because he needs to. Sometimes his thoughts well up so powerful, so angry, that he writes them down and burns the pages. But the sound of a girl running along the gravel stills his lighter, stills his heart.

Notes
I'm still working on my other WIP's, but I couldn't resist sharing this little tidbit. I've written a good chunk from both Juggie's and Betty's perspectives, mostly as a way to test myself by using as little dialogue as possible to set the scene. It's kinda weird so I get it if it's not your thing, but if you do enjoy all the better for the universe ^_^
It starts because it has to. Polly and Betty quickly find that the only way to get out of the house for extended periods of time without Alice breathing down their necks is to run. Sometimes they go in the morning, sometimes after dinner. Sometimes they don’t run at all and walk down to Sweetwater River or Pickens Park for a brief respite. The feel of Betty’s ponytail swinging behind her is reassuring in some way, as is Polly setting the pace of exploration. Sometimes they laugh and talk so much they can’t breathe. They almost never run fast, not unless they’ve gotten distracted and have to get home quickly. They never get “ugly-sweaty” as Polly likes to call it, since she prefers to have the boys at school ogle them instead of wrinkle their noses. Alice compliments the way their calves are developing but adds that they might want to throw in some crunches to help with their belly flab. Polly shoots Betty a knowing look, and Betty grabs her headphones.

When Polly gets on the Vixens and Betty doesn’t, their formerly easy camaraderie dampens. Polly sits with her legs up on the couch and complains she’s too sore from whole body workouts. At first, Betty pretends she doesn’t mind, that she didn’t want to go running anyway. Then Alice starts nagging her about homework, and she feels her heartbeat quicken with the need to escape.

At first, running on her own kind of scares her. It’s not like anything bad has ever happened in Riverdale, but having a mother and father with all kinds of crime and kidnapping statistics as a part of their career research makes her a little nervous about the world in general. She jogs over to the library and stops, staring at the return slot. When she’s by herself it’s harder to decide when to go back.

Archie runs too. He takes his shirt off every time, his muscles streaked with sweat: shining, firm, and flushed. Betty offers to run with him sometime, but feels embarrassed when he keeps having to slow down, and then even more so when she says, “Go on ahead” and he does. Maybe she’s not running hard enough.

It’s dangerous to run by Pop’s. The smell of the fryer oil curls around her, beckoning her to come in and stop worrying about carbs for a few minutes. There’s a moment she considers going in, sweaty and all, to order a milkshake, but remembers she never brings her wallet. Jughead Jones is always in his same booth typing up some kind of manifesto. She wonders if his writing is her running. Sometimes he looks up when she jogs by, and the intensity of his gaze makes her think he’s putting her down on a page.

At school, she goes out for track and field. It makes sense. It’s a good extracurricular. Cheryl Blossom makes a snide comment about everyone making the team, and Betty gets tired of running in circles around her sister, the Vixens, and football players at practice. She can’t even tell which one is
Archie with his football helmet on. Sometimes Jughead Jones sits in the bleachers and documents their conformity on his laptop, waiting for Archie to come out all freshly purged of reeking testosterone. Reggie Mantle slides Betty a crude gesture with his tongue, and she decides she’d rather run away than around something like that.

Kevin Keller is her best friend, but he prefers to run alone in the woods with whispers of promise propelling him harder. The people he meets there aren’t afraid of a little sweat and dirt. Sometimes if she’s feeling lonely she’ll run through, hoping to pass by him on a trail. She never does. It’s not the right time for old friends. The only people she sees are the scouts, Dilton Doiley narrowing his eyes at her as if the woods are a sacred space he’s used to people defiling.

Ethel Muggs never runs. It’s almost a matter of principle. She sticks her nose in the air any time Betty jogs past her on the very deliberately slow march from the library, as if intelligence is the only virtue to be exercised. At least Jughead, who abhors something as simple as gym class, never really judges Betty when she runs. He probably accepts that most people are different than he is. In gym, he runs slow with lazy form, as if none of this really matters anyway. Sometimes it makes Betty want to scream.

A girl in a black dress and pearls insists she’s Betty’s new best friend. Betty’s not sure if they’re supposed to run together, and decides she doesn’t want to. Veronica Lodge is effortless grace. She lives off of martinis snuck from her parents’ stock and looks chic and slim in a pair of high heels and nylons every day. The only exercises she takes joy in seem to be dancing and sex. Betty isn’t very experienced at either of those things, so the girls leave each other to their hobbies and chat about their days. When Betty runs by the Pembrook Penthouse, her phone often chirps with a notification from V, heart-eyes or a hello, beautiful! The invitation is there if she ever wants to come up and indulge in martinis and dancing (and possibly other things that Betty doesn’t really want to think about). Somehow they stay best friends.

It’s about 4 a.m. when she awakens to giggling from Polly’s room. With a start, she realizes there’s a boy in there. Jason Blossom, if she remembers what she overheard in the lunch room the other day. When the giggles turn into moans, Betty bolts upright and decides the curling unease in her chest can only be settled by getting out. She texts Polly a reminder that mom will be up in an hour, earlier if they don’t keep it down, and leaves the house. She doesn’t know how long she needs to run, and eventually it doesn’t feel good anymore. She removes her headphones and sits by Sweetwater River, listening to the water run instead.

The sound of a guitar grabs Betty’s attention. Curious, she walks closer and recognizes Archie’s voice. Maybe his songs are better balms than exercise. By the time she finds the source of music, it’s replaced by the shuffling of clothes. Before she can avert her eyes or change her path, she sees it. Them. Betty’s legs wobble, her knees locked and entire body pulsing with a wave of nausea she can’t let out. The run home is painful, feet pounding the pavement so hard the tension reverberates back up her knees. Betty blasts past her mother, unable to breathe, let alone deflect anything. She needs the cold of a shower to break through the radiating agony in her heart. Betty tries not to cry. She hasn’t done it in so long. But standing in her room, sweat chilling her skin to the point of
shivering, she lets it all out. Tears streak down her face as she haltingly spills to her mother about the music down by Sweetwater River.

Archie glowers at her from his window. Nobody knows yet, but they will if her mother has anything to say about it. His girlfriend is going to jail. The sorry text doesn’t seem like enough, and she flushes before starting slowly down the sidewalk. Her slow, heavy pace doesn’t seem like enough to make sense of the shattered world around her.

Determined to find another story, Alice joins Betty on her run, offhandedly suggesting to correct her form and gossiping about all the neighbors, all whilst sporting perfect makeup and not a trace of sweat. Betty just wants to put her headphones in and forget, but she doesn’t trust herself with oblivion yet. Alice paces ahead like she’s running with a dog on a leash instead of another human being. They make their way past the Twilight drive in, her mother’s shrewd gaze drawn to the motorcycles in the parking lot. But Alice misses, or chooses not to see Jughead Jones exiting the projection booth beanie-less and in his pajamas. Still groggily unaware of the world, he bends down to get a drink of water from the fountain mounted precariously on the wall, his refillable bottle replenished after a fistful of stale popcorn for breakfast. Without the beanie, his hair looks full and greasy and soft. Later that day, Betty decides she’s not hungry and offers her lunch and some extra snacks to Jughead, who looks so surprised that he forgets to frown.

The familiar smell of Pop’s fills her lungs, making Betty’s stomach growl in hunger, but she has to keep running. This path is one of the few that doesn’t involve a view of Sweetwater. Jughead Jones is outside for once, putting away a motorcycle she’s never seen him with at school. A few staggering Serpents hover around him, asking about the coffee. It looks wrong, but his expression indicates that he’s expecting it. Betty meets his eyes, silently asking are you okay? Something unrecognizable flashes across his face and he looks away, his mouth tugging down in a frown.

A screaming match at home about Polly and Jason leaves Betty dragging her iPod off the table and gearing up for another run. She lets the iPod go on shuffle instead of her usual playlists or on-the-go DJ mentality. Archie’s forgotten love song about the girl by the river swirls into her ears, and Betty’s heart pounds so hard she’s afraid she can’t breathe. Ripping her headphones out, Betty stumbles forward, still lost in the momentum. Gravel kicks up behind her, as does billowing dust as she launches herself at one of the large bags of materials that always seem to be laying about at the Andrews Construction lot. She beats at the small, smooth, bagged stones, weak arms finally taking up the helm her legs can no longer carry. The repetitive fury exhausts her, lines of moisture cooling her burning cheeks. Gasping for the dirty air, she turns and sees one flicker of light behind her. The sharp glow of a cigarette betrays the dark shadow of Jughead Jones. The world seems to still.

Since when did he start smoking? she asks, her mind surprisingly calm.

She can just barely make out the subtle shift of his head in the dark. Wiping the gravel off of her indented knees, Betty tries to keep her chin up. Whatever kind of cigarette it is, he hasn’t brought it to his lips.

“That’s really bad for you,” is all she can think to say, voice quiet before she tightens her ponytail and leaves the construction yard, walking fast, heart beating faster.
Chapter End Notes

So, I know this is a little weird, but I wrote most of Betty's POV first for the entire story and then started Jughead's, so a part of me thinks I should upload all of her chapters and then switch to Jug or if his stuff should be interspersed. But you have a voice so lemme hear it if you have an opinion. Updates for my other works should be coming soon ^_^ Please kudo and thank you!
Jughead Part 1

Chapter Notes

For now we're going to do alternating chapters, so if you'd rather read all of Betty's side of the narrative just read every other, okay? Okay! Kudos and comments to YOU all for being amazing and supportive.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

What started as playing pretend with Archie and Betty in the treehouse has evolved into fully-blown escapism. Ironically, he burrows into the realm of nonfiction, focusing on this typical American small town. Maybe deep down he’s a bit of a masochist, trying to learn exactly why he’s never fit in, why somebody would just leave him here if he's just supposed to fade into the role of the outsider. At least this way he can edit out the parts he doesn’t like. But he doesn’t want to lie. He never writes himself as a hero, as a part of Riverdale. He never writes about himself at all. At least at Pop’s he has a place, a booth and an endless coffee cup all of his own. Sometimes Archie joins him for a burger or Betty runs by with her blonde ponytail and focused expression and he wishes he was real.

Fred Andrews tries to give him another place, working for his meals and stray cash by slugging concrete with Archie. It’s not particularly glamorous work, but it’s honest and comes with a complimentary breakfast, so Jughead can appreciate that. Jughead only declines to walk home with Archie once when he’s got to write down his idea for the latest chapter, but apparently that’s enough for Archie to never really want to do it again. Archie seems distracted, shoving gravel without looking up or joking around as much as he used to. Jughead’s not sure what he did, but he probably deserved it.

Camping used to be their thing, their place beyond the treehouse and the company of a certain brazen blonde. Jughead would poke things with sticks and roast them, eyes aglow with orange satisfaction while Archie would chop wood, as if somehow the exercise was good or fun. Now Archie runs around shirtless in the suburbs, always sneaking in and out of weird patterns, slick with testosterone and in his own head. He’s not upset per say…but he is preoccupied. Archie’s often distracted by girls or sports or video games, but this time it feels different. More permanent. It might even be something he has to work through himself. So Jughead tucks his head down in his booth and keeps writing, only glancing up to note how consistently Betty tries to stick to the paths, only to glance longingly at what could lead her astray. Sometimes she looks at him and he feels like the world tilts on its axis.

He’s not sure what the story is yet. Sometimes he sits up in the bleachers and watches these people run circles around each other, no one getting any closer to something real. “Leaders” like Cheryl Blossom and Reggie Mantle keep degrading whoever they can get their claws into. Even Archie fades into a speck of blue and gold, his vibrant red hair smothered under a smelly helmet worn by generations before him, the jersey probably the same as Fred’s from back in the day. Cheerleaders like Polly obediently follow their marks, grinning wildly at the chance to be on display and bid for
attention. Betty’s on track, and she inevitably but accidentally catches the eye of Reggie Mantle. One crude gesture later, and Jughead never sees her run around them again. He wonders where his story is going, halfheartedly thinking it must’ve disappeared along with Betty Cooper.

The other characters sort of swirl in his peripheral. A girl in a black cape with an even blacker dress tries to suck the air out of Pop’s every time she comes in. She’s so not Riverdale it’s absurd, but his chest stings with jealousy when she effortlessly takes his place in the booth with Archie and Betty. He doesn’t shake her outstretched hand and physically climbs beyond her to face the softer, sweeter temperament of the girl next door. Jughead notices that his hands are reaching forward across the invisible halfway line of the table but he can’t seem to pull them back. He tells himself it’s because he wants to steal some food, but he’s not so sure. It feels like he’s trying to take back or hold onto something, not sure if anything’s in his grasp at all.

His headphones swallow his ears with music loud enough he can almost feel it in his veins. The music can be mood-setting for his work, but most of the time he does it just to block out everyone else, especially at school. Archie’s not in the locker room at gym so he decides to cut. There’s no point in going, anyway. He doesn’t need the teacher sighing at him like he’s the biggest disappointment ever for not running a five minute mile. Jughead wants to tell him to get used to disappointment, like he has, and sometimes the words tumble out before he can stop them. It usually leads to him sitting in the quiet of detention with some idiot like Moose Mason who was caught smoking pot in the parking lot. A flicker of red hair through the music room door draws Jughead’s attention, but when he sees what Archie’s doing…and with whom…it’s suddenly like his throat is three sizes too small for any air to get through. Part of him wants to burst through the door and demand an explanation, but the other part wants to run. It’s probably one of the few times in his life Jughead Jones has actively wanted to run.

Not ones to mince words, the boys quickly get to the heart of the matter, which is that Archie is an idiot who thinks he’s in love. Instead of some flighty girl, however, he’s with a manipulative woman. Archie doesn’t see it that way, and Jughead can’t make him, so they agree to disagree and go back to playing video games until the anger in Jughead’s chest is so vibrant he has to go to whatever place he’s calling home that night and burn. At first it just used to be paper, his violent thoughts down on a page, but then his father started leaving other stuff around the trailer. Stuff that doesn’t just crumble and pop, but glows. He knows it’s not good. But he doesn’t want to see his disappointment in his father and his best friend written down in words. He also can’t lie about the tale of Riverdale. So he recites passages from Fahrenheit 451 about being bothered about the right things, masks of happiness, and being a pleasure to burn. Sometimes he dreams about making a molotov cocktail and just torching this town, razing his book and starting all over. But what would he save from the flames? You don’t stay for nothing.

Sometimes when he’s playing old movies at the Twilight, he lets the flickering glow of lights and campy dialogue absorb into his brain, wishing he could hold it all together the same way he holds onto every stupid adventure in the treehouse. He doesn’t know why he bothers. It’s not like he could hold onto Jellybean. It’s not like his mother tried to hold onto him. His father and the gang peruse the perimeter, leaving broken beer bottles in their wake. Jughead sighs and feels despairingly at home.
He’s at his place in Pop’s when the door tinkles and his best friend comes in. He’s looking for Betty (Archie’s best friend, the real one), because of course he is, and slumps into the booth across from Jughead when she’s not available. Halting the press of keys, Jughead watches the defeat sink into his friend’s shoulders. Archie’s girlfriend is going to jail. Betty was brave. Betty told. Archie’s not sure how to feel about it, and neither is Jughead. It wasn’t his story to tell, but maybe he’ll take an extra copy of the Register that exposes the horror and set it alight in Archie’s honor. To the next chapter. He decides to stay at the Twilight for the foreseeable future.

Maybe Betty feels like she needs to make up for something, because she’s been running a lot lately. It almost makes him uncomfortable to watch her push herself so hard, her eyes glazed, headphones in. Sometimes he can almost see the way her knees give out when she’s been going for too long. It’s like the air is too sharp to breathe and she powers through it anyway. If he wasn’t so worried he’d be impressed.

The inane minutiae of high school rears its ugly head at lunch, when his hunger turns into resentful anger. All he’s had is a handful of stale popcorn for breakfast and a bag of chips somebody probably sat on. As he’s contemplating getting a suspicious-looking burger from the cafeteria, Betty’s crew files in around him, following her lead. He’d call it Archie’s, but he sees how they flutter for her attention, all demanding to be her best friend, a part of her to call their own. Oddly enough she takes the seat right next to him. Pushy socialite Veronica Lodge immediately launches into some travesty regarding not being able to go clubbing and get a release. Scoffing, Jughead wonders exactly how rude everyone would consider it if he just whips out his laptop and tunes them out. He’s willing to risk it. As the snap of his screen releases the tension he’s holding in his teeth, Betty gently nudges her lunch canister towards him. Confused, he stares at it, puzzling out what she’s trying to say. She looks down at the table while steadily suppressing a blush in her cheeks. Her fingernails pick at the edge of her seat.

“It’s yours. I’m not very hungry.”

Not very. Which means she is, but she’s still giving this to him. With a sickening lunch, he watches as she pulls a few more snacks from her bag and piles them neatly in front of him, like she’s simply giving him what’s owed. Archie raises an eyebrow in surprise, but Jughead feels too stunned to do anything but let his mouth fall open, brows furrowed in confusion and awe. This is a feast. And it’s for him.

“I can’t have all this.”

He’d annihilate it in two seconds. He doesn’t deserve it. Eventually she agrees to at least share the pretzel sticks, letting the buttery snap of the salty stick melt in her mouth before realizing it’s probably bad for her and presses her fingers to her lips. Betty looks too embarrassed to accept thanks (or anything else), and quickly turns her attention back to the brunette. Jughead could write about Betty the angel all night and still not have enough words to express his veneration.

Things tend to even themselves out. His father’s finally noticed he’s officially stopped hanging around and hasn’t left anything at the trailer for weeks. No tooth brush. No nothing. So FP stumbles into Pop’s with a posse of Serpents, the smell of trash and booze contaminating the sweet sizzle of french fries and milkshakes. He’s demanding that they talk. He wants to know if Jughead has a girlfriend. Boyfriend. Or if Archie’s indoctrinated him into the realm of getting a sugar something or
another in lieu of spending time at home. Caffeine and stories are the only cure. So Jughead waits with his hands in his pockets while Tall Boy tries to handle custody of his messy father, who sways forward and calls him, "Boy" like that means he belongs to him.

A few of the younger Serpents from the park eye Jughead like he’s a sack of meat they’re ready to wrap in a leather jacket and squeeze. Like they should be the same. They invite him to the quarry and his mind flashes with images of cannonballs and splash fights with his best friends. He tries to picture Fangs or Sweet Pea instead of Archie, the one called Toni instead of Betty, but it doesn’t work. The memory belongs to them, to the children from the treehouse. The young Serpents try to claim him like his father would. No Serpent or their spawn left behind. But having this second skin feels more like a straightjacket than a coat of armor.

A flash of blonde draws Jughead’s attention, and he hates the way her eyebrow curls up in a question mark, slowing her movement on the sidewalk. Are you okay? As if it isn’t obvious. Emotions flit across his cheeks like slaps in rapid succession, twisting his face to the side so he doesn’t have to look at her. Shame. Anger. Regret. Longing. It’s messy, and he doesn’t want the girl-next-door to see him as anything other than the boy in flannel who writes a lot and used to hang with her in a tree house. He doesn’t want her to see what he feels, which is powerless.

The vibrations of the motorcycle jumpstart his heart, a flash of rushing endorphins through his veins as he bursts past the streets of Riverdale, hoping to leave a flaming trail in his wake. The wind howls at his ears and something thunders in his chest, eyes watering with the feel of breaking free. When he gets to the edge of the pass where it’s nothing but trees and the town line, he stops. Just to prove something. Just to look beyond Sweetwater River and see if it’s not that different from anywhere else he could go. His body trembles with something he can’t contain.

The constant upswing of the lighter, the spark of flame in his hands, following by the quick metallic snapping shut feels like a rhythm he’s meant to play his entire life. It’s almost like his heart only beats with the catch of flint, with the clack of keys. Eventually the sound of catching fire builds up a momentum he can’t suppress, so he takes one of the packed sticks his father used to leave around the house and ignites it, watching the tips slowly catch and peel in the grim darkness of night. It glows, a faint trace of smoke in the dark. It won’t glean vibrant orange unless he sucks on it, but then he wouldn’t be able to see. Maybe it would light up his insides with fire, let him exhale a thick smog into the poisonous air. There are infinite things that he could burn. One match is all it takes. Almost Fred’s whole business is flammable, a man who’s worked so hard all his life and offered what he could to his son’s second best friend. So Jughead’s careful. His fingers hold the cigarette delicately, marveling at something so complex being destroyed so easily. The sound of rapidly approaching footsteps pounding on gravel make his heart beat faster for a different reason. Something’s coming and there’s nothing he can do to stop it.

Betty whirls past him, headphones abandoned by her side. Her legs carry her beyond the side of the construction office building and right at a bag of materials Fred always leaves hanging around. Her entire force beats into on it, knowing that it can only absorb the blows and give nothing back. Plumes of dust billow around her, fleeing and then clinging to the air, like they’re witnesses something so spectacular they can’t possibly fade away. Jughead’s positive he doesn’t exist, that his heart has stilled and he’s become part of the darkness of the night, watching Betty careen into exhaustive emotion like he’s never seen. The clack of her arms against the stones sounds like fists pounding on a giant keyboard, angrily writing and screaming into the earth. But then she turns and looks at him, her chest heaving with effort, and every hair on his body stands on edge as if to remind him that they are
both in fact on the same plane of existence.

His chin instinctively tilts towards her, not quite in greeting but in acknowledgement. *I am amazed. I understand.* But she probably can’t see it in the dark. Her eyes flicker to the lit stick in his hands, and he suppresses the urge to try and explain. Maybe she understands, and for some reason that scares him. Cool and collected, she stands, brushing off the remnants of her carnage. Somehow she can still find his eyes in the dark. For a second he’s certain he sees something flicker inside of her. “That’s really bad for you,” she says with finality. She tightens her ponytail and walks off as if she hasn’t just opened him up and silenced the roar inside of him. He’s not alone. But she leaves the construction yard, and he is, holding a stupid stick he lit on fire in the hopes he could change something. The silence of her absence swallows him whole, and suddenly he can’t bear the steady stream of words barreling through his brain to fill it.

Chapter End Notes

So what'd you think? I wrote Jughead as a little bit more verbose and pyro-y because I think his brain works that way but of course I'm interested in your opinions. I could've written his reaction to more of the side characters like I did Betty but to be honest I don't think Jughead notices them nearly as much as he does Betty and Archie and possible threats to that relationship. If you're curious to see what this iteration thinks about Ethel and whatnot just let me know ^^-^ Your thoughts from last chapter and this one are much appreciated! I'm not sure if anyone wants me to respond to their comments or not so I'll just kind of patter around the peripheral if you need me. Seriously, every single one lights my little heart aflame with joy and I reread the parts you loved and love them even more for it so thank you for that experience and your contributions to the fandom. Tumblr stuff is at lovedinapastlife
Betty part 2

Chapter Notes

Now that you've met the Betty and Jughead of this universe things are going to continue changing for them. Lots of running. Lots of writing. Sometimes fire. Still, I hope you enjoy and let me know your thoughts in a comment here or on tumblr at lovedinapastlife. Thank you for your support!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I just needed something to burn,” he tells her, blue eyes skidding across her face like they’re not supposed to rest there at all. She waits for more, but that’s all he has to tell, tugging his beanie snug over his ears and disappearing into the muck of the halls.

In an attempt to reconcile the mystery of Jughead Jones, she asks him to walk her home and hang out after school. His body stiffens like she's asked him to jump into a lake of freezing water, but he says yes. It’s just the two of them, even though Archie lives next door. He could be at practice or off writing some song. It doesn't even occur to her that Polly might come home, because she doesn't. Not until she has to. They shamble in through her front door and Jughead hesitates as though he's afraid he'll stain in their pastel living room with his very presence. She lures him in with food and pop culture references until he's sitting at their kitchen island animatedly ranting about the nightmare of being stuck dealing with Cheryl's two cohorts as lab partners, how the frustration is actually making him feel an ounce of sympathy for the Queen of Mean at Riverdale High. She wants to smell his fingers for traces of destruction, but that's probably beyond the realm of camaraderie, so instead she settles for problem-solving and snacks in the hopes it helps him. When Betty's smiling at him over their homework, he glances at the clock and asks with a furrowed brow if it isn’t time for her run.

A date with Trev Brown makes her antsy. It’s not a date date, she reminds herself, foot tapping under the table. She feels stupid for wearing lip gloss and a pink sweater and her ponytail up like she’s going for a run later. But she will. His idle chatter makes her restless, and her gaze keeps getting drawn outside. For once, the smell of Pop’s doesn’t make her hungry.

She’s probably sitting too still, back arching too stiffly when the new music teacher arrives during an assembly. Archie is no longer heartbroken, singing a new tune with a Pussycat, but fear still carves its way into her chest. The clack of Jughead’s laptop stills from diagonally behind her. A moment later, he swirls the bulk of her ponytail in a playful, lazy, circular pattern like when they were kids. She turns sharply in bewilderment, not sure if she should be mad or amused. His face is painted in unwavering concern. Betty’s heart thumps loudly in her chest and she wonders if it means that she's supposed to run.
It doesn’t matter how gross or sweaty she is when she’s helping Hal work on cars. Her father shows her how things are supposed to fit together in the assured, educated way he does everything else. Working with the metal tools gives her something to do with her hands. It helps, but Hal demands control of the conversation and the process. The anticipation of waiting for a command instead of just being able to go feels more like being inside the house than outside of it. But that's the thing about garages. They're sort of between both worlds. Still, she indulges in the hobby occasionally because diagnosing and fixing a car feels like a victory. The hulking machine comes back to life because she does something powerful with herself. She makes something else run for once.

Early morning exercise makes her stomach rumble, and Betty considers finding Jughead and heading to Pop’s. The thought of knocking on the drive-in door makes her heart flutter, so she makes a detour to Veronica’s instead. It seems safer to show up flushed and slightly sweaty for brunch with a girlfriend than spend her morning tightening her ponytail until her head hurts in the hopes she’ll finally get it presentable enough to face Jughead. As she’s sipping what she hopes is just orange juice next to a confident, casual silk pajama-clad Veronica, Betty wonders what there is to be nervous about breakfast. About running into her friends. No one's at the drive-in when she knocks. Betty leaves a banana on the concession stand before she goes home and she doesn’t know if he gets it.

Betty accidentally veers a little too far on the bad side of town. Her headphones drown out rowdy voices until she's close enough for them to see her amidst the trees. Vibrant. Pink. Blonde. Their eyes hover on her, disgusted by what they see, and someone tosses a can of something she can't identify into a glowing trash can to make it swell and cackle like a firecracker to scare her away. Beat it, north sider. Even with the threat in front of her, Betty refuses to take the exact same path home, to turn her back on them. She cuts diagonally across the woods, wondering what would've happened if it had been Dooley and his scouts with their guns instead of angry leather bearers and switchblades. One group she knows, one she doesn't. But neither want her there. And neither will scare her away. She's already seen something that shook her to the core out here, and now it's behind bars.

Veronica offhandedly declares everything as simple as getting a haircut an adventure of B and V proportions, chaining their arms together like they're a brand to be reckoned with instead of two girls who brunch. She wants more. Veronica wants more attention, Betty wants to be associated with changing more than her hairstyle. Doing something good, something right. The attention is flattering but exhausting, and Betty finds herself subtly attempting to assure Veronica that she doesn’t have to try so hard. It just makes Betty have to work harder to make sure Kevin gets his gossip sessions, Archie gets his empathetic encouragement, and Jughead gets…time. He seems the least particular, and somehow the most attentive. But Betty needs time too, time to go outside, time for homework, time to work things out when the knots in her head seem too tight. The obligation to her friends weighs on her along with everything else. Betty makes sure she has extra-supportive insoles as she takes off for yet another run she doesn’t have time for.

She can feel Jughead’s knee impatiently wobbling against her while he waits for Veronica to finish speaking. Betty palms it through his jeans, willing him to calm. The black haired girl shoots them a look as if she can tell. Veronica pointedly makes a scraping noise with her high heels on the tile floor like she’d love to pry something apart, especially after Jughead snakes the strawberry from Betty’s
milkshake. The glowering makes Betty uncomfortable enough to want to leave, but she’s usually trapped in the booth by one or the other. Archie and her have given up on pretending the two can sit next to each other without elbows being thrown. She contemplates the benefits of exercising the mouth versus the body. If it has any effect on aggression. She remembers the glow of orange highlighting Jughead’s dark lines after she’d pounded out her fury into the earth and wonders if anger that deep is an emotion or a possession. Eventually Jughead relaxes into Betty’s side and Veronica seems to recollect herself next to Archie. It’s fine. Everybody is fine, except now she’s trapped in a booth by people whose affections she can never quite figure out. It shouldn’t unnerve her, but it does.

The only people invited (and allowed, Jughead’s clarified) to the scary movie marathon he’s hosting are Betty and Archie. He’s indefinitely staying at the Andrews’, so it makes sense that they meet there. The boys supply the movies and blankets, and Betty brings the snacks and (decidedly not birthday) candles. Jughead's eyes alight appreciatively on her crown sweater as he recites their movie list for the evening. Archie snags the giant bag of peanut M&M’s before Jughead can empty its entire contents down his gullet, and the boys seem to have no idea what else needs to be done to set up. The rearing microwave pops kernels in the kitchen, and Betty tries not to make it obvious that she senses when Jughead detaches from Archie to meet with her. He compliments her on the ambiance, the candles.

“I brought them for you. For your…”

Feeling only the slightest bit awkward, Betty offers him the lighter she’d managed to filch from the garage. His dark gaze hovers on her hand, cheeks moving slowly with the mouthful of food he’s just indulged in. He swallows loudly, like there’s more in him than somebody should ever have to take at once.

“I gave it up, you know.”

The words feel heavy, and she’s not sure what to do with them, nor with the lighter that feels cold and oppressive in her hands. “That’s good. It’s hard to give up the things you like.”

His tone is flat and final. “I wouldn’t say that I liked it.”

The tips of his nails rake her palm for the lighter, like it’s something he’d rather not have but needs to survive by. His fingers graze her skin more firmly, and for one horrible second she realizes that he can feel her scars. The air between them electrifies, stills, and when their eyes meet she can’t move, held in place by the intensity of understanding passing between them.

The quiet catch of the lighter somehow eclipses the ominous score playing on the television. When Jughead kisses each candle with the a lick of fire, it leaves behind an inverted yellow teardrop that makes Betty’s heart pound in exhilaration. They turn off the lights and sit in the hazy glow of the television screen and hauntings. She wishes she could shush the intense beat of her heart, certain they can hear it. The ever-shifting glow of the candles craft shadows on the wall until she can’t tell where hers ends and theirs begin.

The character onscreen bursts out of their skin in a gory hideous transformation sequence. Archie laughs with his whole body, thrilled, while Jughead smirks and chuckles in the dark. But Betty’s admiration is quieter, and she tucks a piece of hair behind her ear and wonders what it’s like to burst our of your body that way. To be imprisoned and held together by your own skin. Jughead touches
After Jughead spends almost a whole lunch period arguing with Veronica and Kevin over the merits of pumpkin flavored *everything*, Betty finds her attention drifting beyond the changing trees. It’s getting cold, too cold to eat outside comfortably without her ears prickling and her breath fogging with each bite. Archie asks if she’s okay. Part of her feels like she’s rooted to the spot, stiffening into slumber along with everything else in Riverdale.

Polly and Jason draw her eye against the muted browns and greens of the field. His vibrant red hair, startling skin almost glowing white. Polly’s soft pastels and dark jeans, creamy skin and straw-colored hair. They look sweet like this, walking together, enjoying the calm. Much better than the distraught arguments they have in the middle of the halls.

Betty’s legs sneak out from under the table with the excuse of needing to stretch. Archie offers to join her, stuffing his hands in the blue pockets of his varsity jacket and ambling along. They don’t talk much, and that suits her just fine. They’re finally at a pace they can go together. The brushing of eyes on their backs follows them all the way to the edge of the bleachers and she wonders if they look a bit like Polly and Jason, even though it doesn’t feel like they are.

The act of mixing and measuring has never given her much satisfaction. The oven blasts her with hot air as it swallows the pans. Everything firms up in the intense heat of the oven, the ooze rising and coming together into something new. The smell is almost too much, so she goes outside for some air, to do something with her lungs and legs instead of her hands. Only fifteen minutes, she tells herself, otherwise everything might burn.

“I just thought it would be nice,” Betty shrugs, not sure if she’s trying to explain herself.

Even Reggie tries to snag one of the pumpkin spice muffins from the table. *“Hands off,”* Veronica bristles in the way only she can. Reggie just winks and takes a big bite of the one he managed to sneak. Polly gives one to Jason, smiling like they’re the only two people in the world, and they might as well be because neither of them acknowledge her for it.

“Do you want any?” Jughead asks, cookie halted halfway in his open mouth. The rest of the tin lies possessively in his hands, though it seems he’d surrender them to her if she asks. He looks concerned but she’s not sure why. When she declines, he looks at her slyly, as if she’s pulled some kind of con over everyone by having them eat something she shouldn’t. He pops the rest of the cookie in his mouth with a satisfied moan. Curiosity flares through her. Maybe it would be worth it. To give it a try.

Archie’s at practice, so Betty and Jughead walk home alone. The air smells like grass and leaves and freshness. The trees are littered with colors so vibrant they seem fabricated, the branches too far away to tell. Jughead twiddles with the edge of his bag’s straps, shoulders hunched. Betty keeps her hands steady, resisting the compulsion to fix whatever’s bothering him, whatever’s bothering her too.

“Betty?” he blurts, turning to face her, his brows knotted in worry.

“What?”
Jughead kisses her, hands on either side of her jaw, guiding her to him. His lips lavish her in the taste of apple cider and pumpkin spice and something a little salty, like when she bites her own lip. Their mouths pop apart with a startling smacking sound. She’s too caught up licking her lips, curious about the sensations he’s given her, to even open her eyes until he repeats her name softly, a question. Everything’s on pause until she decides what to do. Heart stuttering, she leans in to taste him again.

Chapter End Notes

I know a lot of people loved Juggie's perspective from last chapter so don't worry everyone's favorite pyro is coming soon. How are we doing? S'cool they smooched? Notice when Betty chooses to walk? Prepare for some really nice visuals in Part 3.
Comments are so inspirational and motivational so if you have the time, I’d love to hear your thoughts on this/previous chapters, if there’s a moment that stands out to you. Enjoy~ (also happy 22nd birthday Lili Reinhart! Anyone else hoping Sprousehart gets engaged? I mean, whatever happiness is in store for them'll be great. Just saying. I'd be excited.

The booth at Pop’s hosts his inspiration as his fingers fly across the keys, sentences swirling at his fingertips until he’s so jittery that Pop has the audacity to ask if maybe this should be his last cup of coffee. He means well, but Jughead is so wired off of adrenaline that he might as well have invented the next Jingle Jangle. The stick of whatever it was lays somewhere in the banks of Sweetwater River, the only place he could think of that would sufficiently snuff it out. Part of him was tempted to keep it as a souvenir, a memory, but that’s what the pages are for. These ones he could never burn.

The sky is turning pink with sunrise by the time he gets back to the trailer. It makes him think of Betty’s sweatshirt, of the neon glow of Pop’s, of strawberry milkshakes so creamy he has to pluck the fruit off the top and savor something light and sweet to sate him.

The inside of the trailer shutters out the light, everything a dark brown, including the empty beer bottles on the coffee table and the shadows over his father’s face. A twist in his chest explores the unlikely possibility that his father fell asleep waiting up for him and that’s why he’s on the couch instead of the bed. But FP is still wearing his boots, and Jughead’s tired. So he snaps his father’s boots off his feet, ignoring the pungent smell, and lets them fall to the floor with an angry thud. Jughead makes his way to the unmade, unoccupied bed and lays down, but doesn’t think he can do anything useful here. Sleep only claims him when his thoughts get blurred into a muddy haze of that’s really bad for you.

The adrenaline doesn’t really go away, not even after the chapters pile up, perfect and visceral in a way he’s never really accessed before. His excitement cools into trepidation when he sees her in the halls again, sweaters and guarded smiles instead of sweat and fury. He keeps wanting to share the words with her, to trace her skin and see if the gravel is still indented in her palms and knees like it’s branded across his heart.

Archie laments his tumultuous relationship with a Pussycat and how it’s affecting his music. It doesn’t bother Jughead, because Archie’s loveably, laughably stupid and it all seems so high school in its normalcy compared to the damp smells of trailers, violence, and cigarettes he’s used to the kids on the south side complaining about. But Betty sits like she’s detached, almost beyond them in some form of self-preservation. Jughead wants so desperately to be present with her again, for all three of them to be in the same place. His eyes keep flickering between his friends, wondering if they’re
forcefully drifting apart like Panacea—one mass shifted by the unseen powers of the earth into different continents, practically different planets.

Jughead gnaws on his lip and wonders if she thinks he’s a terrible friend for lighting up on the Andrews Construction site. If he’ll always be the kid who spent a stint in juvie for not being able to control it. If he’ll end up like his father and destroy everything he touches. His leg wiggles so violently that Kevin and Veronica actually pick up their food and move a bit further away. Archie and Betty stay, her calm eyes granting him a momentary reprieve from the noise in his veins. Her palm offers a touch of sympathy on his knee before she turns and pretends to care about Archie’s love life. The sleeve of her sweater rises to reveal a few light yellow bruises from their night at the construction yard, and Jughead doesn’t move for what feels like hours.

When she’s finally alone and standing still, he works up the nerve to approach her on his own for the first time in years. There’s only so long before someone or something else will try to drown him out. He’s sorry, and a twisty feeling inside assures him he doesn’t know what for. Maybe for writing Betty down like she’s another memory to preserve when she’s so much more—so much dynamic energy that fills him up with possibility. If their relationship is going to change, at least he wants to be a part of it.

“I just needed something to burn.” His voice sounds lame, gravelly in his ears, and he tucks his chin down before disappearing back into the order and chaos from whence he came before her green eyes can alight on him with anything other than mystification. If she looks at him any longer he’s afraid he’ll be seared there in her eyes, the pyro loner who's half-obsessed with her and can't stop writing about it. Maybe it’s better that some things remain unexplored.

He comes clean to Archie. Not about the fire, but about his home life. Immediately, he’s welcomed in to the home that smells like lumber and flannel and familiarity. He no longer worries about a soggy mattress on the drive-in floor and where his next meal is coming from. He buys his own groceries and is shocked how much more he enjoys cereal when it’s soaked in milk. He enjoys the sounds of Archie flouncing into furniture and twanging on his guitar, Fred’s humming while the coffee maker whirs, and Vegas’s pants hello. The anger in him settles somewhere tolerable and he thinks he may not have to burn anything for a while, if ever. This doesn’t feel bad for him. It feels good.

Thankfully, surprisingly, Archie keeps Jughead’s secret. Archie never used to be able to keep anything under wraps until the music teacher came into his life. It depresses Jughead in a way he thinks he can swallow. Growing up means changing. Things just keep changing so much that he’s not sure what’s supposed to stay the same. It feels like the world is waiting for him to emerge from his woolen shell to be the person they all are waiting him to be. He touches the soft crown edge on his beanie before getting back to his story and he feels a little better.

Betty approaches with her bright green eyes laser-focused on him and asks if he'd be willing to walk her home. It’s likely that she knows he’s staying at the Andrews, but not for how long. He’s not sure if Archie has practice, and keeps looking over his shoulder like he expects him to show up any second. Betty doesn’t, though, like she hasn’t expected anyone, even her sister, for a while. She invites Jughead into her giant white house that even the princess Veronica isn’t allowed in for fear of
tainting its Stepford halls. He stands in the doorway feeling his breath darken the cream walls like the slow exhalation of smoke, marking it forever with his inadequacy. Betty seems unsurprised by his hesitation. It’d be hard for anyone to feel they belong in this house. Her mouth is soft and pink when she gently urges him inside with, “I made you something.”

Something twists in his gut and he lets Betty flutter her eyelashes and feed him and they rant about the idiots at school. Eventually she even needles him into doing their science homework together, more for his benefit than her own. His lab partners are Ginger and Trina, Cheryl’s cohorts, and possibly two of the most vapid girls to ever grace the planet. While normally he’s a fan of working in threes, the girls each have maybe 1/3 of the brain capacity of a normal human being. She giggles as he scoffs about them, and before he knows it he’s forgotten all about motorcycles and wood chips and the laptop sitting in his bag because he’s already sharing a story right here with Betty. He almost smiles at her, but the clock on the wall catches his attention and he frowns. Normally this is time for her run. When he asks her about it, she looks a bit stricken, as if she’s lost herself. He feels bad for ruining their moment, but she assures him that it’s fine, that she can run any time. For some reason it strikes him as a lie.

A date. Dating. It’s just another thing people do when they’re growing up. Jughead tries not to dwell on it, tries not to feel the urge to set up a bonfire or stake his claim in a booth at Pop’s right behind them and write down, experience whatever it is Betty is trying to get with this Trev kid. Archie thinks it’s cute since he’s dating the older sister. Jughead thinks it’s depressing, and the clack of keys is too sluggishly unsatisfying so he edits until his eyes burn. Eventually he makes his way to the motorcycle tucked in the Andrews’ garage and sits on it, hands on the ignition just to remind himself what it feels like.

Betty emerges from her house to go for a run, that same focused expression on her face and determined movement driving her forward. His heart wants to leap out of his chest, because the date didn’t change her. The lighter in his pocket feels reassuringly unneeded. The sound of her feet makes his heart beat just as fast as the click of the flint would. Jughead offers to take Vegas for a walk and happens upon Betty as if it’s just a happy accident, and maybe it is.

Boring Principal Weatherby rattles on about tradition and discipline, welcoming into the fold. Jughead resists rolling his eyes into detention by sitting in the back so he can work on his laptop. The new music teacher comes in, and while Archie seems nonplussed, Betty physically tenses so hard that he can imagine the way her thighs tighten, springing her entire body into action. Even her fists clench just so she can control her feet. Forgoing his normal stay out of it mentality, he reaches forward and swirls her ponytail like he’s drawing the sun on the back of her head. Betty’s hair is just as soft as he remembers, something downy and warm he’d want to fall asleep in. For a moment he imagines her, hair fanned out like an angel, snuggled into her own bliss. Her eyes meet his, and he tries to read if she’s upset. About Archie. About music. About him. She seems unsettled, but not angry, and he’s not sure what else to do but hold his breath and stay in this plane for her.

Veronica Lodge does not trust him. He doesn’t care for her either, especially since it appears he has to tolerate her ever-vigilant presence in an attempt to make their trio a quartet. The way she assumes she can waltz in and make things happen, the way she sees only what she wants to anger him in the same way the Bulldogs purposely unsee him and slam into his shoulders in the halls. The same shirt worn two days in a row. Stealing a bite of meatloaf using Betty’s fork. Any touch, indirect or not, is
monitored by her hawklike eyes. She links her arms with Betty’s much tighter in the halls now, trying to keep her firmly at her side and presumably out of harm’s way. But Betty squirms politely out of reach and goes her own way, Jughead silently giving out a cheer every time.

If he didn’t know better he’d swear Veronica was in love with Betty, and from the way her dark eyes soften in admiration on her, maybe she is. But sometimes she gets that look with Archie too, a more playful smirk playing on her lips, and Jughead wonders if his two friends just inspire that kind of admiration from everyone. He decides to write about it and vigilantly sits next to Betty to save her from having to fend off the dark-haired girl’s advances at lunchtime. Sometimes it feels like Veronica’s trying to do the same thing. Eventually Archie breaks the tension by subtly volunteering his seat so either of them can sit next to him and across from Betty. It’s embarrassing, but when Veronica takes the bait and he feels Betty’s warmth at his side, it feels like a victory.

One night he goes in for his shift at the theater and finds a banana on the concessions stand. It’s not like Serpents to leave fruit hanging around. Part of him wants to toss it, probably riddled with flies, but another part of thinks it’s too random to be chance. Maybe it’s poison. Maybe it’s from someone who knows he works or stays there…who cares. He slips the banana in his pocket and peels it during the opening credits, wishing the pale fruit had a note written on its skin.

His birthday is always awful and special and even though he’s got plans with Archie for the day itself, he asks Fred if he can throw a party the day before. When Fred’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise, he clarifies that he just wants Betty and Archie over for some scary movies. Fred’s expression warms, and with a pat on his shoulder, he tells him to knock himself out.

Betty always brings snacks, her arms full of goodies like it’s the only thing getting her invited in the first place. She disappears into the kitchen after depositing the basics on the couch, averting her eyes when they find one of the packages is full of thick candles. Feeling antsy, Jughead sets up the display, continually thinking this is perfect. Too perfect. He follows her into the kitchen feeling parched. The dry smell of buttered popcorn feels his nostrils and he wants to pull her away from the microwave in case anything he hears about radiation is true. He compliments her on the candles. Her eyes shift nervously, hands tugging at the crown sweater she’s wearing, probably just for him.

“I brought them for you. For your…”

*Addiction*. The word squirrels in his chest. It’s not the right one, probably not the one she was searching for, but it’s the one that haunts him all the same. She presents him with a lighter and he feels sick, unable to swallow the mouthful of candy he’d taken in habit. Finally, he shoves it down, deep inside.

“I gave it up, you know.”

The words haunt him like his father’s, said so many times before. To be said so many times again.

Her eyes are uncertain, studying him while her voice remains neutral. “That’s good. It’s hard to give up the things you like.”

Milkshakes. Music. Mantras. Things he likes. Fire, however, feels all-consuming. “I wouldn’t say that I liked it.” Betty’s breath hitches her in her throat, hand trembling closed as if she’s afraid she’s done something wrong, like she’s holding a murder weapon and not an offer of kinship. Jughead lets his fingers trace her palms as he closes them around the tool, finding indented scars that feel too deep
to be just from the gravel. Their eyes meet, and he feels that flush of *I admire you, I understand you,* rush through him all over again.

In the quiet of the movie, the candlelight somehow endearing instead of eerie, it’s easy to forget that the gore in front of him is supposed to be the thrilling element of the evening. Instead, he revels in the easy laughter of Archie beside him, the way Betty curls into herself and smiles, eyes wide on the screen. At one point he wonders what it’s like to take what you want, and reaches behind Archie’s back to touch Betty’s hand. It’s soft, and even though technically their fingers are not linked, he wonders if he’s ever felt more connected to anything in his life. Warmth surges through his chest and he pulls away, just in time before Archie leans back to close the space between them. It’s hard to breathe in a wonderful, exhilarating way, and Jughead isn’t sure he can talk about it, let alone write about it, if he had five lifetimes to live.

That night he sits in the dark after everyone else has gone to bed, his laptop open and the candles slowly melting around him, and he’s struck with the overwhelming urge to make a wish. It’s the first time he’s made one in years. The first since his last one didn’t come true.

Jughead’s words lodge in his throat, forgotten, as the warmth at his side leaves him for a walk. *Let me join you.* The words come to Archie so naturally, and Jughead feels his ribs curling around his lungs like he’ll never be able to say them. He can’t say them now. He’s wasted his voice defending the taste and color of pumpkin cookies, which feels absolutely worthless in the heart of him now. Betty and Archie look natural walking together, side by side as the golden ones from his youth with the sun softly kissing the color-changing leaves and their orange and yellow hair. They’re glowing. The world glows around them. Jughead feels like the rest of them are shadows left behind at the table, and dejectedly wonders what’s the point of being a writer if he can never use his words.

She makes enough for everyone, but the greedy part of him takes the whole tin of pumpkin cookies and sits them in his lap, stuffing some in his face because a part of him is screaming that *these are for him.* Everyone’s grabbing what they can. Her expression is almost disappointed, but the food is anything but. There aren’t any burned edges, blackened crusts, or misshapen lumps here.

“Do you want one?” he offers, borderline ashamed of how fast he jumped into the fray. She shakes her head, crosses her ankles, and tries to smile.

Something’s holding her back. From running, from eating, from saying whatever she wants. So Jughead takes the showiest, happiest chomp of his cookie he can and winks at her, adding just a little moan for effect. A startled giggle colors her cheeks and his chest surges like he’s been enflamed in joy.

Archie tells him he looks different, more at ease. There’s no chaos at the Andrews’ house beyond the realm of video games and whatever world Jughead creates on his laptop. No vomit or booze in broken streaks in the kitchen sink. No leather jackets or laundry with stains he doesn’t want to make out. In fact, the only time he sees his father is at the drive-in where he can pretend that life isn’t real. Jughead finally feels like he’s living in a *good* chaotic world, the kind where anything can happen and it’s him and Betty walking home together under a sea of oranges, reds, and yellows with the blue sky holding up whatever force of magic this is. The sky is calm and the trees are fire and it’s all in
balance when he turns to her and calls, “Betty?”

“What?” Her blue-green eyes look into his, grounding him in her reality with a simple flutter of her eyelashes.

His mouth finds Betty Cooper’s and he gives the world to her. If he could purge his soul, his words, and make her happy, he would. It’s selfish and selfless and everything he wants in a single moment. He’s learned from his greediness earlier and savors this, half expecting strawberries and vanilla but finding something richer and saltier instead. Her lips are chapped, imperfect, and wondrous as they move (they move!) against his. Trembling in the realm of possibility, he pulls away, aware of the way her tongue reaches out to trace the remnants of him on her lips. He calls her name again, beckoning them to that same place. *Let me join you.* Her mouth rejoins his and drowns him in the sensation of being *wanted.*

Chapter End Notes

Obviously as I switch perspectives I think a lot about WHY Jughead has more/longer snapshots than Betty in most cases. Besides being naturally more verbose and a novelist with a blank page instead of a journalist who needs to be succinct like Betty, I think it has something to do with WHAT they're trying to preserve and/or what around them is being destroyed/changing. I don't know. I think about writing sometimes. What do you think? Also I love Jug's perspective especially in his non-bday celebration and the kiss because he's embracing a hopeful sort of wonderment that the world can be chaotic but it can also be good in the form of Betty Cooper.
Hello lovelies! Um, there are sexual THOUGHTS in this one but nothing particularly graphic by my standards. If anyone thinks I should up the rating just lemme know ^-^ Betty’s post-kiss world is a wonderful, kinda scary place. And it has labels. So many labels.

Without being able to run, Betty feel like she has no idea what to do with the blood surging through her veins and coloring her cheeks. Seeking ground, her fingers intertwine into his. Part of her wants them to take off together, barrel down the street until their bags slam against their backs as hard as their hearts are pounding in their chests. But Jughead looks like he’s about to fall apart at any second, mind whirring as fast as her blood is rushing to her extremities. So instead she squeezes his hand, they do an awkward goodbye dance that ends in something between a kiss on the cheek and a hug, and she has to suppress the urge to ask him, “What does this mean?” because that’s something Polly and Alice and maybe everyone would never approve.

Her heart keeps hammering in her chest, just as hard as when she runs, and Betty finds it almost impossible to focus on her homework. Tightening her ponytail, Betty risks a glance out the window. Jughead is sitting at Archie’s desk, glancing up when he feels her presence, even a house away. Feeling like her insides are being plucked, Betty immediately grabs her coat and heads downstairs, telling her mother she’s going for a walk. Alice reminds her that walking doesn’t get the heart rate high enough for cardiac benefit, but Betty doesn’t think that matters at this point.

Betty pauses in front of the Andrews house, hands stuffed in her pockets, wondering how many times she’s envisioned it as a safe haven. Now it’s keeping him safe. But safe from what? She doesn’t feel safe. She feels exposed. Pushing away the childish thoughts, Betty turns and power walks up the street, preparing to jog once she’s out of sight. The sound of someone sprinting forward with heavy, quick steps makes her turn. Slightly winded, Jughead catches up with her. His eyes flash bright with concern.

“Did you want some company?”

Surprisingly, the answer is yes.

Their hands stay in their pockets all the way to Sweetwater River. The awkward quiet shifts into nostalgic chatter about small joys of childhood. Almost giddy with anticipation, they push leaves together into one giant pile, sometimes with the edge of their foot, other times in giant dry armfuls until they’ve collected a colorful bed under the cover of the trees. Satisfied, Betty rests on her knees and looks over at Jughead, who’s smiling in a crooked way that makes her want to tilt her head and align their mouths again. The anxiety in her stomach has shifted into something else, something on the verge of hunger and nausea all at once.
“We should go in together.”

Grinning, they stand to face each other and count down from three. Jughead’s arms clamp around her waist as they dive sideways into the foliage, flakes of leaves springing up around them like confetti. Amidst her joy, amidst the release, she snakes her hands up to cup his face and press herself against him. They kiss each other in the hues of orange, red, and gold until their lips feel warm and numb with bliss. It’s the first pleasant memory near Sweetwater she’s had in a while.

Flecks of leaves keep falling onto Betty’s shoulders, her bouncing ponytail shaking them loose like the most wonderfully unexpected dandruff in the world. By the time she gets back home to shower after her exercise, she’s practically skipping.

During a particularly grueling exam week, nothing seems to make her feel better. She runs, feet pounding as her head recites formulas, facts, and theories over the songs in her ears. The information is jostling loose inside of her, categories mixing and mingling until she has to stop and get ready for school. Dejected, she takes her place next to Jughead in the student lounge, nestling a little closer than she normally might when they’re in front of their friends. She rolls her shoulder. Almost automatically his hand reaches up to her shoulder to press his thumb right where she needs it. Her back arches in relief, like whatever it is inside of her finally has a clear path to her brain. Veronica looks scandalized, Kevin bemused, and Archie, to her dismay, looks incredibly uncomfortable. It’s not that terrible. To be touched. But she doesn’t want their scrutiny on top of everything else and decides to keep her hopes and longings to herself in front of the others.

Sometimes Jughead’s frown is so deeply entrenched that it even surfaces when they’re making out in the Andrews’ garage. It’s like he’s aching all the time. She can’t figure it out, and it bothers her so much that sometimes she has to take a loop around the block. When she asks him if he would like to run, his mouth sort of shuffles into itself until he declines. Like it’s something he thinks is special to her, something he can’t share. Or that running means something else to him, something almost but not-quite bad. If she can’t ease a smile out of him with food, kisses, or conversation, she can do it with tender caresses that leave him wilting and dazed. She takes comfort in the way his whole face brightens when she pops over for a walk, his shoulders momentarily lifted of the burdens they carry.

It gets harder to find excuses to be alone, especially alone with Jughead once Archie becomes single again. Whenever she comes over to say hello, Archie’s eager smile is the first one at the door. He pulls her in to listen to sad breakup songs in his bedroom. She looks down at the mattress on the floor, wondering why Jughead’s in the garage instead of the safe, warm, house and at their side. Archie feels her attention waning and stops playing, scratching the back of his head and finishing, Yeah, anyway, Jug's down there if you want to say hello. She doesn't want to be rude, hates to see that discarded expression on his face, so she stays and assures him his heart is beautiful until the urge for Jughead drives her leaping down the stairs, into the garage, and the embrace of conversations without words.

After the snow falls, running becomes a chore. It’s repetitive, it’s hard, and the uncomfortable chill of slick mushy ice seems to follow her anywhere she goes. At one point she gives up and just goes to Pop’s for something warm with the few dollars she has in her pocket. A hollow ache blooms in her chest when she realizes Jughead’s not perched in his usual booth. Pop winks at her and throws a few
marshmallows in a hot cocoa cup for good measure. Her gratitude is genuine but strained, and she sits at the counter warming her hands and throat until there’s nothing left but chalky swirls in the bottom of her cup.

Her parents are in the house more lately. Alice works on her laptop at the dining room table while Hal studies something secret in the basement. Sometimes Betty can hear him playing home movies late at night of when they were little, Polly or Betty protesting *I don’t want to* as their parents make them perform the latest trick. *There’s our girl,* her father says warmly in the past. The one in the armchair who watches the films seems unmoved, and lately his eyes don’t quite light in recognition when he sees either of his daughters come down the stairs for the day. But none of them ever fail to exchange a smile in passing. Perhaps that’s why. It’s the patented, much-practiced Cooper smile that snuffs out any light behind the eyes.

Polly’s practiced in the art of deception, wearing skimpy layers under sweaters and puffy coats to reveal to Jason when they’re alone. Betty wants to feel sexy too. The closest she gets is a full-coverage bra with black lace and thick straps, but it looks unnatural under anything else. It shows, the darkness absorbing whatever pale sweater goes over it, and it’s not the same effect if everyone knows she wants to feel sexy. There’s a few thicker denim shirts she can hide it under, but the material is so stiff and uninspiring that it negates any initial impact of the bra itself. As she studies herself in the mirror, Betty lets her fingers trace over the outline of the bra at the spill of her breasts. Perhaps it would look good under a certain soft gray S shirt she’s found her fists curled in lately. Or flannel, soft and warm and dark. Unbuttoned. Nothing else. The thought sends a chill through her so powerful that she whips the bra off, stuffing herself into a constricting sports one so she can get outside and let the cold air chill her while her feet pound away the thoughts of seducing a certain boy next door.

Jughead’s fingers find her when she’s feeling low, rubbing and smoothing out the tension that seems to naturally tangle inside of her. She never even has to ask, he just does it. Sometimes the relief comes simply and quickly, in a way she’s not used to. When he sees her rub her own calves in soreness from whatever run she’s done that day, he sets his laptop aside and offers her a massage. Feeling shy, she puts her legs up on his lap and tries not to jerk away when the first wave of relief washes over her. Somehow he even knows that lotion helps, working his palms into her skin and loosening her muscles until she wants to tell him to go higher. To get inside of her. But her tongue gets stuck in her throat and she gets so worked up that she feels like she should run away before she embarrasses herself.

He allows her to push him until he’s seated on the floor, the back of his head resting between her thighs. It *almost* alleviates some kind of heated ache just knowing he’s there while she works through the tension in his shoulders. Betty studies, learning how to move her hands on his body until he moans and rolls his neck back into her. Eventually they get to the point where he removes his shirt so she can work lotion into him too. At first he still wears his tank top, jokingly citing sanitation reasons, but when she compliments and caresses his body, his strong shoulders, eventually he takes that off too. Although she runs and runs, Betty has almost no upper body definition. But Jughead is strong under his layers. Construction work has molded him nicely, crafting muscular ridges she wants to explore with her skin and tongue and teeth. A tuft of natural, downy hair streaks somewhere she can’t see, shouldn’t touch. Jughead clears his throat, so she presses some kisses to his shoulders and keeps focusing on what makes *him* feel good. She’ll worry about making herself feel good later.
The descriptions of hurried exchanges of bodily fluids in the woods make Betty's stomach crawl. Kevin makes it sound like it's about grabbing what heat they can until they bury themselves in it. When Jughead takes his place next to them at the lunch table Kevin's eyes lose that natural brightness and he turns away, as if the boy's presence is his clear cue that the conversation is over. Jughead's long fingers cover her own under the table and it takes a significant effort not to pull away. She feels clammy and afraid and like the second they give in that's all anything will be anymore. Sweat, and a high.

When Veronica condescendingly refers to Jughead as Betty's broody boyfriend, something clamps down in the blonde's chest, snapping her insides shut in self-preservation. It shouldn't be alarming, but she's never had a boyfriend, not unless she counts Archie when they were six. The Cooper girls aren't supposed to have boyfriends the same way they're not supposed to have sweets. With a shiver, she recounts endless arguments between Polly and their parents about Jason Blossom. Screaming matches ending in slammed doors, stolen phones, sobbing, and sneaking out of windows. She doesn't want that life. She just wants to enjoy the company of her best friend in whatever way feels the most natural to them. Her friends must note the worry in her eyes, because Jughead isn’t referred to as her boyfriend again for the rest of the day. Veronica tells her that it's okay, sometimes it's better to just have fun. Kevin agrees, but doesn't look like his heart is in it. Betty wonders how much of her heart can be in another person, and turns to look for Jughead amidst the scurrying figures in the hall.

Even though the cold air hurts her lungs, Betty pushes her body hard, hoping it'll clear her head. Sometimes it feels like the cold itself is tugging her chest cavity, urging it to implode on itself. The sky is dark, the snow reflecting what little light is to be had. The steady thrum of her feet following one after the other lead her back to the Andrews house, and a passing glance reveals a very tense Jughead in the living room. He’s already there with her, like he’s been waiting for her to come home, to pass by so they're in the same place even for just a second. Swallowing, he tries to hide his longing in the glow of his computer screen. Betty moves closer to the window and gestures with her chin for him to come outside. It's not like she wants Archie to feel awkward if she comes in and asks to be alone with Juggie. Her maybe-boyfriend meets her on the porch with a sense of finality and gloom hovering around him.

She feels like he’s expecting her to swing an axe when she asks, “Would you be willing to meet my parents at dinner tomorrow?” His head doesn’t roll off, but his mouth does fall open without words tumbling out of it, which is surprising enough on its own.

The entire evening feels like wrestling with the end of a giant bulging balloon to keep it from launching itself all over the room. Her parents have met Jughead before, of course, but not in a formal capacity. Both Hal and Alice seem a bit shellshocked to be staring at the boy who still wears his childhood beanie like a security blanket at their dinner table. He addresses them formally, occasionally glancing at Betty to check if he’s pleasing her by going slow and steady. Polly keeps huffing and glaring at everyone just because Jason’s not allowed to come to dinner. Betty kicks her under the table and tries to send Jughead reassuring smiles. Most of the time she just wants to grab his hand and bolt for it. Alice purposely annunciates Jug’s name as two distinct words instead of one and asks a quickly deflected question about his family, but Betty thinks everything goes as well as it possibly can.

The end of the night leaves them momentarily alone. The second she's on the doorstep, Betty tugs his
uncertain lips against her own in a small, congratulatory kiss for surviving a night. Her parents start talking idly about high school memories behind her, so she assumes that must mean he’s okay to come over again. Jughead lingers on the porch, still looking a bit dazed from the interaction. Betty relishes his goofy expression and allows herself to believe that she might be able to have the best of two worlds.

Chapter End Notes

You are all so amazing and supportive and thank you so much for sharing your thoughts big and small on this fic. Your voices are lovely and I hope to hear more of them as Betty and Jughead veer into uncharted territory. Favorite imagery? Moments? You’ll hear Jug’s soon enough
Thank you all for your continued amazing abilities to help me appreciate this story and these characters. Your support for the fandom and this fic are appreciated and help this fic shape into the love-ball it is. However. Enter FP, and a host of problems with him.

The world is still swirling when they pull apart, when he realizes there’s only so much kissing in the street Riverdale will allow before he falls into a pile of want and limbs like a human bonfire already lit from within. When her fingers tighten into his he’s pretty sure his toes curl and even his hair feels like it’s smiling.

When they get to her house, Betty hesitates, glancing up at the high tower and looking like she’s debating whether to go up alone or if she’s supposed to tug him along. His mind runs through so many scenarios he almost feels light-headed, and barely registers when Betty squeezes his hand in goodbye. In his frazzled, optimistic yet fumbling state, they end up kissing each other’s cheeks and hugging. It’s the best goodbye he’s ever had because there’s a kiss and a promise of see you later. At least he hopes so, he realizes, as her warmth fades away.

He can practically feel her leg swinging in indecision at her desk in the house over. It’s as if their kiss has suddenly amplified the natural connection he feels to her. The second their eyes meet through the window it’s like he’s being pulled on an invisible string. She needs me. Or maybe he just wants to be needed, because she’s out of the room and putting on her coat before he can even stand. She pauses outside of the Andrews house, a contemplative look on her face until she seems to decide better and walks away. Stunned, Jughead stands in the living room, his fingers trembling on his coat in her wake.

Before Jughead can crumple into the agony of abandonment, he shakes his head and remembers that Betty Cooper is often in motion, and that doesn’t mean he can’t catch up to her. He runs faster and with more abandon than he ever has at gym class just to gain on her hurried pacing. When her eyes alight on him, surprised, he tries to breathe. It’s possible his guts will spill onto the pavement when he speaks. His ribcage opens just the tiniest bit to ask, “Would you like some company?” It’s not let me join you, but it might as well be. Her face glows softly, mouth quirking in a smile of ascension, and he tries to ignore the thunder in his ears as they make their way to Sweetwater River.

Kicking the foliage on the path reminds him of when they were little, when they used to rake everything together and slam into the leaves with such force that they’d shoot across the lawn, a mild rebellion against the Coopers and mother nature. Betty smiles at the memory, quirking an eyebrow and suggesting a reenactment. They stoop without awkwardness, sharing laughter and budding smiles as they feed fuel into the leafy bed of their own making. When it’s finally ready, she smiles at him, staring at his mouth and tilting her head like she’s readying to fit into him.

“We should go in together.”
The countdown from three intensifies his anticipation. He launches himself more at Betty than the leaf bed below them. The impact is soft, but not as welcome as the velvet of her lips pressing against him. The world celebrates their union with vibrant color cascading around them. Betty’s strong legs wrap around him in a way that makes him feel they’ll be here forever, kings and queens of the bed of change.

Jughead hits the official record for smiling at three hours and counting. When he realizes he left all of his books at the trailer, instead of getting angry, he asks for Archie’s middle school copy of Fahrenheit 451. It strikes him as oddly fitting when he slips three leaves from their bed between its pages. One red. One yellow. One orange. Just in case. A little fire and earth he can keep beyond the words on the page. It’s something to stay for.

The rev of a motorcycle chokes up on the street. Jughead’s fingers stiffen over his keys as someone clomps up the steps of the Andrews’. Fred answers the door, shielding Jughead from view. The voice is horribly familiar, the cadence not staggered. Fred refuses him to come inside, saying they’ll have to go out if Jughead even agrees to see him. Jughead wonders how many more times the Andrews men will have to stand up for him before the inevitable happens and his future comes barreling in without mercy.

It’s only half an hour, and thankfully it’s spent with a cross-armed Fred and a wary Archie in the booth instead of just a smiling FP rubbing his hands together like he’s warming an itch. Pop’s fries taste like greasy cardboard in Jughead’s mouth. Just another thing to be bitter about. Now his father sucks the joy out of food. They trade short sentences about the park, about school. Archie accidentally mentions Betty and her name strikes a match along both of the Jones’ men. Cooper? Is she your girlfriend? It’s taunting him, so he scowls and changes the subject to the drive-in closing for the winter. I’ll miss it, his father prods, eyebrows raised like he’s asking him for something. But Jughead has nothing to give. So he settles for not having to answer when he’ll go home, because he hopes the answer is never.

A miserable Archie spends a lot of time needing distraction, which in turn leads to a lot less writing. Jughead covers his friend’s broken heart in dry humor, pizza slices, and video games, but it’s nothing compared to the second Betty Cooper comes to the door. And though Jughead longs for the blonde’s calling card, the eager smile on his friend’s face means something, so Jughead excuses himself to the garage to write. To ignore the way Archie’s hand curls around Betty’s small wrist to drag her upstairs, her confused, rich eyes flickering to Jughead’s as he tries to swallow something green and sticky in his throat. He could sit with them. But laying on a mattress while Archie laments endings and longs for the comfort of his favorite girl is something painful enough to imagine, let alone experience. It feels like he’ll disappear. So he sits in the sound proof garage trying to lose himself in words until Betty finds him and reminds him of the joy of beginnings.

Even in a world where Jughead gets to kiss Betty Cooper, not everything is going to be perfect. The young Serpents start showing up at Pop’s to drop off scrawled messages on dirty napkins, hanging out in the parking lot until Sheriff Keller gets wind of it and shoos them away like they’re raccoons messing with garbage instead of kids potentially looking for grub. FP leaves Jughead drunken apologies and pleas to see him again. Jughead thinks about answering them, his fingers hovering over the dial button on his phone until the screen darkens in his uncertainty. After one particularly
grating message about trying and having a place with the Serpents, Jughead grabs a fistful of finger-stained napkin messages and bursts into the garage. His thumb flicks open the lighter and consumes his father’s lies in a satisfying orange maw, the words falling in broken ashes at his feet. The next day Betty tries to kiss him in the garage but all he can smell is ashes. She asks if he wants to run and it makes him want to cry.

With the cold quiet of the snow, Jughead takes comfort in the dogged way Betty forces her way over the sidewalk. The shoes, her attire, technically everything should be wrong for this kind of weather, but she conquers it anyway. He can tell it wears her out quicker because the runs have gotten shorter, but they haven’t decreased in frequency. When she’s struggling to make it past their house to get to her own, looking hesitant to go back inside, he dares revealing how attuned he is to her presence and opens the door to invite her in.

The intention is just hot chocolate or tea, but whatever he makes ends up tasting like chalk or seeds. She makes it better, but he wants her to relax. Running in the cold makes her uncomfortable, and she rubs her calves in an attempt to warm them up. An overly eager but possibly very sweet part of him wants to do it for her. The laptop gets safely set aside and she places her strong, bare legs on his lap. It feels like she’s trusting him with something precious. He grabs some lotion that probably hasn’t been used since Mary was an Andrews and lets his hands caress her with the firmness she needs. Her skin is cold to the touch, muscles burning underneath. Jughead lavishes her in whatever comfort he can, rubbing and knotting out the tension, loving that his hands can do something for her. Sometimes her wince seems more like a jerk, like he’s touched her somewhere really good, and Jughead struggles not to let his blood flow places that will need touching later.

His ass hits the hard floor. Betty’s hands work his shoulders, and the smell of her sweat mixed with something stronger does something to make him shiver in anticipation. She peels at his layers, plucking one shirt from the next until he’s lost in it, letting his head fall back and his beanie touches the apex of her thighs. He thinks he moans, the soft glow of the overhead light dancing orange and yellow spots behind his eyelids. He wishes he could have her everywhere, and just as he’s trying to clear away the thought, her lips craft comfort on his skin and his whole body erupts in fevered chills.

Her touch...their touch, is something special. His fingers seek her for more poetry than he could ever lay out on his keys. It doesn’t even have to be her skin. Her shoulder, beneath a pale blue sweater. Her knee under the cafeteria table. Something happens when they touch, like he’s playing a song he can finally dance to, a new language full of secrets and wonderment. Sometimes it overwhelms her, body trembling, and sometimes she stills with absolute clarity. It’s the only time he feels like he’s fixing something. Making something better beyond the edits on the page. The intensity of the resulting magnificence is so intense that sometimes people look away. Betty’s afraid they’ll be blinded by it. Jughead just wants her to shine.

Despite the ever-constant presence he has in the circle, Jughead still has the uncanny ability to disappear. He’s relying on it, because when Veronica makes a jab about him being Betty’s boyfriend the entire world opens up in possibility and slams shut with just an expression. Betty’s eyebrows knit together, her entire body shuttered in what he can only assume is the troubled realization that she’s spent too much time with the boy who plays with fire. Jughead licks his chapped lips hoping for a remnant of her taste and leaves the student lounge before anyone else will ever realize he’s there.
The stem of the leaf feels so delicate in his hands, but he can’t resist twirling it, letting the faded yellow spin until he can’t make out its edges. He’s just waiting for it to fall apart, to crumple in front of him, even if he doesn’t have the heart to smother it himself. Part of him wants to burn it. Just take it out to the garage and destroy it like the false hope that’s been the rest of his life. The hard smack of feet against pavement and heavy breaths outside pulls at his chest and weigh his head down until it’s between his knees. His fists come up to his beanie, blocking his ears but not the mental image of her parted lips, breath curling out of them like a mantra more powerful than smoke.

When she comes back, the leaf is back in its pages and Jughead waits by the cold window on the first floor because he doesn’t think he can bear to have his heart broken in Archie’s bedroom, the redhead of his youth in the bed above his pretending not to hear the muffled sobs. But maybe he won’t cry. Maybe he’ll just shut down. Go back to being the worthless kid from the wrong side of the tracks, the one who stares at her too hard and eats too much because there’s never enough.

He’s only pretending to write, his fingers laying limp on the keys when he catches sight of her halting on the sidewalk, gesturing to him with her chin. Everything feels like it’s in slow motion, like he’s preparing her fists to pound into him like they did the ground at Andrews’ construction yard. And he’ll take it all because he can’t do anything else. Quietly, his fists stuffed in his pockets, he takes his place on the porch. Swallowing hard, he meets her steel expression, sharp enough to slice his heart out.

“Would you be willing to meet my parents for dinner?” she asks, the words as firm and decided as her stance. His mouth hovers on unspoken words, confused by the emotion still lodged in his throat.

When he’s back inside, he touches the golden leaf again, wondering how it’s still intact. Archie asks him what he’s doing, and Jughead struggles to find the words, because sometimes he doesn’t know.

None of Archie’s clothes fit him right. But Jughead doesn’t have anything _nice_. He has _warm_. Comfortable. Affordable. And dark. Nothing that really screams the Cooper house. But he accidentally catches an approving smile from Betty through the window and is reminded with a powerful tug on his own lips that he’s supposed to go as himself.

It feels like a test rigged to fail, the Coopers eyeing him shrewdly from his beanie down to his boots. He stands as tall as he can, chin tilted up to take one on the chin but he can’t suppress the little spark of defiance in his eyes. Once the unpleasantries are over, he’s seated by himself on the long side of the table, across from Betty so he can look to her for support amidst the inquisition. The pacing is odd. Rapid judgments, necessary defenses, and an incessant air of forced pleasantry amidst the smell of fresh-baked rolls. He steadies himself as Betty’s guest, decidedly more polite than he’d like to be at their subtle jabs. Polly glowers at him for not having red hair, much like everyone else in the world. Betty’s feet jitter under the table, and he can’t help but surmise from her pained smile that she wants to leave, but when her foot grazes his he realizes that she wants to take him with her.

Alice and Hal make it clear they don’t respect his name, but they do respect that he’s not a Blossom, and that’s the best they can do right now. Before he can ask for Betty’s appraisal she’s on tip-toe, kissing him politely but decidedly in front of his jurors. The tang of her lips stains him, dizzies him to the point he doesn’t care about his own name or the invisible score card taped to his back like a _kick me_ sign. She smiles at him until she’s called back inside, and Jughead wants to stand there until it’s morning and he can see her face again, just to know they’re more than trysts in a garage and the heart of the woods where no one can hear them breathe each other in.
Fred’s not here to tune the moral compass, and the brunette girl seems to be messing with it out of spite for whatever her issue of the week is. Veronica’s perched like a swaying cat on the bed next to Archie. Kevin is notably absent from the judgment committee, though Jughead doesn’t miss him. Determined, they start the second round of the inquisition, the ever-present question of so are you her boyfriend? flung at him like so many darts at his forehead. They’re all waiting in line, waiting for him to fade back into nothing. He wants to take his mattress up as a shield against them. Instead, he demands to go to bed. Veronica’s purposely belligerent, refusing to call her driver or mother, and Archie can’t drive her in his inebriated state anyways. We can’t make her stay on the couch, Archie slurs. She’s a girl. Like that means she’s a lady or of intrinsically more value than a best friend. Archie wants him to give up his bed. And what is he supposed to say in a home that isn’t his own? In a house he apparently has no stake in?

Scoffing, Jughead grabs his stuff and takes off for the garage amidst their invasive questions about what his role in Betty’s life means for everyone else. Jughead risks a glance at Betty’s pink window, willing her to appear. The natural connection they have doesn’t seem to be in effect, but when he listens closely he can hear her arguing in Polly’s room. He wonders if it’s about him. If someone is fighting for him after all these years. But probably not.

The garage is uncomfortably cold, and Jughead feels the frame of the couch dig into him as a painful reminder that he doesn’t have a home. Even with his arm over his eyes, the motorcycle purrs at him, begging to be ridden. The lighter on the high shelf sits waiting, ready to spring into action. He lets out a shallow, visible breath, determined to sneak back inside where he’s safe from the bite of steel.

Chapter End Notes

I think this is the first chapter that ends on a bitter note since POTENTIALLY the first one. But there’s so much cute Bughead earlier so hopefully you still have some beautiful moments and feelings you'd like to share. I mean, if they're ugly feelings you can share those too T-T I'm sorry! Archie and V are hurting and that's why they're such gallumphs right now. Winter is a bit rougher of a season for these kids, so we're gonna have to strap into some fluffy coats and get the marshmallows out. I'd love a happy thought if you have one, and hope you have a wonderful day.
B4 - You Get Hurt

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer - There will be no cheating, sideways or otherwise in my Bughead ramblings. There is a hot second in this fic that Betty thinks something happened (if you remember how last chapter ended it makes sense) but not-so-shocking spoiler, no one will come between them that way. Ever. I know as a reader it makes me feel squicky when it's hinted, let alone shoved in my face, so rest assured they are entering a monogamous relationship (which they're kinda already in). Ahem. Anyway. Teenage hormones. As you were.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She’s started wrapping her wrists in soft elastic guards to warm her pulse points and slick away sweat. It’s something her mother wants her to try to help with her skin, and one of the few recommendations that actually interests her. The fight with Polly still sits unsettled in her stomach, the inspiration of her early morning exercise. Selfish. Words were hurled at each other like the sticky mashed potatoes left from dinner, dripping and cold. All over a supposed lack of respect for love. Not expecting the boys to be up yet, but still hoping for a glimpse of hers, Betty glances out her window. She’s startled by the silhouette of her self-proclaimed best friend holding a bra in her hand and leaning over the mattress on the floor. Veronica’s head dips down, lips pursed to give someone a kiss, and Betty’s heart erupts into flames.

Mechanically, Betty finds herself staring at her front door. It seems impassable. Her hand hovers in the air, not sure whether she even wants to turn the handle and face the cold harsh reality outside. She never said he was her boyfriend. Beyond this door is where she kissed him. An eternity ago, a second ago, before her heart was oozing in her chest and spreading throughout her limbs like the rotten thing it really is. But maybe it can’t be real. The door seems heavy as she heaves it open, letting the air spark across her skin, dousing her radiating body in a cool breeze. Veronica is on the Andrews’ front porch with a quiet, satisfied smile. Her chin pops up in surprise when she spots Betty in her bright pink sweatshirt. Something akin to guilt and panic transform her friend’s face into someone she barely recognizes. “B. I just—I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

How could you? radiates in her with a trembling fury, a squealing, deafening NO crying harder. She takes off running down the street, and Veronica can’t follow her in heels. Something that might be her name grasps desperately at the air behind her. Betty’s phone pings with a text from Archie. “Please don’t be mad. After your dinner, there was some drinking and things happened. It was probably a one-time thing.” Everyone must think she’s a total idiot. Some smiling blonde to take to the movies and hold hands with and rip her hair out under the pretense of brushing it just because she’s too nice not to forgive. She doesn’t feel too nice for anything. Not even having her heart ripped out and spat in by the people who are supposed to be everything.

Trying to remove herself from the world, Betty goes off the path towards Sweetwater River and runs
until her lungs threaten to burst, until her cheeks feel raw and exposed with carving agony trailing down her face. There’s only a small lump of snow now where the leaves used to be. Part of her wants to dive into it just to remind herself that it was real, that it was good, and bury herself in it to stop the screaming in her head. Jughead calls her but she lets it go to voicemail. His text just reads “Are you okay?” In her anger, she slams a foot through the ice and lets it plunge her calves in the harsh chill of the water, longing for the feel of knives to drag her into frosty numbness.

Running back is harder, but worried fragments of studies about losing toes and losing boyfriends keep looping through her mind until she’s hobbling as fast as she can back to the house, to a warm bath, to the white walls that keep everyone else out. Archie’s on the front porch already, so there’s no way to avoid him no matter how fast she goes. “Betty, you know I love you,” he insists, “You didn’t deserve to find out this way.” Betty feels her ears flame, the boy becoming a blur of nothing but peach and red amidst angry tears, even as he moves to block her path. The dark shape of Veronica comes out too, wrapped in her expensive coat with dark lips muted by whatever sins she trespassed the night before. Maybe even this morning. Veronica’s eyes are dark and glassy with tears, edged with clumped mascara. It’s clear that she’s wracking through whatever sincere emotions she can conjure. “It just...happened. I'm so sorry.” Betty tightens, icicles stabbing every inch of her skin, feeling like she’s still on fire, remembering that Veronica is ice.

A ripping, searing pain shifts inside of her as Jughead appears in the doorway behind them, looking quizzical and more than a little insecure, hiding his neck in the fleece of his jacket. The image doesn’t add up the way she expects it to. A tearful Veronica, a pleading Archie, and an anxious, angry Jughead. She glances past them to the living room and spots Jughead’s backpack and his favorite blanket on the couch. The pieces start to click together in her brain, words slowly seeping in through the cracks. Something unravels in her chest so quickly that she sobs. The force of her release knocks Veronica and Archie into silence as her physical body rams into Jughead, desperate to be reunited. Stunned by the impact, he slowly starts to cradle her and lets her sully his soft collar with her tears. “I thought it was you,” she whispers painfully in the solace of his warmth.

Some new kind of tension ripples through them, and she squeezes her eyes shut against the new onslaught of anxiousness. His breath catches, releasing in surprise as his fingers trace comfortingly through her hair. “I’m yours, Betty. You have to know that. I would never...” He sighs, gripping her closer, cradling her heart against him, even as it strains. “I don't ever want to hurt you. I will never choose someone else's skin over yours, over my own. You're a part of me,” his voice catches, face turning for more contact against her prickling skin. "This...feeling. It's only with you. I'm only with you.”

The words to define them, something seemingly beyond language and written in their caresses, fall easily from his lips, as natural as water flowing down a stream, a small gentle waterfall to soothe her to sleep. Hers come out haltingly in relieved sobs, like the sky opening up in a torrential downpour with fat splashes across the landscape, thunder rattling in her chest. Jughead’s lips are cool, his breath hot against her skin, and she shivers with the craving of this tangible thing. Forgotten in the haze of declarations, the people behind her want to clear the air at Pop’s for breakfast. The next step in the right direction. Jughead’s pulse quickens in anticipation against her and she clenches him hard to let him know she’ll run with him if he wants to.

She cleans up quickly, covering her swollen ankle with thick socks and a flash of shame before rejoining the crew. Betty clamps her fingers tightly around Jughead’s as they slide into the booth. All that she comprehends through mouthfuls of pancakes and milkshakes is that Jughead is hers (boyfriend, she’d confirmed aloud for assurance, which he’d repeated reassuringly with a warm
smile) and Archie and Veronica have found comfort in each other. She feels like everyone keeps waiting for her to react like she did this morning, but beyond a halfhearted smile a vague shrug she's not sure what to think about it. She wants to smother thoughts like, But why Jughead's bed? Why did you reach for me? and Why after our night? Because as much as it pains her to realize, it's selfish to claim that the night belongs to them just because her heart belongs to Jughead. Like no one else matters. She sips quietly on her straw and wonders if she should apologize to Polly, even if her sister is often guilty of excluding Betty from her little world of love.

Eventually Jughead shifts his hand and flexes. She worries she’s crushed him with the morning’s fear, but he wraps an arm around her and pulls her close to his body until the panic in her chest subsides into satisfaction and warmth. He dips a fry in her milkshake and she smiles. What’s yours is mine. Pleasantly surprised to bask in her attention amidst an audience, Jughead sneaks her a wink and gestures gently with his chin that she might want to be listening to their friends pour their hearts out. It’s hard, though, when it feels like hers is sitting at the table right next to her.

That night she feels a spiraling panic build, expanding outside of her bones and branching like veins into the ceiling above her bed. It had been so easy for her world to fall apart. One small incident, a match that set off an explosion. She always thought she was level-headed, like her father. But she’s not. She’s a fire-breather, like her mother. Or maybe something worse. Something weak. Betty gets up, wanting to go outside. A jolt of pain shoots up from her ankle. She can’t run. She can’t run like this. She can’t.

Staring at the wall instead of the window, salty paths dried on her cheeks, Betty finally texts Jughead to see if he’s awake, to see if he’s safe. The unknown element of it all is agonizing. It’s a mistake, to mention that she can’t sleep because of the throbbing pain in her bones. It’s not his burden to bear. But Jughead calls her anyway, his soft voice reassuring her, and when her tone breaks, he comes to the window using the ladder Jason does to get to Polly’s room. Something threatens to overwhelm her when he crawls through the threshold, a sick internal desperation to lay back and let him swallow her whole in those soft, concerned eyes…with his patient, pliant mouth. Her swollen ankle can’t handle direct touch to ease the ache, so Jughead curls around her, his heartbeat calm against her back. He’s safe. He kisses the back of her neck softly, without demand, and something warm spreads throughout her body, dissolving the pain. Betty’s fairly certain that it’s love.

In the morning, they wake up together, the remnants of pale yellows and oranges cascading over their skin. The normal pull to get out of bed and go outside is muted by the enveloping comfort around her, his limbs securing her reverie within her body. When she rolls over to meet his fluttering gaze, they’re vaguely aware of the surreal aspect of it all, sleepy and quiet and waiting. Their fingers thread through each others’ hair like it’s soft silk, like they’re studying each other in a dream. Long, dark eyelashes. Plush lips. Constellations of freckles. His eyes a soft murky gray bathed in prisms of blue when he shifts into the light. The intimacy of the morning feels so different than what she thought she’d seen. So much softer. Theirs.

When her body brushes the front of his morning ache, he shifts like maybe it’s too sensitive to be touched, much like the injury on her ankle. Maybe she’s hurt him in some way she hasn’t even realized. He confesses he doesn’t feel like he belongs at Archie’s anymore, like he doesn’t belong anywhere. So she watches him, holds, and kisses and warms him in the hopeful reminder that they belong together, they’re meant to be twined in the early mornings, the late afternoons. That he can’t be lost forever. Thunder rumbles in her chest again.
As he’s going down the ladder her voice cracks the atmosphere like something breaking through ice, needing to reach him, sure and defined. “I want you to stay.” He freezes on the last wrung, big blue eyes brightly swirling in awe, black hair stark against the soft fall of snow, and she wants to add the word, Forever.

Chapter End Notes

Betty can't run right now. Yep. That's...not good. But not terrible, right? She can't run, Jughead's been entreated to stay...I mean...good things could be happening here! What do you think? This section was slightly more plot-driven by ONE event but it's a big one so I think it deserves its own little thing. Especially because the core four dynamic significantly shifts in this one. See more of Jug's perspective, especially on Varchie, next chapter, which will be posted soon. I decided to opt for two short chapters instead of a long one since the current mood~ seems to shift from here. I'll let Betty's chapter sit for a day or two before Jug's but I do always feel more motivated after hearing your thoughts so I can share more with you, should you feel so inclined. Thank you for sharing your voices so far ^-^
Y’all were so great about commenting on the last chapter that I got all excited and was about to post this one yesterday but alas, internet connection. I’ll respond to them soon I promise ^-^ Your thoughts inspire my heart so thank you for that

The couch in the living room is fine, further removed from the roars of engines and flames of the night. Fred’s bedroom might’ve been an option for Archie, but Jughead wouldn’t dare take advantage of Fred’s empty bed after all he’s done for him. And he’d rather sleep outside in the snow than share a room with Veronica. Still resentful, Jughead drifts in and out of uneasy dreams until the solid thuds of Veronica’s heels echo down the wooden stairs. Groaning, he turns over so he doesn’t have to face the thorn of Pembrook. At his audible protest, she pauses, like she’s still getting used to caring about other people. It’s not like it’ll occur to her that he has nowhere else to go. Nowhere else that doesn’t smell like beer and b.o. with walls thin enough to hear the neighbors hollering while Serpents circle outside. She must remove her shoes because it’s quieter the rest of the way down, just the subtle shift of nylons. He hears her slip out the front door and hopes she freezes to death. The worst he can currently wish on Archie for his betrayal is for Vegas to bite at him, but given enough time he can probably think of something more creative.

Jughead bolts awake, the voice of Veronica pleading for Betty amidst a heavy footfall of a sprint outside. “Betty?” he asks groggily. Why Betty? Is Veronica intent on taking over every aspect of his life? He flings the blanket off. The wicked are even stealing his sleep now. Veronica’s wobbling on the porch, sniffing dramatically in her high heels. At the very least, she looks disheveled and distraught this morning. But it has nothing to do with displacing Jughead and everything to do with a blonde disappearing beyond the snow banks of Elm Street. The very idea that Veronica has remorse (or love) under that calculating product of a personage is something that edges into the land of make-believe. Still, Betty shifts the universe around her to the point where nothing can really be deemed impossible. Veronica covers her smudged mouth in another sob, pushing past him. The biting questions of what right do you have...to cry over my...Betty, to drink with Archie, to stomp me out with your designer brand selfishness) get swallowed like bile when he realizes that Betty’s gone and gets a horrible, sinking idea of why. The word types out in his brain, each letter stamping the breath out of him. Jealousy.

His snappy demands what happened to Betty? go ignored, and he ends up having to storm upstairs after the brunette to get any real details beyond that there was a sighting of the much-adored blonde in their lives along with Veronica’s currently disheveled state. Archie’s half-naked and bleary-eyed on the mattress that’s supposed to be Jughead’s life raft, especially after a night with the Coopers. He’d be more bitter if it’d been Veronica in his place, but resentment still curls into Jughead’s fists. It takes them a few seconds to put together Veronica’s bleating explanation of why Betty took off. “You should’ve seen the look on her face,” she starts crying, knuckles going up to the dark smears hardened in the corner of her eyes. “I’m the monster from New York all over again.” Jughead’s heart starts pounding painfully in his chest while Archie scatters to text her, asking how mad they think she is. No one comforts Jughead that Betty might be upset over another man.

Another woman. Both of these people want to go after her and leave him behind, a footnote in the core of it all. And yet he doesn’t even have the energy to be anything other than pissed off and
concerned because they’re all being selfish assholes when someone is in pain. Maybe he ought to burn Archie’s book and save the leaves for another day, because obviously the whole town is going to hell.

He calls Betty once he’s safely in the garage, having talked himself down from *she loves them (him) more than me to she’s in a rough place*. The ringtone plays like a xylophone across his insides, vibrating his core until her voicemail kicks him in the gut. Sometimes she shuts down like this. Like right before she asked him to her parents’ place. And she just needs to run to sort herself out. *Are you okay?* he texts her, because he isn’t. Jughead lets the phone rest against his forehead and flicks the lighter in his other hand. The catch of metal pulses in his veins, something that makes sense enough to drown out the noise in his head. *She’ll come back. She has to come back.*

When she does, Archie’s the one pacing outside, trying to corner her before she can escape them. Because maybe it should be Archie, shit friend that he is right now. Maybe he’d be a better (boyfriend), a better fit at that judgmental dinner table or alongside her at Pop’s. A more vibrant partner when she needs to pound out her anger into the earth. But mostly he lets him do it because maybe, as horrible and world-ending as it is, it’s what she wants. He has to know, even if it destroys him. Jughead keeps his teeth grit, tempted to drown them out with music just so whatever words they end up using don’t slick into his skull and torture him forever along with the pounding of her determined footsteps. But her gait is different than normal. Imbalanced. Letting his newly-packed bag fall to the couch, Jughead slinks out after a shivering Veronica as they all bid for the runner’s love. Betty’s practically a pink flame against the snow, eclipsing everything else and making Jughead’s heart catch in his throat. He feels like a shadow on the wall again, hovering behind her friends as he watches his pink and yellow girl surge in some wild inner fury. It looks like she’s about to break out of her pretty pink sweatshirt and hurl the mailbox at them, nails and all. But her hands are occupied, one clutching music to no doubt drown them out and another high on her creamy thigh, nursing blotchy angry marks that trail all the way down to the jagged angle her ankle throbs. His concern for the injury is cut off by her sharp expression raging from Veronica and Archie to land on him. Confused that she can see him through all this, he waits, ready to be mowed down by her choosing someone else, *everyone else*, but her eyes lose that hard edge and shift into confusion at the situation. She doesn’t see Veronica and Archie, it’s almost like she never has, and something finally seems to *click*. Her face crumples in something more than relief and she sobs, shiny tears streaking down her beautiful flushed face as she surges forward, past her friends and into his arms with the weight of everything she runs with. It’s enough to slam him back into the threshold of the Andrews house, and his arms instinctively wrap around her to catch whatever sorrow she has to give. Whether it’s mourning Archie. Or Veronica. Or them. His fingers curl into her hair, savoring it with a sickening feeling of desperation, like maybe he’s only good for comforting her and family dinners when Archie’s too busy making eyes at the new girl.

“I thought it was you,” she breathes wetly into his ear, moisture lingering on its shell. Her chest heaves against him with sobs, and it takes him a full few seconds to process it. She thought…it was him? That he’d… Been part of some horrible display? The star of it, when the entirety of what’s good, what’s tethering him in this universe is in his arms? Even the thought of being with anyone else leaves him cold and nauseous when Betty is warmth and inspiration. And *he’s* the one she’d be upset over. He feels terrible and relieved all at the same time. Jughead clutches her a little closer, relishing the way she goes soft in his arms.

“I’m yours, Betty. You have to know that. I would never…” *Promises*. Not something he's used to
people keeping. The air seems thicker, harder to breathe, and suddenly he needs to press his mouth against her, marking the words into her flesh with his tongue, the same way they’re inevitably carved into his soul. He wonders if her body pressed against him hard enough to knot their pulses together is her way of screaming that she feels the same. “I don’t ever want to hurt you. I will never choose someone else’s skin over yours, over my own. You’re a part of me,” his voice catches, wetness burning his eyes, needing the smooth and sweaty comfort of her cheek. “This...feeling. It’s only with you. I’m only with you,” he confesses, hoping to comfort her, to promise her. Forever, and everything in between.

It should be awkward at Pop’s, but the only thing making him blush is how fixated Betty’s attention is squarely on him. It’s like she’s afraid to let go of him, to let go of this for even a second. She’d clarified the words he wants, and although he wants forever and something along the lines of yours and mine, he’d settled for her anticipation for boyfriend. Girlfriend. Even thinking the words in accordance with him and Betty leaves a pleasant vibration on his tongue. Her freezing cold skin prompts him to let go of her trembling fingers, noting her anxiousness the moment they lose contact, to draw her tighter against his side and warm her up in the comfort of Pop’s. He bites back a grin at Betty’s open adoration, Archie’s dour expression, and Veronica’s unheard attempts at reconciliation because there’s nothing to reconcile. With her, at least. Betty loves Jughead. Betty wants him, and nobody else. Jughead, against all odds, is her boyfriend. Her future. It’s all absurd, and he’s loving every second of it. He dips a french fry into Betty’s shake and thinks it’s the best thing he’s ever tasted besides her smile.

It feels weird, going back to Archie’s. His friend looks awkward and sullen even as his cautious brown eyes raise to meet his. “Sorry. For...you know.” Jughead’s not sure Archie fully grasps how much there is to lose. How little Jughead has. How much Betty means to him, to them. Maybe the music teacher wore away Archie’s charm and innocence. Jughead quietly wonders if Mary’s phone calls hinder or comfort his friend, reminding Archie that his mother loves him, but thrives far away from their little town, far from him. Gladys lets Jughead stew in the empty silence, uncaring of what it turns him into. Perhaps Archie’s experiments in the world of women, Val and Veronica and everyone else, had failed, and now Archie’s the one scrambling to be the one to stay for, the one the nurturing blonde should smile at from her window while his best friend plays video games and makes colorful commentary from the floor. Jughead understands, but it’s hard to forgive nonetheless.

It’s similar to the way he understands Veronica is used to getting everything she wants. No sharing or rationing when Daddy's footing the bill and calling her mija while he whittles his way out of any long-term consequences. That the only person who expects her to be good, who thinks she can and should be, is the blonde that makes everything seem possible. The one who's chosen a boy with nothing but words and fire, who declines Veronica's money and influence in lieu of linked arms and milkshakes. Betty, who'd pass by the allure of the Pembrook to run by the river. No matter how insistent, how devoted, the Lodges cannot infiltrate past the metaphorical salt circle around the Cooper home. It's a generalized assumption that it's in Lodge blood to crush or own whatever they touch, discarding the rest. He wonders how difficult it is for Veronica to resist that impulse to do that to Betty, curl around her and squeeze until she gets what she wants. Her latest attempts to break up Jughead’s world so she could grab a favored piece accidentally burned their beloved girl, and that at least should keep her manipulative blood at bay. Betty's kinship is worth a thousand terrible families, something that can quiet the inherited urge for carnage and ruin.

His mind wanders to crescent-shaped grooves on Betty's palms, the screaming, angry splotches on her ankle. Glancing down at his jacket, he notes a few reddish marks that sicken his stomach,
clenching something deep and dark in his bones. He didn't use ketchup on his fries at Pop's. This sort of stain has stared up at him from the floor of the trailer. His fingers twitch with the desire to close wounds, to seal away the pain he's shoveled aside for years and help Betty. Maybe help Archie, if either of them can muster any kind of kinship again. The boys who love the blonde, even if in very different ways. They've all been forced to make allowances in the greedy hope that love is real, that the world is theirs. The boys eat pizza bites in relative silence, the red sauce clumpy and bright, squeezing out of the cheesy bites between their calloused fingers. Jughead watches Archie dispose of glass bottles, haunted by the rattling sounds that somehow followed him into this house. He longs for the chipper clink of strawberry milkshakes instead. The clack of keys and a set of cushy headphones distract him into the night, dreading the knowledge that motivations may explain actions but they don't excuse them. They don't stop things from falling apart, from bleeding out right in front of him. He pushes his fingers harder on the keys as if he's staunching a wound, but he's not sure it'll be enough.

A message. From her. It's late, and he worries about her, unable to sleep on the freshly-washed sheets when his mind is filled with images of Betty curled on her mattress, adrift in the dark when they should be together. Her voice waivers on the other end of the line and the invisible string tethering them together pulls him towards her bedroom. He's filled with purpose. Jocks like Jason might climb the window to Polly's room all the time, and the older Cooper has crawled out on more than one occasion, but for Jughead the climb is significant. It's the first ascent he's had to make since the treehouse, a redhead and blonde peering down at him with big smiles on their faces and the promise of adventure.

When he climbs through her window, her eyes shine with relief in the dark, and it's like the entire night sky welcomes him into her life. Jughead's acutely aware of the way she avoids rustling her ankle, the way her hand curls into his clothes as if she's afraid he's going to disappear. They sink into bed enveloped in one another, her unsteady heartbeat evening out with his pressure at her back. Everything feels cushioned, warm, and on its way to being right. With every steady breath, they sink further into unison until he can't stand not expressing how deeply he feels connected to her. It takes shape in one soft kiss on the back of her neck. Betty's body does one long shiver, his arms instinctively hugging her in reassurance. Her hips nudge further back against him as a soft, satisfied sigh drags them into peace. His girlfriend. His person.

Something rocks gently in his arms, waking him from one dream to a fantastic unreality. He's still surrounded by the beautifully rosy skin of the soft girl beside him, inside of him. Her dark blonde eyelashes flutter cautiously but unashamedly as she studies his face, gently tracing him with a caress that leaves a tingling glow in its wake. It's like she thinks he's beautiful. And maybe in her eyes, in this pocket world of theirs, he is. He sinks his hands in the downy softness of her hair, not sure if the oil makes it slick and easy to slip through or if it just means it's good to hold onto. The green in her eyes darkens, molten and reflecting his shadows without a trace of fear. They're safe here.

As much as he wants to envelop her, taste her, discover her body, somehow these sculpting touches feel more important. An almost painful jolt of want surges through him with Betty's accidental brush against a sensitive, hard part of him, and he closes his eyes against it, fully aware of the blood rushing through him when he knows they need to be still, to recover. But her eyes are tight and glassy, creating a reason why he'd ever pull away from her, and it takes a less effort than he thought it would to give her the real one. "I'm afraid that if I get too happy with you, or even at Archie's, it'll hurt that much more when it's taken away. I can't—I can't handle that right now." Her body shifts closer, nose nudging his in gentle encouragement. "Sometimes it feels like I don't belong anywhere at all." He's afraid to look in her eyes, to see disappointment or pain edged into their reflections. Her fingers stroke his cheeks, begging him to see her. So he does, a trembling sort of need to be unreal
stretching his marrow to twine with hers.

Her lips and hands keep reassuring him, plying him with warmth as he gets ready to go back into the cold. Just as he’s about halfway down the ladder, she leans over the window’s edge and calls to him. Her lips as rosy as her cheeks, golden hair dangling down like a rope braid of its own accord. Green eyes shine blue and white with the reflection of his sherpa jacket and freshly falling snow. There’s a hint of desperation and resolve when she says, too loudly for the early hour meant for whispers, “I want you to stay.” The wind swirls chill across his skin, snowflakes dancing across his cheeks and sticking to their hair. Some distant light shines on them, but all he feels is the glow of Betty Cooper surging through his veins in the little world of Riverdale.

Chapter End Notes

Jughead is like 5k% DONE with shenanigans and yet he's trying super hard not to lose his shit at Archie because they've been best friends forever and otherwise he has to go to his dad's, who's done arguably worse things than try to be his girlfriend's priority. SPEAKING OF. Guess what needs to happen now that Betty's introduced him to the pit of judgment that is the Cooper house? Meeting Serpent dads! Huzzah! Confetti! So what did you think? Is Veronica legit staying out of things? How will Archie and Jug repair this thing between them? I don't think Jug and V will ever have much more than a reluctant truce not to piss each other off for Betty’s sake. I love your thoughts and hope you have a wonderful day. Lemme know when you're ready for the next chapter ^_^
B5

Chapter Notes

Sexy things at the beginning! I'm pretty sure I don't need to up the rating but you let me know. Teens are aware of this sort of thing, I presume.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The hum of vehicles passes by the house, but Betty isn’t fast enough to see them. Apparently her flesh will get loose if she doesn’t keep herself tight in the colder months. Alice punctuates the helpful fact with an eyebrow raise and sip of tea. So Betty bundles up, still too sore for intense impact, eyes bleary from a lack of sleep, a lack of Jughead the past few nights. Sometimes he surprises her, his breath even against her back, leaving wetness that she’s not sure is from his mouth or his eyes. She stays until he’s dry, until he’s warm and no longer trembling against her. Her fingers trace the swell under his eyes, trying to soak up any despair in him with lingering devotion.

When they’re close like this, she thinks better. Maybe too much, or not at all. Maybe that’s better by itself. She smiles at him, glancing at the ceiling, and suddenly his mouth is right at her ear, ready to share yet another moment that just belongs to them. The sharp puff of his breath, his words, shatters her self control. Squealing, she shivers against him, pulling away and under him at the same time. Betty, he chides with wide, horribly amused eyes. Covering her mouth does nothing to relieve the rebellious laughter waiting to burst under both of them. The adrenaline, the silliness of being caught over something so minute shakes through her with such wild abandon that she has to slam a pillow over both of their heads and laugh. Nobody comes in. They can’t possibly ruin something this bright and perfect this time. Jughead’s bright eyes and wide smile under the pillow with her feels like a moment she’ll bottle with her for the rest of her life, tagging the memory with a star sticker in her diary.

They tend to each other less intimately during the day. Holding hands during free period, sharing knowing glances when the teacher gives them an assignment that’s definitely beyond his lab partners. Kevin and Veronica pass notes with her on bright post-its, but Betty prepares a long lined sheet specially for Jughead each day, giving him as much room as he needs for the scrawled messages so messy she has to decode them sometimes. There’s always something he wants to say. Archie, lately, doesn’t have anything, and stares at his homework like he’s trying to read and the words don’t make sense. Betty’d offer to tutor him, but Veronica almost sets something on fire in the lab and he’s gone by the time she settles it.

Running is still too painful, so technically her muscles shouldn’t be sore, but there’s still this tension that works its way inside of her. The aches are the worst at night. Worse and better with Jughead at her side. When he’s pressed against her, she doesn’t feel her ankle throb, but everything else either melts in relaxation or flares up with tightness, needing him. Her entire body wants to work with him, unravel its knots by tangling in their healing touch.

When it’s time for him to crawl back out the window, still half in a dream, they share a long, fervent kiss. And she can’t help the urgency that arises. Their mouths are open and demanding, their fingers crawling under shirts, leaving a delicious tingling in their wake. She wants this. More. Possessed
with assuredness, she helps him remove the cloth barriers between them, pushing his pants down, something hot and hard pressing against the place that aches and lubricates at his nearness. And his touch. It’s beyond massages, clearing passages. It’s raw nerve endings, clenching muscles, need.

The sound of a door handle startles them, and she holds him close before he can bolt. Why? her brain wheedles. Why not let him escape? Because this isn’t something we should run from, she reassures herself, steadying their heartbeat with attempted rational thought, and then with Jughead’s heated, stormy gaze that slowly softens in the stillness of their bodies pressed together. When the footsteps retreat into another room, his kiss is solemn, apologetic. “I have to go.” She wishes he didn’t.

Probably due to some misplaced sympathy for her injury, Betty finagles invitations for Jughead to join her for breakfast before walking to school. Sometimes they even share a ride (but not on the motorcycle that stares unblinkingly from the garage). Archie tends to sleep in, his bad habit of running late preventing him from joining the ride-share program. She’s fairly certain Jughead would be late too if not for their unusual, synced-up sleeping schedule. He easily scarfs down the food so often a veiled criticism, and watching him tackle it and her family’s pointed comments with indifference makes it easier for the morning sustenance to slide down her throat, pocketing the fruit for herself or a friend if they need a sweet treat for later.

When Alice drives, it’s a constant barrage of Polly shoving her feet against the glove compartment until Alice berates her into conceding, only for the other one to edge its way up and the process to start all over. Sometimes it’s a rant about clothes. About neighbors. Alice’s head swivels on a constant vigil for distractions that need adjusting. Jughead and Betty quietly hold hands in the back, exchanging wry smiles in the knowledge that the drive feels innately longer than it is.

One morning Hal offers to take them, and the ride is significantly quieter because Polly knows better than to goad her father by putting her salt-crusted shoes on his pristine labor of passion. Just as they exit the car, Hal asks Jughead to stay behind. Air punctures Betty’s lungs, but she forces a reassuring smile in her boyfriend’s direction as the car door shuts in her face. She stands with her books clenched to her chest, letting Veronica wait a few extra seconds with her coffee and scones. When Jughead’s dismissed, her father seems satisfied. Chipper, even, as he waves and pulls away. Jughead’s hand fists tightly around her own like he’s clenching their heartbeats into submission. “Everything okay?” she asks, and Jughead nods, eyes focused grimly on the school doors. “He really cares about you,” is the dull reply, and she gets the impression he means to imply that maybe people don’t worry that way about him.

He still comes to her at night, but doesn’t move to touch her with fevered intensity like he did before. It’s pensive, quiet, but he’s not talking about it. She loves him, she wants him. In all ways, but that new one too. So she edges her fingers under his shirt, across his abdomen, waiting for him to respond. He waits, watching, patiently letting her explore. It doesn’t feel the same. It doesn’t feel like fire. Or sparks. It just feels nice...like Jughead. Her hands move somewhere safe, and she notes with some sadness that lately he’s been wearing his beanie, even in her room. A blooming ache lodges somewhere inside of her. They’re still best friends, she wants to tell him.

Betty sludges to the library under the guise of getting some fresh air. Polly stays locked in her room. If she’s even there. Maybe she’s snuck out to see Jason again, the only person she actually smiles at these days. Miserable, Betty texts Jughead to join her, unable to resist adding some heart emojis. It feels inconsiderate to text one roommate over the other, so Archie gets an offer too, a chance for
tutoring. When Jughead declines, she texts Kevin. But then she probably should text Veronica. The list grows in her head, as does her internal groan, and by the time Archie arrives, he’s drumming his hands on the table so loudly that Ethel Muggs turns and glares at them with a hatred that could silence a small dog. Jughead has obligations, Archie offers with a shrug. He taps a pen on the table in a steady rhythm that reminds her of feet and asks if she’s heard anything from Veronica.

It feels like she’s going in circles again, trying to work her way back up to the pace she’s accustomed to. Every step feels angry, resentful for being so reckless. The snow packs tight underfoot, but at least now she’s forged a path in it. Jughead dutifully scurries along with her, hands in his pocket, eyes on the sidewalk where he drops words like change in a jar, to be collected for later. But it doesn’t feel real enough when his head is down, her body tingling sharply, so halfway around the block she slows, his breath evening out as his hand links to a part of her body, and everything feels warm again.

They talk about pets while walking Vegas, what they’d want. It’s a big commitment, she thinks, but Jughead smiles so fondly at the scraggly dog, reminiscing about the stuffed one he used to have at the trailer. She squeezes his hand, happy to share a part of this. The future. The past. The everything, really.

Caught up. The phrase dangles taunting her in the form of a text message. Caught up what? Writing? Reminiscing? Playing with Archie? Dinner, even with her family, is something Jughead’s never turned down before. She bites her lip, asking about dessert. Of course :) The little smile means everything, and she settles back into her chair and decides to use this time for a well-earned movie night with Kevin. They have their own brand of catching up to do.

The rumblings of a motor sound like thunder on the road. A tingling bell in the diner announces the arrival of some vaguely familiar greasy teens, certainly not the company she’d been hoping for. She’s still on the fence about potential double-date material (are they together together?), certainly happy when it’s just her and Jughead. When Betty turns to her boyfriend, he looks down at his food like he’s trying to be invisible. He doesn’t see the way the arrivals drop napkins from their leather pockets onto the floor at her feet. Rude, she frowns, stooping to grab them. Her breath hitches when her fingers come back stained black with what at first she thinks is motor oil, but less slimy. It’s sharpie, she realizes dimly, reading the message half-smeared on her hands and the napkin that says, Serpents before sluts. The next, in different handwriting. Given her a taste of the snake yet?

The girl with pink hair flashes a vibrant tongue at them between her fingers. The tall boy next to her smirks and turns around to reveal a hissing green insignia on the back of the leather jacket. Serpents.

Betty’s eyes stay fixed on the offenders, unable to turn at Jughead’s quiet call of her name. Her ankle throbs and she wants to go home. She wants to go back to Sweetwater and make it take the pain away. She wants to bury it in a burger at Pop’s, in the arms of the boy she loves. Instead her fingers are stained black and she can’t eat or run or touch him or even erase the words there and all she gets is a sigh from Jughead who settles against her and claims, “It’s my dad.”

The trailer is small, barely bigger than what she imagines a studio apartment in New York would be like. They step in and Jughead ducks his head like he expects he’s grown too tall for it. The recesses under his eyes seem a little more pronounced in the dim light, so Betty makes every effort to put her
best foot forward. She offers her acquaintance and a home-cooked meal to a greasy-looking FP Jones. A flutter of unease runs through her at the plaid shirt he’s got on. It’s similar to some of Jughead’s, but he wears it like a disguise. Her boyfriend is incidentally wearing a knit sweater that’s soft and warm and good for many reasons, including that he doesn’t match his father.

FP looks like trouble. It’s not just the smirk, or the way he says, *this your girl?* like she’s a deaf piece of property. It’s the overstuffed garbage can, the odorous remnants of bar-style chicken wings in styrofoam containers, the murky glasses that spill out of the sink. His bruises don’t seem at all congruent with the supposed motorcycle accident the Serpents and Jughead are helping him recover from. The clammy pallor of FP’s skin reminds Betty of a sicker version of the sweat that beads after a long run. He has a hard time staying clean, she thinks. Still, she senses Jughead’s stiff demeanor and hates that she might be a part of it, so she presses her body against his wool sweater like a shield and says, “*Your son is amazing. As a writer and a person.*” Jughead’s fingers tighten within her own. FP cocks a knowing grin. “*He must get that from his mom.*”

There’s no tupperware in the trailer, so Betty assures FP that he can keep the pan as long as he needs it. Part of her wonders if he’ll ever use it, if it’s worth the reaming out from the mother, but one look at Jughead’s face and she adds that she’ll just get it next time, earning a surprised look from both of them. Jughead kisses her so hard on the way home that she can taste a hint of their meal under the saltiness of his tongue. She craves savoring all her meals this way, imprinted on him like a kiss.

Surprisingly, Alice doesn’t ream her out about the tupperware, accepting she’ll get it back or Betty will pay for a replacement. She shows Betty her recipe book. There are even meals with cheese in there she’s never seen before. They work together, Polly even joining in when bribed with a portion of her own, and Betty feels some small smidgeon of happiness. When it’s baking in the oven, she still feels that quiet urge to go outside, but Alice offers the girls some tea and it’s actually nice. The cup warms against her palms as Alice rolls her eyes and dishes on some particularly hilarious high school drama involving Fred Andrews. Polly laughs with them, phone forgotten in her pocket, and Betty decides she doesn’t need to check hers either.

The second portion sits waiting in the freezer for Jughead and FP when Hal comes home, surprised by the feast and warm family in front of him. Betty beams when he calls them *my girls*, and feels just the slightest bit guilty she doesn’t cook for her own family more often. How many people has she ignored the needs of simply because they weren’t drowning in them? She texts Jughead a picture of the plate and captions it, *next time*.

Rubber squealing sharply against wood reminds Betty how powerful movement can be. Archie and Kevin halt rather suddenly, transfixed by the basketball court. She follows their gaze to a bunch of sweaty dark-haired kids, her breath momentarily stolen away by the fact that Jughead is one of them. His olive skin is flushed, gray t-shirt damp and sticking to his pits while the pink-haired girl flicks him in the face with her ponytail, fingers and nails attempting to keep track of him. Jughead’s brow is furrowed, mildly annoyed, but he jogs dutifully to and fro, avoiding their touch. The game slows to a halt when they discover they’re being watched. Jughead seems to hold onto the air inside of him, and Betty feels an anxious tug on the invisible tether between them. “*Wanna go head to head?*” The tall one asks. Archie and Betty step forward in unison. It feels like she’s fighting for something.

The pink-haired girl, Toni, is toned, scrappy, and a terrible shot. The same fingers that tried imprinting on Jughead’s soft gray shirt cleave into Betty in an attempt to break her, tear her clothes. But Betty’s fingernails have done far worse on her own skin, and it feels powerful to move past her
and score with the help of her friends. The Serpents hiss in dissatisfaction and demand Jughead tag in for the small girl. After a moment’s hesitation, he agrees. Betty looks at him, heart pounding as they lower themselves to the ground, ready to run forward. Concern knits his brows, and she can tell he’s going easy on her, glancing at her ankle. Every time Sweet Pea tries to involve him in the game, she dives forward, determined to knock the ball out of bounds or to the other side of the court. During a breakaway, Jughead runs fast enough to catch her, hoisting her up from behind before she can do much more than gasp in surprise. His mouth presses against her neck, a quick little nibble enough to send her writhing. The ball bounces off the rim, missing its mark, and everyone forgets about the game long enough for her to elbow and kiss her smiling boy.

The Serpents glower at their small rebellion, breaking the rules. Suddenly the slaps on the court aren’t just against the ball, against the wood. It’s flesh on flesh, Archie and Sweet Pea, Fangs and Kevin, Jug and Betty, all very different sounds to keep the ball in and out of play. Jughead’s long fingers block out the world around them, and part of her just wants to be enveloped in him instead of playing the game. Sometimes she is. But she can feel the air shifting around them, Jughead swiftly tagged out in favor of a snake. Betty’s and Jughead’s fingers linger on each other’s skin, linked, as he passes by. Her eyes are drawn towards the sidelines where Jughead stands apprehensively, watching everyone move in violent, guarded patterns, and wonders if this is what it’s like to run with a pack.

Movement. Inertia, she thinks sharply in reference to an eight grade science test. Sweet Pea doesn’t stop, and she crosses her arms and braces for a fall when his shoulder connects hard enough to knock the air out of her lungs, her legs out from under her. “I’m fine,” she reassures everyone out of instinct, palms and scars bracketing her impact on the floor. Archie’s yelling. Kevin’s eyes are large and round, hovering like she’s okay but he still wants to preserve the evidence. Jughead dwarfs them all, scooping her up in his arms and away from the noise. Her fingers scrub into the soft material of his t-shirt and she stops insisting, “I’m fine” because with him, she doesn’t need to be.

A lock of hair keeps falling into Jug’s forehead as he tries to wrangle ice against her ankle. It barely even hurts anymore. She ran, she wants to tell him. They ran today. Kevin’s handling Archie, calming him down and rolling his eyes at her across the gym like, “Straight boys are so dramatic.” It would make her smile more if she hadn’t thrown herself into a construction yard and frozen river to try and feed her raging desperation. The Serpents have retreated to the corner, hoping for a glance from Jughead, but he’s so focused he can’t even see them in the peripheral. His brow furrows, long fingers so careful, precise, like when he’s typing out a particularly poignant thought. It’s like he’s saying what he stamped into her skin on the back of her neck, scrolled on her scalp with a swirl of her ponytail, massaged into her shoulders and calves.

“I love you,” she says, and his eyes shoot up from her ankle to her face. For a horrible moment she wonders if she’s made a mistake, if she’s scared him, if the words themselves scare him. But they’ve said it to each other a hundred different ways. Betty refuses to be worried about the words. To be intimidated by the intensity of the storm in his eyes, of how deeply she feels for him. She’d say it again, she’d say it forever. In private, in speeches. Everywhere, in everything. She loves him.

“Betty, I…”

The Serpents call him by his last name, startling the couple out of their moment. She watches his Adam’s apple visibly bob as he tells them he’s heading home. He takes her hand as if he means to stay, and she notes the way they react to that, like it’s wrong in some way. The ride is quick, quiet. Jughead rather dramatically insists on carrying her to her bedroom, leaving a startled Archie to watch her hoisted over the threshold. She’d be embarrassed if she wasn’t giddy, adrenaline and minor uncertainty jostled with each step they take. Her parents aren’t home, and neither is Polly. When Jughead lays her down on the bed, he presses his forehead against hers, the dam breaking as he
whispers, “I love you too, Betty. God, I love you too.”

They kiss, and her heart's on fire.

Chapter End Notes

Your thoughts are beautiful things ^-^ I'd love for you to share them with me! How about that? A non-horrible Cooper dinner? Cheese fixes everything. Betty and Jug almost do the horizontal tango! Nobody knows if Veronica and Archie are dating! Huzzah for confusing sexual/romantic/friendship things! I feel bad for Archie. I can't help it. He's just melting away into the shadows now that he's nobody's favorite anymore. Who here wants to punch FP? Because most of the time it's me. I mean, he's trying to be nice. And dad-adjacent. But seriously. And the baby Serpents? First of all, may I say I never thought I would write Jughead playing basketball. It is a thousand percent not his fav thing to do. That'd be Betty (*cough* IF HE'D GET HIS SH** TOGETHER). His next chapter explains. Or you can guess. You want it tomorrow or a few days? Lemme know your lovely folks, and if you have a fav part too if you have the time
Chapter Notes

RATING CHANGE because nipples are mentioned. Watch out, people. Dangerous stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s not every night, it can’t be, but Jughead climbs into Betty’s window with Romeo and Juliet references in his pocket, ready to diffuse his eager need to be at her side. More often than not, he leaves whatever armor he has at the sill, content to be soft and boneless behind her, next to her, cradling each other in warmth. She lets him cry, lets him breathe, lets him do anything he wants the same way he’d let her. It still feels new. He enjoys the way her eyes and fingers linger on his exposed hair, the beanie safely stashed next to the nightstand. Most of their mornings are quiet, sentimental, but occasionally they get lost in each other’s heat, not just the warmth. It’s different from the quiet whispers of her thumbs clearing the underside of his eyes. They way her spine arches to deepen a fevered embrace or twists to cradle him against her. Sometimes his hands move from her ribs up to her breasts or down to her bottom, skimming the soft flesh with tentative, bottomless worship. His mouth opens against hers, a quiet, wet prayer.

Even if Archie’s still doing him a favor, Jughead makes no effort to hide when he slips out in the middle of the night to climb into their neighbor’s window. “You going to Betty’s?” the redhead asks hesitantly, like he’s being left out. And Jughead lets him feel that burn for once, nodding and disappearing into the dark. Blood surges in his veins, only cooled with his girl’s lips against his throat, gentle purring of confirmations that she cares. That he has somewhere to go besides a booth in Pop’s or a mattress on the floor.

They have to nestle close in order to talk without fear of being overheard, so close he has a hard time not going cross-eyed in the depths of her open gaze or silencing her with adoration. When his breath tickles the shell of her ear, she lets out a squeal, shivering, and both of them immediately seal over the warmth of her exhale. The suddenness of the slip makes her eyes crinkle with amusement, even if there’s a possibility he’ll end up tossed out the second story window. Mockingly, he chides her, hushing as best he can to suppress the glee at being so silly, so naughty. Their grins keep growing with each passing second, some kind of uncontainable joy bubbling to the surface. Betty yanks the pillow out from under her head and smothers their faces with it, unleashing their giggles under its squishy absorption. But he doesn’t think anything can soak this up, this feeling of buried under joy with her. Later he’ll try to write it out. He wraps his arms around her as the one thing that’ll never let go.

He catches up on sleep during what he deems unimportant classes. Sometimes it’s PE, where he takes a nap in the unused janitor’s closet propped up with pillows stolen from home economics. It’s better than waking up to Reggie Mantle snatching his hat in the student lounge or dealing with sidelong glances from his tenuous best friend while they play something stupid like dodgeball. Jughead’s torn about passing out in classes he shares with Betty. On one hand, she can give him the notes. On the other, he’d miss out on any of the little intricacies of their daily life. She’s so thorough in her notes. The cute little ones she passes to her friends, the clear, careful ones she takes for class.
His favorites are when she marks his long tangents with red pen, unscrambling whatever his scrawl is supposed to mean, even to him. Without realizing it, she’s helping him be a better writer. If there’s anyone he wants crystal clear communication with, it’s Betty Cooper.

Veronica nearly sets the lab on fire, and Jughead has to stifle laughter as Betty quickly moves to put it out. His lab partners are stupid, but at least they’re too lazy to try and mess with anything. Once it’s out, Betty looks to Archie with concern on her face, that whip-sharp ponytail bouncing around her face. It’s not longing, he knows that, but it’s something. She didn’t have to turn off her feelings the way he did after the misunderstanding. Noting Archie’s disappearing back, maybe he’s not the only one. But then Betty turns to him and smiles, smoke tendrils curling just beyond her shoulders, and he’s lost in her.

The goodbye kiss is meant to say stay here, rest, but instead, whatever magnetism is between them pulls their bodies together for something persistent in its longing. His hands move to her bare skin, her waist, her shirt coming up and off along with his. The sourness of their breath isn’t even a consideration as they tumble into grappling free-fall, his thumbs drawing her nipples to points the same way her scent pulls his groin to hardness. She tugs him flush against her, hands fumbling with his zipper and pushing down just enough to release the bulge in his boxers. Hissing swears, he moves against her, reveling in the way he fits perfectly against her, no matter what the position. Their skin rubs and sparks against one another, and he wants it so fucking bad he can feel it. The moisture through her pajama pants coating him and his boxers in need. He’ll always need her. Always, this way or another.

The sound of a door opening shudders them into a stop. Betty’s fingers clench him close against her chest, heart to heart. He can imagine a thousand situations where the door opens, her parents walking in on him pretty much pressed inside of their topless daughter. But he tames his racing heart by reveling how close they are, how quiet they have to be. He can feel her pulse this close, and just the fact that they’re in sync brings him peace. But she feels it, feels him in whatever psychic connection they’ve made by twining their bodies together, and meets his gaze. They stay like that, frozen against each other, basking in each other’s breath and souls until the morning person goes back to their room. With one last kiss, he slides off of her. “I have to go.” He wishes it wasn’t true.

Guys like Reggie who’ve never been in love would probably call Jughead whipped or clingy or something else meant to demean him, but Jughead feels adored, rooted and tethered in a way that makes him feel sturdy and strong. Alice and Polly start getting used to him, letting him fade into the background or even sit next to his girlfriend during the rundown so often known as breakfast. Betty sure notices him though, wheedling him into every meal she can, like she can single-handedly make up for all the basic rights his parents forfeit for him. It’s the least he can do to make her smile while he eats, his foot gently nudging hers under the table. Sometimes he swears she sparkles through his glass of orange juice. He wants to savor every second of this.

While Betty’s healing, she accepts more help, more time, which can lead to other undesirable side effects in their lives. Her mother usually drives them, Archie becoming the sloth of the bunch now that Jughead’s been properly motivated to get up early. The late sluggishness of his best friend seems rooted in some desire to wallow, which is something Jughead’s only peripherally able to deal with. There are endless lost chords wafting through the Andrews house and only so many exasperated sighs he can exchange with Fred and Vegas about it. Tuning out Alice and Polly bickering over everyday nonsense is easy, especially when he has Betty at his side.
The subversive nature of Hal unnerves Jughead a little more. Hal watches him with careful displeased consideration. It’s not unlike he expects a dad to behave towards his daughter’s boyfriend in a movie. But this isn’t a comedy. There’s no punchline. There’s only the request he stay behind after a tense ride where nobody touches anything, where even Betty hesitates to hold his hand ostentatiously in Hal’s prized car. Betty’s mask of reassurance slips into panic once the car door is shut, the door locked, and Jughead swallows hard against the nausea in his stomach. Hal’s light greenish-blue eyes look like they can carve him even through the rear view mirror. Betty’s special. Of course she is. He waits for the punchline. Hal delivers.

Coopers don’t tolerate bad habits. They get rid of them. Jughead’s chest clenches as Hal deliberately airs out details of his father, inherited traits. Betty’s “inherited” greatness. A sharp mind. As if she doesn’t work for everything harder than anyone Jughead knows. Running. Friendships. Love. She certainly didn’t inherit her tact, her generosity of spirit. But Betty’s children, Betty’s family will not be aimless addicts, will not be broken. Jughead tastes steel in his mouth, unsure if it’s his blood or the metal of his lighter coming back to haunt him. The static of the television screen, the clink of bottles hisses in his ear. Be careful there. Be very careful, Hal warns, we don’t want Betty getting caught up in all that, do we? Jughead closes his eyes.

She’s still waiting for him when he gets out of the car, throwing a hopeful smile in their direction, faltering when it’s not returned. Her hand is the only thing that steadies him. I love you. I’m sorry. He’s not sure who says it to whom through the tightness of their palms pressed together. The raised reminders of her pain scrape against him, the world getting fuzzy around the edges. He doesn’t want to break her, them. When she asks if everything’s okay, he tightens his hold on her. They care about her. Everyone should. And not for the first time, he wonders if it’s right that she cares so much about him since nobody else does.

Archie’s on his side, facing the wall when Jughead gets a text notification. It’s nothing. A general hey, kid. The bare minimum that’s not drunken nonsense scrawled on a napkin meant to be thrown away. Archie shuffles, irritated when he doesn’t respond. “Aren’t you going to go over?” he frowns, peeking over his shoulder. He thinks it’s Betty, because it’s always Betty. Jughead flicks his phone screen on and off like it’s his lighter, thumb knotting the edges. “I dunno.”

When he clambers into Betty’s window, he feels exhausted. They lay together, beanie cushioning his head against the pillow for extra security. Under all of this comfort he should feel better, and in a numb, neutral sort of way, he does. Even when her hands edge under his shirt, eyes nervously skittering across his face, he can’t…do anything but let nature take its course. Can’t summon anything beyond the desire to let Betty have whatever she wants. She hesitates then, removing her hand. It strikes him as endearing in a way that makes him want to bury his face in her neck. She kisses his cheek, settling against his side in the hopes he’ll tell her what he wants instead. It’s too hard to look into her eyes because they both want something. Words, gazes, touches, mean everything to her. And she means everything to him. But family…the word curdles in his throat. It’s only the two of them in this room, but there are others in this house, in this town, in the world. He doesn’t want to ruin it.

The snow is still hard enough to feel crunchy under his feet when he hops down from the ladder onto wobbly knees. He wipes his feet at the door, startled when Fred catches him coming back into the house. Blushing, Jughead claims he was working out. They both glance at the house next door. Fred just kind of chuckles and shakes his head, the way Archie sometimes does, and tells him to be careful. Both of them say the same thing when he gets the call from FP. A motorcycle accident, he

His hands shake when he drives over, cold steel and no mittens to save him from the bite of the weapon, the vehicle between his legs. This feels right. The hospital is too far, the Andrews’ too removed. If Betty hears the motor from the window, she can’t tumble after him. He thinks about the blood he has to give. Spilled on the pavement after a nasty slide, unable to keep traction. Or maybe drawn out patiently, Jughead watching as bright arterial substance darkens in age, in volume. He hates it. He has to burn something, but doesn’t know what. The sickening scent of rubber and motor oil topping off too fast triggers an inhale so deep it feels like a cigarette.

The hospital feels stale, suffocating. The aura of hand sanitizer burns his nose, the reminder of alcohol purifying making his stomach turn. His father swears he wasn’t drunk. Even though his eyes are red and open as if he has nothing to hide, Jughead still feels that guilty, angry tug in his gut that he shouldn’t trust him. The young Serpents come in to pay their respects, hesitating and blocking the doorway. Jughead wants to keep his head down and knock past them using his shoulder like they’re the Bulldogs at school. “It’s okay,” his father assures him, but it isn’t. They eye him like they wish it could be their blood in FP’s veins. Frozen in an armchair, fingers clenched over his keys, Jughead’s forced to listen to his father chat easily with them about school, joke about the fights, tease them about crushes.

“You got a girlfriend?” Everyone eyes him with curiosity, as if this conversation is the most normal invitation in the world. His blush gives him away, the hearts that flutter around her messages branding themselves onto his face. “Betty,” he says, nodding once, trying to ignore the pang of regret that he’s sullied her name by attaching it to his in front of this crew. FP’s grin is wide and proud, repeating the name like a taunt, a private joke. Toni and Sweet Pea exchange a dubious look, like love is a one-line act. Fangs raises his eyebrows, suitably impressed, and Joaquin gives him an appreciative nod. They sink further into the familiarity of his father while Jughead drifts further away, thoughts tethered to a certain blonde hanging over a windowsill. A word lingers in his brain, unable to type it on the keyboard. *Stay.*

Harsh laughter, playful jibes become routine in the process of checking on his father. Archie just kind of glances up at Jughead every time he leaves the house now, an eye on his backpack to make sure he’s leaving *something* behind. They talk casually, but it still feels stilted. It’s too cold to consider staying in the trailer, even though FP’s out of the hospital and the offer still stands. Jughead glances over his shoulder at the pink curtained window across the way and stands for a few seconds, willing her to feel his presence.

*Rehabilitation.* It’s what his father’s doing, what Betty’s doing so he can hear her footsteps assuredly outside of the Andrews’ again. He has every faith in Betty. Sometimes he half-jogs to keep up with her power walk along the sidewalk, their breath coming out in resilient fumes together amidst the cold air. On occasion, they bring Vegas. Fred deserves the help, even if Archie and Jughead don’t. The second half of the block goes slowly, his arm around her waist, sometimes a gloved hand in his, while they wax poetry about going in circles. How it’s good. How it’s bad. How it’s eternal. His fingers clamp a little more firmly around her, mind going fuzzy and gleaming with fever-dreams of Betty and a matching set of eternity that seems just out of reach, interrupted by the static television of a man medicating himself into oblivion.

It hurts to watch FP try to drag himself out of the circle. Trembling so much he can barely hold a
coffee cup, reeking of cold bitter sweat that makes him look just as sick on the outside as his poison makes his insides. The visits get more painful, the water in his father’s miserable red eyes reminding him that he’s tried this before. He’s failed before. Jughead can’t witness it again. He can’t know, but anticipates how this is going to end. In self-preservation, Jughead retreats to the Andrews’ where Fred smells like sawdust and coffee and asks how much homework they’ve done and if they’re eating enough. Archie and Jughead share a laugh over that, because what is enough?

Pop’s feels safe, the food and coffee settling into his stomach with quiet appreciation for the company at his side. It’s still a pleasant surprise whenever Betty’s nestled against him punctuating points about student council with french fries instead of running past as a soft bobbing light amidst the vinyl and neon. The tinkling bell threatens to interrupt their easy conversation, the domestic charm, and Jughead glowers into his food when Betty turns to see who else has come into their little haven. He’s expecting the awkward chill of Veronica and Archie in their unsettled relationship, or even Kevin’s clipped commiseration with Betty. A fluttering distracts her, dipping below the booth. Confused, he glances at her ankles, wondering if it’s something to do with her pain.

Her hands come up smeared in black, eyes fixed on the darkness in morbid, stunned fascination as if the ink is blood. Faded scars on her skin blend into some macabre horror transferred from the greasy scrolls left behind by his frenemies. Serpents before sluts. There are other more salacious notes, pantomimed across the way by the people his father insists should be his friends. Tongues. Fingers. Snakes. Inside of her. The thought creeps up like a vice around his neck and he sucks in air like he’s just about to drown. She blinks, brow furrowed as she untangles the hidden messages meant for him. “Betty,” he pleads. But she’s got that distant look in her eyes like when her earbuds are in and she’s pounding out a problem in pavement. But they’re not the problem. This is. It always has been, written in his blood before he was born. Taking one last breath before the plunge, he wraps his arm around her. “It’s my dad.”

Everything in the trailer park seems flimsy next to Betty and her sturdy metal pan of homemade chicken and potatoes. He doesn’t have the heart to tell her FP’s barely able to keep anything down these days. Still, it’s the nicest smelling thing in the trailer, and for a second it makes the dingy atmosphere feel more like a home. FP’s all self-deprecating smiles and charm, his leather jacket gleaming at them from a coat hook in the living room. Betty’s pleasant, professional with her hair half-down in a little beret. But she’s shrewd enough that her smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes, hands clenched tightly in Jughead’s and at her side. The haze over the inevitably of the trailer suddenly clears when Betty’s body presses full against him. She beams up at Jughead like he’s the best thing in the world and not a sullen nervous wreck in the shadow of his family. “Your son is amazing. As a writer and a person.” The words wrap around his heart, squeezing tightly until it seeps into his veins. His father says something in return but ultimately it doesn’t matter anymore. The wetness in his eyes has nothing to do with poison and everything to do with a cure.

He sees the words everywhere, in the snow outside of Betty’s window, the tags in the trailer park, the start screen of a new game with Archie. Stay. Stay. Stay. He cries without any relief, completely overwhelmed with love that only seems to keep growing, forgiving and deepening. His fingers cleave into the softness of his beanie, letting the sobs wash over him with reckless abandon. Hours later, when the trembling in his chest subsides, he texts his dad and finishes his history homework. Archie joins him for a snack and laughter at the kitchen island. The next morning, Betty is so pleased with his essay she clutches it to her chest like it’s a treasure, kicking her feet like it’s given her the
grace to move again. A small smile finds its place on his face for hours of the day. He still doesn’t know what his novel is…but something in him feels like it’s a love letter to Riverdale. Riverdale, or something else.

The world seems more like a place for him as opposed to against him lately. When his father insists it would make him happy to see the gang go out and have some fun, Jughead’s so surprised that he’s referring to the young group of kids around his trailer and not the lurkers of the White Wyrm that he agrees. At first, he just sits on the sidelines and absorbs the squeaking and squawking of roughhousing on the basketball court, laptop secured away so no stray plays dislodge his careful world. A simple game of hoping a lazy lob results in a letter transforms into something more desperate involving breakaways and layups where the only reward is the laughter and claps on the back of haphazard teams. Their hands feel oily and strange, crashing for community in a world where his heart beats for the children from the tree house. Still, he jogs from side to side as part of a gang, a group of people hoping his father gets better.

The ball stills in Sweet Pea’s hands, swayed by the challenge of three pairs of wide eyes. The audience might as well steal the air from the room. Kevin. Archie. And the one who brings them together, Betty, no doubt in a rehab session with her friends. Tone and posture and pale skin glowing sparkling clean amidst the sweaty dark leaness of the south side players. Jughead lays somewhere in between, panting as Betty’s green eyes trace him like she’s bracing for a tattoo to break out from under the sweat on his skin. Before he can dissuade anyone anything, the south side team claims him and Betty and Archie step forward as if the challenge is for their childhood and not a stupid orange ball.

Jughead brings a fist to his lips, chewing on his skin to prevent from carrying Betty off the basketball court and to the safety of the bleachers. Her ankle, he keeps protesting internally, watching how hard she’s playing, ponytail slick and muscles taught with effort as she naturally communicates with her teammates despite the incessant noise she’s so good at blocking out. Archie and Sweet Pea collide, shoulders barreling into each other like it’s football finals instead of a small pickup game in the local gym. Kevin and Fangs seem well-suited enough, just the right amount of do I care plastered on their faces every time the ball leaves their hands. They seem more interested in the interpersonal dynamics than the score, and Kevin only looks at Jughead when Sweet Pea tries to tap his ass to get him to go in for Toni.

Betty swallows hard, nervous, across from him, and his fingers flex in the hopes that with him on her she’ll at least be safe from twisting in any way that she shouldn’t be. Her efforts become more desperate around him, eyes darting frantically from him to the ball, the other team, and he finds he can barely focus on anything except for keeping her safe. Voices bark at him in the background, but he just wants to wrap his arms around her and assure her it’s all right. When she breaks away he shatters every imaginary rule and hauls her up from behind. It’s practically an assist even though the ball tumbles from her hands the second his mouth finds her neck, playfully biting the sweat and worry from her skin. It draws her surprised laughter to the surface. This is the game he’d much rather play, the one they revel in, worry transformed into unabashed affection no matter which court they’re on.

He’s tagged out for the misdemeanor, fingers lingering wantonly on Betty as Sweet Pea and Archie declare the next few points will be the tie breaker. He doesn’t even know the score. Doesn’t know anything beyond Betty’s smile quickly fading into alarm as Sweet Pea comes barreling at her, ramming his girlfriend so hard that she skids across the floor. Charge! Archie cries, as if they’re in court. Foul! Jughead barely hears them, world muted as he falls on his knees next to an alarmed but unmoving Kevin, asking the blonde, “Are you okay?” Not even hearing the answer because
Jughead’s lifting under her knees and arms and carrying her away from careless violence. Her face burying in his shoulder, lips quietly pressed against his pulse.

*Be careful,* they all warned him. He doesn’t know what to do. Rational thought sluishes through his brain like water through his fingers as he tries to put together some ice. *Take care of her,* he chants internally, hands moving of their own accord. His heart's beating rapidly, moving his brain beyond his body. Nothing else exists except making things right, making *this* right.

“I love you,” she says, and the entire world tumbles into free fall, his chest stretching large to make room for the unending swell of his heart. Her eyes are bright and clear, air prickling around them with sparks. It’s hard to breathe anything but the words.

Strained, hot liquid warmth spreads through his limbs, slowly loosening his throat enough to overflow, “Betty, *I...*”

“*JONES!*”

The word doesn’t fit here, the name. Confused, he turns. His father’s follower-family stare at him, waiting to lead him beyond the destruction. Like his last name indicates whom he should be. The atmosphere of light doesn’t quite extend to them, and his hand stays firmly panted on Betty, the heat radiating through them both. He’s going *home,* he announces, firmly convinced it should’ve been the tree house all along. The Serpents scowl at him for it, don’t understand, acting like it’s a betrayal of his blood. Since they’ve probably never had it, *this,* he’s not sure he can blame them. All they see if the last name. The former address. The fire. The brokenness. They don’t see the evenings by Sweetwater, the swirling leaves pressed preciously between a memory. By rejecting Betty, by damn near bullying, they’re rejecting part of the core of who he is, of everything he stands for. FP might be on his way to getting better, but Jughead’s *good.* With Betty’s hand in his, nodding at Archie, he's good to go.

They climb into Archie’s pickup, Jughead wishing he could just scream what he wants to into her veins so she’s not left hanging on the edge. Instead, she seems quiet and warm and content between them. She’s *happy.* He will be, too. Archie looks over at them anxiously, hands readjusting to ten and two. Unable to release the tension, Jughead’s arm stays around her waist, reluctantly thanking Archie with a pat on the shoulder. When they get to their houses, Jughead hops out and insists on carrying Betty back where he knows she’ll—where *they’ll* be safe. Archie offers to help, but Jughead insists he’s got it. *He’s got it, he’s got her.* Seemingly exhausted, Archie waits by the truck and watches her giggle in his arms, opening the door for the both of them before they practically trip inside.

It’s powerful, crossing the threshold with her, especially knowing no one else is there. It’s all them. Adrenaline surging through his veins, he summons every bit of strength he earned on the construction site, through his whole life, and gets them into her bedroom. They collapse on the bed, Jughead on one knee as he wrangles himself up enough amidst her breathless smiles to press his forehead against hers. Hot liquid warms at his eyelashes, splendor radiating around them. They’ve *shown* it, but this is it. This is the first, *(the last)* girl he’ll confess to. “*I love you too, Betty. God, I love you too.*”

Her hands slide against his neck, and he funnels all of their blazing glory into a kiss. Everything inside of him feels like it’s shifting, making impossibly more room to devour this feeling forever. To be a part of her, a part of him. *I love you,* it sings, before heat engulfs his thoughts in hurried reverie.
Thank you to those of you who left comments after the last chapter! Honestly you are the reason I keep posting because I love your thoughts and encouragement almost as much as I love bughead! ^-^ It's a long weekend so I'd figured I'd spoil you with his side fairly quickly. Jughead is so afraid of being overshadowed by FP he lets himself get absorbed by Betty. I think that's good and worrisome for a couple of reasons, but at least his friendship with Archie is slowly coming to a more respectable place. Next chapter would've gotten the M rating anyway because let's face it - Betty and Jughead are ready to get more physical. They've been through a lot. They deserve some orgasms. And Betty can run again! Jughead feels like he's on fire in a good way! Woo! What did you think of the Serpents this time? Juggie has such a complicated relationship with FP. How do you think it'll change after the not-so-friendly game? Also I know Archie seems still put-out by the end but he's coming around, I promise. He just thinks they're insane in a good way. Like, he didn't feel that fevered giddiness with Veronica and that confuses him, even if they are still good together. SOoooo we're going to have a dance next time : ) I know. I'm probably skipping holidays, but as always I love to hear your thoughts so leave them whenever and I'll see you next time!
Her skin boils anywhere they connect. It’s like she’s trying to break out of her body, overspill into him, because of him. His mouth is wet and hot and at her neck and she cranes to give him more. To give him everything. Sensing her need, his hands skim inside her shorts, around to the swell of her bottom. They push and pull at the barriers of their clothes, shoving things aside and off. She needs to be bare for this, for them. He moans her name, following her guidance as those long fingers find her wet and wanting and plied open for a release. He fills her, explores her in a way she’s shudderingly unfamiliar with. Part of her wants to grab his wrist and show him what she thinks she likes, but his own patterns seem so fresh and unexpected that she forces herself not to do anything except kiss him, run her hands through his hair and hold onto the intimacy. Embrace the welcome intrusion, the path to ecstasy.

It’s hard to keep her eyes open, the world melting into need, but when she can, she looks at him. He’s biting his lip in concentration, rocking his hips against her leg. She tries to reach for him, to relieve him, but he shakes his head, eyes dark and swimming with hunger.

“I want all of you,” she wants to say, but all that comes out is a breathy “Juggie.” He knits his eyes together tightly and works on her, fingers swirling until her insides curl tight enough to snap, screaming like the spout of a tea kettle.

Jughead’s staring where they’re joined like he just discovered some hidden superpower. A low chuckle is all she can manage before shifting up, not quite wanting to dislodge the pressure of his hand. His heated gaze lingers on her face, their connection, brain lingering somewhere in the realm of gobsmacked, silently asking, Did you feel this too?

“Yes,” she whispers, straddling him with her thighs.

“Yes,” he echoes back, eyes fluttering shut as she glides her wet sex against him. Back and forth, finding the rhythm with his hands on her hips. It’s building again, and she can feel his heat released in slow tantalizing waves underneath her, desperate to go inside. The rounded tip of him grazes her clit, and the impending rush is like being slapped with shooting stars.

“Juggie,” she pleads again, and he rocks with her, biting his lip in an attempt to keep himself from spilling over.

I want all of you, she thinks again, desperately tilting her hips upward and catching him inside of her.

Air slams inside both of their lungs, a string of expletives shooting forth from Jughead’s mouth followed by her name. Something’s squeezing through her with a more insistent pressure than his fingers digging into her skin. It’s him, her body readjusting to sheathe him comfortably, and he’s there to catch her through every breath of it all. It takes a few focused moments before the shock subsides and she can open her eyes. Jughead’s trembling, head thrown back, eyes waveringly
searching hers, nearly wailing in tempered ecstasy that he can’t hold back. It’s the most vulnerable and powerful she’s ever seen him. This is them. Shaking from the energy and desire surging through her veins, Betty feels free. She moves her hips, loving the thickness of him scraping spots she never knew existed inside of her, the way his fingers dance over her skin, the way he murmurs her name.

She’s not even sure what words they use, all of them tumbling together in I love you, I want you, all of you, so much, when his eyes snap shut and hips surge upwards, something warm coating her insides in dripping stars. Jughead takes a shuddering breath, bringing their blessed palms to his lips with the same reverence she feels for him. He edges her forward, nestled into his arms, and she’s not quite sure if and when he slips out from between her thighs because all of her still feels ready for him, connected to him.

Again, she thinks, while they still have time, while no one’s home, and after peppering each other’s shoulders in kisses, they find each other’s mouths, opening into another new, hot pattern. Fingers twined, hips rocking, words moaned into each other’s flesh. Always. Cresting against one another, Betty feels like they’ve started something infinite. They should always be like this. It feels like she’s made of whatever makes the sun glow. Fluid. Warm. Loved.

“I love you,” they breathe, sticky limbs and throbbing muscles irrevocably tangled until exhaustion claims them.

There are no stretch marks, just the ridges on her skin from when she shot up in the fourth grade. No loose skin. Nothing that is perfect and glowing and ready for the admiration reflected in his reverent gaze. The water slides across them, his hands worshipping her skin. He’s wet and beautiful and old and new, his smile stretching her limbs in a way that makes her feel free and tethered all at once.

People don’t know, but they probably wonder why she seems lighter, why she smiles at ghosts in the room, bashfully tugging at her ponytail before hopping back to the present. Snow retreats from her paths. Every time she goes for a run her footsteps leave a little more earth exposed, frayed fossils of grass and mud peeking up at her, releasing their earthy scent with encouragement to come back. People warn her not to run so soon after her injury, that her enthusiasm is just endorphins. Betty remembers Jughead’s nose buried against the back of her neck, his arms wrapped around her chest, the way he smiles after he makes a joke he knows she’ll like. Her chest swells, and she goes for a run just because it feels like she can fly.

Alice insists Betty’s hiding something to be so happy, snooping often enough that Betty itches when she makes her bed, wondering how often she’s supposed to wash her sheets. She craves basking in the scent of him, the remnants of them. But her life’s not clean, sterile like her family wants, so she works a carefully sly system of wearing Jughead’s old shirts to sleep. Buried in his essence lulls her to contented slumber, and her mother can never figure out if it’s the shirt or the boy itself. When it’s mysteriously washed, Jughead gleefully works up a musk in another one, anointing her in it with a mischievous pride that makes her flare with honor in savoring in who he is as a person. Her love.

Schoolwork isn’t that hard. It just takes focus, and Betty finds she can multitask well enough without the little pills her mother tries to sneak into her bathroom cabinet. Veronica taps at the problems like
they’re those trick metal hoops Betty clanged together to test for vulnerabilities, convinced by her parents that magic didn’t exist, only truth. Veronica trails behind, glaring at the homework before them. Betty stops, letting her pen down so she can untangle her friend’s thoughts.

Veronica’s mouth drips open, spewing forth protests about independence, identity, and taking care of oneself. Betty’s confused. For her, it’s rarely a question of being her own person. Jughead makes her a better person, her best. Sometimes it’s like he’s the only one who really wonders if she has enough mental health to take care of herself, the only one who will pick up the slack if she isn’t. When Betty asks if there’s anyone who makes her feel that way, Veronica gets this sort of pinched look on her face and folds her arms neatly across her waist. Her best friend quietly accuses Betty of losing part of herself to a boy, and in some ways, she guesses she’s right. But she’s always considered it sharing, growing. How can anyone say she’s lost when every inch of her feels found? Better yet, understood, and appreciated? Bristling, she encourages Veronica to reconsider what she’s capable of, and by the defeated way she uncurls her arms, maybe she will.

The glimmer in Jughead’s eye sparkles at her even across the hallway. “Heart-eye alert,” Kevin teases, sidling up to her and demanding details. Even without Jughead’s scent marking her, Kevin somehow knows that things have shifted. The excited, if bashful, admission shifts into uncomfortable territory at lightning speed. Kevin’s questions indicate that they’ve skipped things. Things Jughead would like. Things she might like, now that she thinks about it. Wrinkling her brow, Betty keeps the details to herself but thinks in vivid, planned details of all the places and processes she wants to try.

At first she resents the little tablets that will help them be “safe” and regulate her inevitable pains. The consumption make her worry about addiction, about the way Jughead’s throat bobs like he’s struggling to swallow them when she does. Maybe they’ll get addicted to this, to the frenzy of flesh on flesh. She’s hyper-aware of the inch lower his hand naturally gravitates on her hip, of the v of his bones that cuts that down to the soft hair that’s coarser than that on his head, of the way his gaze lingers on places he’s sucked her skin. But Jughead’s still ultimately himself, and interested in so many things that sex becomes another passionate expression of what she already feels, which is love. Togetherness. Baring themselves in the privacy of her bedroom. And sometimes, when their world burns bright enough to sear everything else away, ecstasy.

She’s broken out of focus by Polly’s voice carrying down the hall and through her classroom door. It’s different than when she’s pushing someone away, herself or their parents. Eyes wide, Betty catches the surreal glimpse of a boy with such sunken eyes and light skin that his dark lips and flaming hair actually make her wonder if he sinks his teeth in and drinks blood or cherries to stay that way. Usually when they fight, it ends in dirty resentful glares and hissed agreements where to meet later. Her sister doesn’t pass, and an irrational fear that she’s been consumed or hidden away grips Betty with a cold fear strong enough to make her rise from her seat.

Her beanie-clad boy turns in her peripheral, slowing the perception of time as she takes measured steps to the sound of what was or hopefully is her sister. Polly’s lips are berry-pink, a color she usually stashes at school and kisses off by the time they get home. Now they curl, bold and cruel in their rebellious determination. Before Betty can even get close, she’s reamed in a sea of resentment. Polly didn’t ask for her, will never ask for her, because Polly does things on her own. She claims that their last name means nothing. That she means nothing. That Jughead only bothers because she feeds and fucks him with what a teenage boy needs. Polly’s moving, always away, leaving a ripple of
emptiness behind her. Betty feels strangely tingly and numb, like she needs to stand still. Without realizing it, her hands ball into fists. A shadow appears in the doorway, waiting for her reaction, an indication. The sharpness of her nails barely registers. Is it happening at all if she can’t feel it?

She wants to feel. To run. To hurt. Control. Jughead shifts, clearly called back into the class but unwilling to leave her. *Just a moment,* she thinks, letting her neck and shoulders give way to gravity. In and out. In and out, she breathes. With careful precision, a splitting tug on her hair, she rejoins the class. The waft of Jughead in the doorway doesn’t cling to her like a mist like she wants it to. So sharply focused on the lesson, she almost forgets that the world has fallen away. It’s just not necessarily hers.

Veronica’s cheeks stretch in a way that reminds Betty of an ache when she asks Archie to the Valentine’s Dance. Archie stares at the flowers in her hands with surprise before accepting, the two maybe-more-than-friends kissing each other on either cheek with obvious pleasure. Jughead nudges Betty’s shoulder with his chin, reminding her to release the rigidity there. He doesn’t really do dances. He might if she asked. But after spending hours managing decorations with her friends while they consistently discarded *I love you* candy heart snacks, Betty’s not sure what the dance is supposed to mean. To her. To anyone.

Even Kevin seems a little put-out, He’s been *curious* about one of the Serpents from the insane basketball game. Kev claims he’s cute and possibly interested, but there’s no way they could date. Sheriff’s Son. Gang member. Betty runs her fingers along her palms trying to figure a way they could make it work. They could always make it work. Jughead’s fingers worry into her own, and she grants him a smile as quick as a camera flash. There’s just so much that needs to be done.

The squeaking of weights keeps a steady rhythm in Betty’s head. She’d never *run* here on a treadmill where impact rattles her knees with every step. She won’t trace lined circles again, not after the incident with Reggie, who thankfully is too obsessed with his flexing reflection to notice her. Kevin keeps glancing at the door every time it opens, hoping against hope that it’s *him,* the Serpent with blue eyes. Her own heart thrums with the possibility that it’ll be *her* Serpent-adjacent boyfriend with blue eyes softening the second they spot her. But the odds of finding Jughead in a gym are even less than finding him at a dance, and neither boy comes.

Eventually, damp with sweat, they have to go *somewhere,* if not home. They take the long walk back, passing by Sunnyside Trailer Park, where most Serpents tend to stay. Kevin’s never seen the boy in the woods where he meets his other short-lived prospects, and Betty doesn’t remember him standing around the barrel of flames in the section she used to run past. There’s no sign of any other familiar faces, and Betty wonders idly if she’d ever see Jughead here on his own. Maybe it’s too cold for the Serpents to be out, or maybe they have a lair. The only signs of life are the flickering halogens and speckled flashes of television screens against faded beige blinds.

There’s so much about this world that’s still hidden to her, and she wonders how much of it Jughead would know. How much he *should* know. Kevin shoves his hands in his pockets and keeps his chin up, annoyed they went all this way just to spot a boy who may or may not like him. But it isn’t silly. It’s love. People should do anything for love, she reasons, and tightens her ponytail before heading off to join Archie and Jughead for a study session.

Jughead brings each of them a milkshake, guiltily drinking half of her strawberry one. One lick of whipped cream on his upper lip is enough to make her lean over and wipe it with her thumb, sucking the evidence away so quickly that Archie misses it. Jughead doesn’t though, and flushes just about as
pink as their milkshake. Their feet slip under the kitchen counter, toes gently prodding each other’s soft padded feet in a comforting rhythm while they figure out how to divide and conquer their work.

This is more than food and a fuck. This is friendship. Family. Flirting. Fun.

Polly slams silverware down after every meal like she’s punishing the table. Furniture scrapes with her exit, almost hard enough to leave deep grooves in the expensive wood floors Alice had redone three years ago. Betty stares at her food and waits for the slam of her door. Even though she knows it’s coming, the impact still makes her flinch. Alice and Hal let out an exasperated breath. “That girl.” Betty feels sick and pushes her plate away, determined to go for another run. Outside, the cold air feels numbing, but her stomach jostles unsettlingly with each step.

Now Betty feels like the one playing dress-up with a smile as her and Jughead approach the trailer door. FP is friendlier, less self-deprecating this time. He keeps worriedly glancing at Jughead like he’s half-expecting him to drag her out of the trailer at any second. As a distraction, she asks about FP’s community, not sure if and how long it might’ve been her lover’s. She can feel Jughead tracing little patterns into her back, s’s and something else followed by hearts. The food is delicious, but the memory of making it with her family makes it hard to swallow.

“I love you,” he reminds her, kissing her cheeks, her lips. “I know.” It feels unjust to have Jughead lay so close to her when Polly’s alone. Or gone. Probably gone. She buries her face in his chest. “You can’t fix this,” he tries to tell her. I know, she wants to say, but wet, angry breaths come out instead.

At first she thinks Jughead might be the source of quiet rumblings in the house, maybe he was able to sneak over after all. But the rustling comes from the hallway, so Betty tip-toes to the edge of her door and listens, creeping down to the living room where a glowing fire highlights the boldness of her sister. Polly’s hair is long and wiry, looking like it could ignite as easily as straw. She tosses things from a box into the fireplace with a diligence that Betty ultimately finds disturbing, like they’re corpses instead of memories.

Jason’s smiling face crinkles and blackens into itself until it’s swallowed entirely by the flames. She tries to call her sister’s name, to stop this, to save something, but she can’t. It’s none of her business. Ultimately, Betty lets silent tears drip down her face as she sits just behind her sister, wanting to hug her. But Polly’s cheeks are dry, maybe as brittle as her hair. Without so much as a word, Polly extinguishes the fire and plunges them both in darkness. Betty hears footsteps under the hissing of the fire, but her heart’s beating too fast to run, much less go back to her bedroom and sleep, awaiting a boy who couldn’t come. That’s really bad for you, she remembers idly.

Perhaps it’s lack of sleep that makes it difficult to register what’s right in front of her, especially because it’s so strange. A winding, stretchy fuzzy flower that will last forever. It wobbles in her boyfriend’s hands, the wiry stem wrapping around his wrist, swaying to reflect that he’s asking her… that he wants to dance. Betty feels her eyes shine, an impressed laugh working its way through her. She didn’t even think she wanted to go, but with her chest up against Jughead and the plant in a hug,
maybe something that celebrates the heart will be good for them. Archie grins and cheers them from his locker, brought to life by the red and pink decorations in the halls. Veronica hovers nearby, her burgundy smile curious and genuine, then suddenly eager, grabbing onto Archie’s arm. They could all go together. She’s sure of it. Betty kisses Jughead appreciatively, loving the way his smile curves into something bashful and proud.

She feeds Jughead a bite of each of the chocolates from a heart-shaped container when she thinks no one else is looking. She loves the way his lips close around her fingers, that she can swipe away the remnants of chocolate, cherry, or nougat that linger on his lips. Still, he touches up the spots with his tongue as he chews, declaring them either delicious or mediocre. On one of the last, his mouth lingers on her fingers, eyes fixed on her so deeply and darkly that she can feel heat rush through her veins. “Delicious,” he declares with a pop, licking his lips. Veronica laughs, surprising both of them. Betty’s best friend declares them too much, and happily turns to Archie to gush about the chocolate-covered strawberries she bought for lunch. Betty meets Jughead’s obnoxious grin and sucks the smugness right off of him.

It’s a shame they can’t get ready in Betty’s room, taking peeks at the boys through her bedroom window. But Veronica’s place lends a certain formality to the affair. The girls heat their hair with curlers in the attempt to get something soft and bouncy going for the romantic holiday. Veronica slips into something daring and velvet, a small smirk on her face as she puts on the finishing touches on her look. Betty admires her, feeling a little girly by comparison when Veronica’s got such a womanly confidence. Her best friend’s seemed happy lately, finally branching out and investing in the idea that there can be satisfaction in believing in people, in making the best of things. Veronica insists her newfound optimism and growth is all because of Betty. Just as she’s about to protest, Veronica lays a kiss on her. It’s so surprising that she freezes, wondering if this is just how city girls say thanks. After a moment, Veronica pulls away, squeezes her hand, and offers her some glittery eye shadow that’ll really make her eyes pop.

Suspender astride his shoulders and in the tight sloping lines of a suit, Jughead looks amazing in a new way. He smiles at Betty, and the image of attending his first book signing washes over her like some proud fantasy. It takes a moment to right herself, to resume the normality and grace that’s expected of her. The moment they touch there’s movement, arms wrapping around each other to lift into a hug. Her efforts are rewarded with a sweet kiss that washes her anxiety away about Veronica’s appreciative one in the Pembrook. Maybe she’ll tell him about it later, a funny sort of footnote to the drama of their lives. She’d assumed for quite some time that he’d be her last first kiss, but maybe it’s good enough he’ll just be her last.

Veronica hastily warns those in line behind them that their group will be using the photo booth for the next ten minutes. Kevin dips her, as is tradition. Archie crosses his eyes and does awkward dance moves. Veronica tosses her hair dramatically, posing with a certain playful flair. And Jughead, precious Jughead pushes everyone else out of the booth and cuddles her, kisses her, plays with her, makes her feel like they’re falling into the leaf piles by Sweetwater again, like they’re falling in love instead of swimming so deeply in it that it’s thrumming in her veins.

Nuzzling into the rhythm of Jughead’s arms around her is different when they’re vertical. The weight of his hands is more solid, but not suffocating. Swaying motions settle and relax her, but still she can’t help but look for clues. The brightness in his eyes can’t subdue the fact that he’s enjoying this, no matter how many times he critiques the song choice. After a while, he kisses her cheek and excuses himself to devour some cupcakes alongside Archie. She anticipates Veronica any moment, and takes a second to appreciate Kevin’s happy smile, finally slow dancing with someone just as dapper as him. This Serpent seems less acidic, much calmer than the others. While it makes her heart
swell with happiness to see her friend feeling wanted, it almost unnerves her. He’s too happy with a relative stranger, but she tries to be optimistic. Everyone starts out as strangers, even her and Jughead, as hard as that is to believe.

It feels like something punctures her lungs, air sweeping out from under them when a glimpse of sand and teal presses up against Reggie Mantle. Her sister unabashedly grinds on the slimiest guy in school like it’s nothing, like she’s polishing forks instead of someone’s body. Betty gasps for air, looking for an anchor, instead finding the matching red scowls of the Blossom twins, who it appears have come as each other’s dates. They look at her as if they’re demanding she do something, and she tries, but what? What can she do? She needs air, water, not the rose-colored mixture in the punch bowl.

Her limbs vibrate amidst a chill, a fear that no amount of rubbing her arms seems to able to soothe. Jughead’s almost steaming when he finds her, even his beanie looking caustic as he palms it hard against his skull. Words like hell and crazy dance around her head like a radio show coming in and out of static. “He was her first love.” Jughead’s anger stalls, sputtering as tears drip down her cheeks. “We’re not our families.”

She knows they’re not. Not even a little. But sometimes that makes her feel even more alone and lost than anything else. Because they would never be able to find her. If she ever lost Jughead, no one would. Sometimes it feels like she’ll never find them, the true heart of her family. Never really feel like she’s growing or sharing anything even close to love in that house except when she’s tangled up with the boy she loves the most. She thinks of Jason’s pale, blackening face, of Reggie’s twisting tongue, and curls into herself harder. She hates the thought of having to cut out her sister. To cut her out before she hurts her even more, before it turns Betty into someone who would hurt Jughead, who pushes him away when he’s just trying to make sure she has a nice time at the dance. To someone who doesn’t fight for love.

They go inside, her arms somehow enveloped in his jacket. His comforting scent is mixed with a fragrance that she doesn’t anticipate Fred or Archie possessing. Maybe Kevin leant it to him. He borrowed cologne for her. She leans up and kisses him so tenderly that she feels tingles creep into her toes, warming her chest. They hold each other in the halls for a bit, swaying, dancing, walking. It’s all the same. It’s all in rhythm. It’s all together. And when they go back into the gym, she ignores her sister in favor of focusing on her friends, who welcome her with a smile, and on Jughead’s palm, pressed comfortingly against her scars, and then her back.

They cut out early to curl up in the garage where she can enjoy his sarcasm while his fingers thread through her hair. Heart thrumming, she pulls him up, barefoot and all. He looks dubious at first, slowly dancing with her until his frown melts into something darker as she strips away their finery. His expression is so thoughtful that she can’t ever imagine throwing it away. Her last kiss. Her first love. It’s him. It’ll always be him.

Chapter End Notes

Polly was upset! But damn is she mean when she wants to be. What do you think broke them up? They were always FIGHTING, yo, even if they were cute. Betty’s definitely thrown by that and Jug tries to be her adorable love monkey and I just love their love and her uncontrollable itch to force things together but let her own relationship tighten naturally. How do you feel? It's been so long! Let's talk! Tell me things! What are some of your favorite moments?
J6: Love is a Giving Thing

Chapter Notes

Here is Jughead's post-"I love you" world. May all of you have tons of love in your life <3 Jug is a bit, uh, fascinated and preoccupied with this new level of their relationship so I hope you all enjoy that ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Their bodies are slick, entwining so easily that Jughead isn’t even aware of a direction other than closer. His hands find their way inside her shorts, cupping the roundness of her ass. The smooth skin tempts him to squeeze, to grasp and kiss her anywhere he can reach, pressing his whole body into her in the hopes of making more contact. Her hips rise into him, urging him to slide everything off as her hands release him of his excess. Between every shed barrier they greedily reconnect, long, hungry kisses that jolt his senses and send flames licking up his insides. With every inch of exposed skin, he wants to savor this, worship it, moan her name like a mantra and bury himself inside of her. He finds somewhere new, somewhere wet and deep and aching for him, her head tossing back in ecstasy when he finally enters it with ravenous fingers. Her blonde hair flickers in motion, skating across the sheets as he probes deeper, hooking inside of her. Her eyes flutter shut in abandon, gasps and confirmations her only verbal cues as she tears into his hair, igniting his scalp with her desire.

She’s so fucking beautiful that he almost can’t see, can’t look at her without rutting shamelessly against the soft flesh of her thigh, wanting the wetness coating his fingers encasing all of him and the need between his legs. Her tightness wraps around him, both of them throbbing and swelling with the sensation. I love you, all of you, he thinks he says, or maybe she does, because he’s so tightly wound that everything is jumbled in pleas, moans, and happy desperation.

There isn’t a shred of dignity he wouldn’t rip from his body to give her this, to give himself this. Her fingers dig into his skin, setting grooves that only she can have, marking his muscle with love and want as he draws his against her clit. “Juggie,” she keens, needing him, but also reaching to share this with him. Her eyes are wet, chest heaving, and her breasts flush so beautifully that he almost gives in and lets her take him. But he can barely concentrate as it is, summoning what will power he has left to finish what he started, rubbing a crescendo of his affection against her nerves. Her whole body tightens, sucking his fingers in so tight that he’s fairly certain she’s got him down to the bone. The whole thing is so wildly erotic that he feels he’s been tugged out of his senses and into another heightened sense of reality.

She quivers, heels sliding along the mattress, still clenching onto him like they’ve driven off a cliff together. His heart’s certainly beating like they have, sliding along the aching satisfaction that her body is instinctually craving him, hesitant for him to leave. He always knew their touch did something special, but this…this closeness…this passion is something else. He could give her this. She catches him staring, her emerald eyes shimmering at him with a certain quiet admiration. This is beyond just…choosing each other. They’re the firsts. The lasts. The everythings. He wants to know, to ask if she feels this way too, this swelling like their bodies are only echoing the sentiment of their hearts. I choose you, I want you, I love you, forever.

“Yes,” she whispers, reading his mind and wrapping her body around his.
“Yes.” He surrenders to sensation, fingers lightly dusting on her sides as she positions him along her slit. It’s fluid motion, coating him in readiness. Jughead trembles, her sex against his own. He didn’t think he could feel more for her, but he does. It’s overwhelming, white flames and sparks dancing behind his eyes, flaring anywhere they touch. Their fingers link, reassuringly sentimental amidst something so deliciously carnal. Maybe he can still hold onto himself through this, but then her hips rock again and he’s so fucking hard that he untethers from his brain and surges with something primal, a geyser of heat.

He clamps his teeth over his lip, trying to hold on, but Betty sees him, those eyes dark with desire and understanding as she lifts her hips and envelops him in her warmth like she knows exactly what he needs. More. Her.

The air electrifies, intensifies and grips him as tight as her sheathe. He gasps her name, exhaling something else entirely. The most powerful words he can think of in any and all order, single syllables piercing the air as she takes him deeper inside of her, pushing aside all barriers. Amidst it all, her name, his prayer. He tries to settle her, to welcome her against his heart as they sink together. One hand at a time, she brings herself to him, his palms steady against her back even though he feels like he could shatter at any second. Her eyes are deep and wet and beautiful and he has to kiss her, to wrestle her hair in his fist so it doesn’t interfere with their mouths. Even with the comfort of her tongue against his, he craves more, he craves infinity. The hunger hardens and swirls until he’s coiled so tightly that everything becomes erratic and strained, and maybe they’re breathing, maybe they’re speaking, but they are sure as hell fucking. He swears to love her, to want her, to have her and hold her. He swears, a tangled jolt of euphoria so sharp that it overwhelms him, buried in Betty to the hilt and sending a part of himself even further in, like liquid fingers searching for their place in her sheathe.

It’s another few seconds before he returns to the boundaries of his body. Trembling, he pays tithe, kissing her palms and winding them into his hair so he can bring her closer to him even as he softens. He imagines, craves the imprint of her on his skin. They’re still together, still connected, veins still thrumming with adrenaline and bliss. He’d fall into darkness if it wasn’t for her hands in his, for the kisses he needs, receives. It’s impulse, like breathing. Kissing her. Shoulders. Neck. Mouth. And soon she’s running her hands along his scalp and he’s between her thighs and they’re doing it again, caught in something so vulnerable that it makes him feel invincible.

“I love you,” they swear, emotion tearing through them like the shivers of heat in their limbs. He wants to know every part of her, every sound, everything. Everything, he keeps repeating his head, overstimulated by the abundance of new things he wants to savor, consume. The way her hair sticks to her neck, which touches inspire the different pitches of her gasps, the angles that knot them irrevocably together, which tear patches of irreconcilable pleasure from each of them. His brain is frying and his heart is pounding and he comes again, jerking unsteadily against her hips. The words keep flowing, whispered in his ear as she soothes him, “I love you.”

He wants to hear it again. Forever.

They kiss, hot and sloppy and perfect before collapsing in a fit of rapture. Her thumb continues stroking his chest, like she can’t help but treasure him even in their dazed, sticky state. If it was possible to just lay inside of each other for the rest of the day he thinks they would. Sweaty and heated and gross, he still wants to run his hands over every inch of her, let her know just how much the new reveals of today as well as the well-known parts of her mean to him. Everything. Heart, mind, body, and soul.
Under the slick relief of the shower, he watches her bathe. This is a first too, an intimate one. He’s seen her wet before, and maybe they bathed together as kids, but certainly not once theirs bodies changed. Things are larger, firmer now, and he has encouragement to touch them, kiss them, clean them. She giggles and sorely curls away from another round of sex, but she lets him explore as her eyes and hands do some wandering of their own. There are small tracks on her thighs, from running or growing. He traces them in adoration, needing both hands to get all the way around such strong thighs to slide his fascination along watery paths. She’s so amazing, muscle and firmness coupled with a soft giving shell. He wants to brush his cheek along her, kiss her with his eyelashes and his lips. Instead, he rinses her skin until it’s peachy and rosy and glowing like he feels inside. A vibrating anticipation trembles through him at her thorough, curious touch. The alliteration strikes him when he bows his head to her, presenting the thick wavy hair she longs to curl and clean. Lathered in love. This is special. To feel cared for, refreshed, brought to purring at a sensual touch. This is another new way to love. As the stream washes over them, he wonders at how lucky they are to keep discovering new ones together.

Sometimes he stares at the screen, letting the words fade in front his eyes. It’s not that they don’t matter, they’re just not what he’s lost in at the moment. Jughead feels a phantom pressure on his fingers, a tickle of hair against his neck, and sighs, hoping for a breath of her. His muse. His everything. Sometimes she takes the story with her, dredging away the snow and leaving room for something new to grow. He imagines what it is. Flowers. A home. Maybe in ten years she’ll still slice through the cold morning air, her thighs in a constant state of just a little sore from running and whatever they do in bed. He’ll keep it for her, welcome back all her heated satisfaction until it’s time to face the rest of the day.

It’s horribly domestic, imagining making coffee with Betty instead of Fred in the morning, having her invade his space and read over his shoulder with random suggestions and kisses on the cheek instead of Fred’s genial how’s it going? and piece of toast, a general belief that he’ll turn out something good as long as he’s careful. He’s one cup closer to finding out.

It surprises Jughead when his dad asks if Betty’s okay. It’s not how is she? He knows. Not the good, wonderful things, like the recent declaration of love. He knows that the Serpents tried to trip her up, to knock her out of commission for owning his attention, and somehow felt it could be fixed up with a casual phone call. He may not have ordered the hit but he sure as hell set it up. Jughead has half a mind to rip the trailer door off and destroy everything inside of it. Archie’s eyes light up in concern, not even hearing the other side of the conversation before his hands are up like they’re back on the basketball court, guarding the door. Don’t do something you’ll regret.

But Jughead can’t contain it, and maybe he’s more Serpent than he realizes because he hisses that if any of them ever touch her again, they’re dead. He whips the phone at the couch, barely hearing its soft thud as his nails go up to rake his scalp, wishing it was Betty lathering him in shampoo instead. Archie’s hand claps him on the back, reassuring him that it’s okay, but it’s not. It’s not. His veins are singing and he hates his father and he hates his blood and he hates that he’s the reason Betty got shoved to the ground like she meant nothing. She’s everything. Blinded, he tries to grasp what that means everyone else is. They’re not nothing. He’s not nothing, but…but Betty…

Archie tries to reason that she’d have played no matter what the game, no matter what the injury, because it’s Betty, and she loves him. They both do. It strikes an odd nerve. What wouldn’t they all do for each other? Archie gave him his home and Betty gave him her heart. But what does he give
them? Sardonic perspective? Pop culture references? A nostalgic memory? Everything goes to Betty, but he’s not even sure what that is. And he’s been Archie’s friend for so long that neither of them even acknowledge what that means. That they’ll fight for each other? Is that what this is? Jughead needs to go for a walk, and part of him hopes she’ll find them there, a happy accident. That she’ll clear his mind and settle his heart. But Archie comes along instead, hands in his pockets and humming a song in the background while they absently follow the tracks she’s left in the fading snow. Slowly, the pressure in his chest abides, and he feels more like a man instead of an inferno.

It sets off mild alarms when Kevin approaches and asks about that day at the gym. Why? Is Betty upset? Does he know something about that night? Or is this something about Sheriff Keller and the Serpents? But Kevin must sense his apprehension, because he sighs and mutters never mind, rolling his eyes and marching off with the same purposeful stride he’s always had. Jughead considers calling after him, giving them a chance to have a normal conversation about an actual out-of-school interaction they’ve had, but it doesn’t seem like the natural thing to do. He wonders what Betty would want, and frowns at the solitary back of one of her best friends, hoping he hasn’t failed some kind of test, resenting it if it exists. In some ways, Kevin and Jughead both know what it’s like to walk alone, to have Betty appear like a flashlight through the night, to smile good-naturedly at their cynicism and unique flair. But then the sea of classmates swallows Kevin up and Jughead doesn’t get the chance to take it back. Doesn’t chase it, anyway. Instead, he finds Archie and ranks the most obnoxious phrases he’d like to etch in Reggie Mantle’s car.

At first it takes a conscious effort to look Alice and Hal in the eye, knowing they’ll probably send Betty to a convent or him to an early grave if they find out what’s happening. It’s hard not to swagger a little, to write it on his face like a giant neon sign that Betty Cooper loves me back and invited me inside of her. He’s not sure if he’s going to do something stupid like grin or throw up all over their hardwood floors. Betty proudly knots her fingers through his and does something to muffle his audible gulp whenever her parents approach him. At least Polly’s disdain is usually kept at a distance, an eye roll on her way to the stairs. He’s not sure what to make of that, but resumes beaming at Betty and managing forced politeness with her family.

Betty requests Jughead’s scent, of all things. At first he finds it endearingly sexy, the way she sniffs his shirt, fingers trailing on his chest as she insists they jog, do jumping jacks, or other more mutually beneficial activities to work up a sweat. Her eyes linger on his bare chest, dark, hungry, and focused. Putting on his shirt almost feels as sensual as taking it off. She treats it like a heist, carefully planned, motivated, and he finds great pleasure in slowly making her forget everything but movement and heat and sex. Sometimes when he crawls up to her windowsill unannounced, he catches her stroking the collar of his shirt with her thumb, the softness draped over her perfect breasts as she longingly lays a hand where his body should be beside her, maybe even with her inside the shirt itself. He loves her. So much that he aches. Even if she doesn’t realize it, there’s something new that’s been drifting in his senses. A scent that’s them. If only it was as easy to hold onto as a well-loved t-shirt.

He thinks about her thighs a lot lately. Not just the taste of heaven and sin when they’re on either side of his head. But how they’d look against his motorcycle. If she’d wrap them around the machine or the man. If he’d feel the vibration of the motor rippling through her jeans, if she could feel it in his heart with her arms wrapped around him tight and strong like another layer of his ribs. He’s not
tempted to ride alone, but he is tempted. He wants to show her things. Everything colorful and powerful and real, beautiful like they are.

Hearts start popping up in the hallways, but he barely notices them in favor of the one beating in the chest of the girl next door. Archie finally says something, a cheap paper cutout dangling between them, asking how Betty and Jughead’s relationship is even real. Only fictional relationships are so entirely tethered, loving, burning as the two of them. It doesn’t escape Jughead that the fictional examples of all-consuming love usually end in tragedy.

The fantasy that’s been escaping Archie his whole life has found two of his best friends, and now he’s asking how to get it, if normal people are even capable of it. Archie thought he’d been in love before. Spent time with girls, curled up with them and thought they were pretty and nice and made him feel special enough to write songs, but they never burst into his life like fireworks and turned the world into something impossibly chaotic and beautiful.

Jughead never expected it, never even dared to hope this would be his life. It didn’t just happen, and it’s not hard work. Loving Betty comes easily, inevitably. It’s loving himself that’s harder. But Betty celebrates him every single day, every night. He doesn’t exist for her, but most days it feels like she inspires him to come alive, to be present and tangible and real. Maybe there’s some chemical reaction in their blood, in their quiet understanding of the great and terrible power inside of them. That with each other, they never have to hold back even when they ache to hold each other. He doesn’t have an easy answer for Archie, some cliché about hanging in there. Because on some level, Archie knows. He has to know. Inspiration is like the vague cousin of love’s rhapsody. It strikes people differently, sometimes not at all. And he’s been singed to the bone, the soul, by what he feels for Betty.

Betty can transfer emotion like it’s air, intensify it until the atmosphere cackles. Even though he’s never been romantically interested in anyone else, Jughead’s always been a passionate person. Combined and amplified with someone like Betty…that makes for magic. They see, feel each other with some invisible tether that’s so incredibly palpable that he wonders if they braid thicker layers into it every time they meet. He hopes so. As if on cue, Betty looks over and smiles, and he feels whatever hold they have on each other tighten in satisfaction.

In a trailer his dad still insists could be his home, Jughead’s arms knot hard across his chest. Technically his dad never endorsed anyone hurting Betty, so he’s here making his expectations crystal clear if he wants to clean up this broken mess. If it’s even possible. The next time a leather jacket is shoved in Jughead's face or slithers by his girlfriend, he's shoving their greasy napkins in a molotov cocktail aimed right at the Wyrm. Two birds with one stone. Destroy the bar that inevitably tempts his dad with oblivion and scatter the snakes that have been hissing at him since birth.

Surprisingly, FP just frowns and claims "That's dangerous talk, boy." An offshoot of be careful there. It's so ironic that he almost laughs.

For visitations, FP’s said he'll try to clear the way for a leatherless existence. Use the napkins to help clean up instead of make a mess. But he doesn't want to hear Jughead disrespect his chosen family, nor his attempts to get sober. Jughead finally does laugh at that, a bitter, sick thing that makes his eyes water. Love changes people, FP insists, focusing on Jughead with hard, sharp intensity. It changed you. It could change me too. But he's loved his dad his whole life and nothing's ever changed, not for long anyway. Maybe it's not enough. He thinks of Betty, how her love didn't so
much change him as it did the entire world. It’s more vibrant now, a place of possibility. A place where hypothetically his dad could get sober. But he’s still not sure that’s enough, and glances away, thinking of her text message with a home-cooked meal that says next time, and wonders what that means for his father.

In something close to a wistful smile, FP cracks open a suspiciously dark green bottle and offers its bubbly contents. Jughead shakes his head instinctively, watching his father take small sips. “I remember what it was like, kid. To be in love. To feel on top of the world. That changed too.” It’s that stupid offshoot of be careful there again. His father has no concept of stability, how tender it is. FP brought Gladys flowers after a fight once, another argument erupting before they’d even had time to brown. When she left, he noticed the empty closet space, the lack of food in the pantry, and yet he probably felt lightness at having one less person to disappoint in the house. Two, if they’re counting Jellybean, but she was too young to be disappointed. Jughead was just old enough to remember, to feel it weighted in his bones. He takes a deep, steadying breath, and tries not to think about what it means to have an empty space on the bed.

Laying on the air mattress, he asks Archie what he really wants from life. They usually have these talks late at night when they’ve eaten too much and Fred insists they head up. FP and Fred used to be friends. Maybe they even had chats like this until FP sucked that relationship dry. So Jughead tries to give, even if it’s just stupid reaffirmations that Archie can go to college. He’s not an idiot, at least not academically. He just lacks focus sometimes. And maybe that’s a good thing. He never hones in too deeply, burrows in his brain until it’s whizzing and steaming. Even if he does end up taking over Andrews Construction, he’ll be out there working with his hands where his mind has something to bounce on with the steadiness of a basketball or beat, inspiring a crew and maybe making them cringe as he plays them a new song. If he doesn’t stay…Jughead pauses, trying to carefully construct the right words as Archie dreams aloud about rooming in New York together, pursuing their crafts and passions. His gaze shifts over to the window across the way where Betty’s studying, head down. Sensing the question, Archie grins, claiming she is Jughead’s passion, and will probably be right there with them. Maybe they’ll all get out of Riverdale, exceed everyone’s expectations, including their own.

The fantasies he’d thumped out after long massage sessions on the couch are brought to vivid technicolor with Betty, who sucks and molds him with loving caresses until the sun erupts behind his eyes and fades into a warm, tender glow of endearment. Betty.

It unnerves him when she takes pills, like she’s sick. Betty learns to do it aside from him, even though the only place she can safely take them is at school, when Veronica cracks open a little Days of the Week case. That someone else is involved in her sexual health at all infuriates and grosses him out, but he can’t exactly stuff used condoms in his sherpa jacket and shimmy back down the ladder to dispose of them at Fred’s house. He doesn’t put it past Alice not to root through the trash. They can’t be burned. Betty assures him she wants this, and although he knows she wants them and this new, physical, heat, he’s not sure she wants everything else that comes with it.

Maybe one day, he muses. Maybe they’ll put away the pills and have something else instead. Maybe it won’t even be a barrier. They might make something small with a heartbeat of its own. Betty looks at him, trying to sort out how he’s feeling, and for once he’s uncomfortable enough that he doesn’t know if something like that would be a miracle or a disaster.
The distant threats of a lovers quarrel briefly transcend the lecture at the front of the class. It sounds a little more serious than a typical spat, one set of footsteps slapping away and a chair squeaking against the floor. Maybe it’s the tether that makes him look, catching Betty almost possessed as she reaches towards the door handle. She doesn’t hear the teacher ask where she’s going, and honestly they probably don't care. It’s Betty Cooper, model student, which makes this all the more suspect. It takes about two seconds for him to make a halfhearted excuse to slip out after her. It’s not like he’s stalking his girlfriend, even if he is hovering in the doorway, listening to her heated conversation with her sister.

Polly Cooper says some awful things, things he imagines Jellybean might yell at him if she was a few years older and ricocheting from a breakup with typical Jones temper. Still, it’s jarring, especially directed at Betty. It's about Polly, but she makes it about them. Betty stiffens, absorbing and hardening at the onslaught of abuse. This is different. This isn’t Alice telling her that A- should be an A+. This is Polly rejecting her as a person, as a sister. Their teacher catches him loitering, snapping that he needs to come back in. Although he glances at them, he doesn't move. He has to wait for her. To go after her, even if she isn’t moving.

Betty turns without seeing, shoulders shuddering once, twice, then marching towards her duty. He holds open the door, eyes fixed on her fists to see if he can slip in there or if he should lay a comforting hand on her back. Reassure her that Polly’s just angry, that she’s wrong. But Betty’s mechanical, focused, tightening her ponytail and slipping into hyperdrive, somewhere he can’t quite reach. A place beyond pain. Beyond pleasure. Beyond all of them. He doesn’t hear a word the rest of class.

He makes an effort to join Betty in her bed that night. She’s stiff, rambling quietly about Valentine’s Day. No matter how much he rubs her arm, how many times he kisses her, she keeps shifting, glancing nervously at the wall separating her and her sister. Polly might know about their midnight rendezvous since she used to have some of her own. The question is whether or not she’ll rat them out. But Jughead gets the feeling Polly wouldn’t want to ruin future chances of her own midnight man, so he slips his arm around Betty and tickles the spot just above her hip that always makes her smile. When he feels her lips press into his neck, trying to suppress her squeals, he thinks he’s on the right track. The pressure changes from light to insistent, and after a moment of sucking bruises into his flesh, she seems to push away any thoughts at all.

Archie’s obviously and hilariously surprised when Veronica Lodge formally presents him with a small bouquet of pristine red roses in the student lounge. Half-hiding his laughter behind Betty’s shoulder, Jughead enjoys the heiress’s a flippant speech about it being an honor to go to the dance. Of course Archie says yes, kissing her cheek, then stumbling to kiss the other to follow her lead. Afterwards, Archie looks at him and Betty for some kind of affirmation. Jughead raises his eyebrows and grins in faux-encouragement at being the chosen one. But Betty’s studying them carefully, spine straight, even for Cooper manners. The movement of her fingers sliding into her scars makes him panic, quickly forging their hands together. He doesn’t know…isn’t sure if she’s reopened them lately, but he knows all her nervous ticks. There’s one now. That reassuring smile that lasts just long enough for a picture, just like her parents taught her. It isn’t enough for him to fake one back, but she’s so lost in her head he’s not sure she even notices.

Just for kicks, he goes to Pop’s. He’s been able to write in Archie’s garage or living room well
enough, but Pop’s still has the benefit of endless coffee and french fries. Plus, there’s little chance he’ll get distracted by the comings and goings of the Cooper family. Maybe it’ll do him some good to stop worrying about Betty worrying about other people. He slides into the familiar booth, listens to the slugging coffee machine, takes his first rich, dark sip, and boots up his laptop. The white noise of Riverdale drama patters around him, his fingers finding their rhythm on the keys.

Eventually a familiar light catches the corner of his eye, dragging his attention from the words at hand. Betty’s practically jogging to keep up with Kevin, trying to reassure him. Based on his firm-set expression, the way he’s not deigning to look down from his perch, it’s not going well. Her ponytail swings insistently, refusing to stop. And god, even though it’s sad, Jughead loves her. For trying. For attempting to find someone for Kevin, to be there for Polly, and if he knows her well enough she probably had something to do with Veronica’s sudden willingness to give the dating game and their best friend a try. His little cupid with her bleeding heart, bleeding palms to match. Jerking at the thought, he realizes that he’s promised to meet her and Archie for homework. When he orders a chocolate and strawberry milkshake to go, Pop gives him a smile like he knows.

Betty keeps subtly pushing the straw in Jughead’s direction, half-lecturing Archie all the while. Of course he drinks it. He’s practically insatiable, especially when he knows that this milkshake is what she’ll taste like later. Well, her mouth anyway. In an unexpected move, she swipes Jughead’s upper lip, the warmth tickling his skin before her finger disappears between her lips. It’s so unexpectedly intimate that he nearly sloshes her drink all over the table. Archie, thankfully, notices nothing, still frowning at the packet in front of him and asking another question for clarification. Before Jughead can insist they go to the garage or that he needs to take a shower, Betty’s soft sock-clad foot slides over his, urging him to stay. Of course he can’t deny that. So he writes part of a study guide, their feet absently stroking along with the tapping of keys.

Things must be abnormally uncomfortable at the Cooper house, because Betty’s all too excited to drag her carefully frozen meal out for a visit, mist swirling around her wrists and tightening the blood vessels in her palms upon contact. He’s not sure why she dresses up when his dad’s only button-down is a flannel thing and the shirt he wears when he appears in court. Still, she’s consciously made up to feel pretty, so he tells her she is and keeps his hand on her lower back to guide her out of the Cooper threshold and into the Jones one.

The whole time, he glares at his dad to play nice, and FP tries. The food’s great. Made with love, he wants to tease her. Some vegetables are hidden in the potatoes and cheese but it’s so tasty that he doesn’t even mind. FP laughs, surveying the spread. “Alice helped you make this?” Betty’s throat dips, swallowing spit instead of the carefully prepared meal. “My sister Polly sort of helped too.”

“How things have changed since high school,” FP muses, eyes gleaming with either fond or rueful memories. Jughead kind of wants to kick him under the table, so he puts his hand on his girl’s back instead. Betty and him aren’t going to change that much. They’re going to stay together. Cook together. Eat together. Live, laugh, and love together.

FP notes Jughead’s protective stance, gently moving the food in his mouth with an extended chin and tongue adjustment before asking about her sister. Of course that’s another jab, if an unintentional one. It’s like he can’t help hurting people without a reason other than trying to cover his own stupid decisions. Betty vaguely answers and changes the subject, fork hovering over her food. Jughead tries to comfort her, distract her, drawing tiny infinity symbols on her skin, occasionally a $j$ and $b$ in a heart. Maybe he should mark a tree sometime. Tag the trailer underneath, or the spot she set him alight in Fred’s construction yard. Their space. He just wants them to leave a mark, to sear them in forever so everyone else can see it too, even if they don’t know what it means.
They’re walking to school and Betty’s more sluggish than usual, accidentally bumping into things, scratching her scalp under the ponytail that sits a little lower than the tips of her ears. He asks if she got any sleep and she shakes her head. Guilt twists in his gut. If only he hadn’t been so wrapped up in things, he might’ve been able to help.

He wishes she could climb down, sneak into Archie’s room and curl up with him on the inflatable mattress while they chat or play games, or maybe Archie would be asleep and Betty and him could kiss until the tension in her knuckles recedes and makes its way around his wrist. He doesn’t ask, though. Why it can’t be her coming to him, even if she is often the one in motion.

“She was burning Jason,” she says, like her organs have been scooped out and her voice has nothing left but seeds to clamber up on the way out of her throat. Obviously she doesn’t mean the actual quarterback. But the way she’s mourning, it may as well have been. She’s never carried any love for the Blossoms, and has even resolutely been keeping away from her sister, like she’s something in the peripheral Betty can’t quite un-see but certainly won’t focus on. He’s just not sure that everything else can blot it out entirely. He wants to give her something happy, something to look forward to. Since he can’t exactly ask her for forever yet or worry her about college, he settles on something smaller.

It’s been a long time coming. Jughead hasn’t seen the Serpents around Pop's, thankfully. His dad probably has something to do with that. Giving him space. But Riverdale’s too small a town for him not to see them ever again, and he runs into the quiet one, Joaquin at the supermarket. Kevin’s been asking Betty about him, who of course asked him in turn, but it’s not like Jughead knows more than most people would. The kid keeps to himself, keeps his mouth shut and his eyes open without judgment, which is more than Jug can say about himself. Or Kevin, for that matter.

The greaser’s eyes light up in quiet surprise when Jughead approaches, bag loaded with candy. It’s not for him, obviously, but Jughead does ask if Joaquin’d be willing to go to a dance with an obnoxious, tall, dramatic north sider who’s into that sort of thing. He shrugs with the same indifferent acquiescence of being told to do a delivery. A little twinge in Jughead’s gut wonders if it’s only because of his dad, if the similarities between them are enough to keep these kids in line. But he’s just a kid. And he’d barely been able to protect Betty from the wilder ones in a stupid game. Still, Kevin will be thrilled, which means Betty will. He hopes she will.

He pauses in the flower aisle, ignoring memories of wilted ones in the trailer that makes everything brown. They’re beautiful, vibrant, pungent. Some are already turning at the edges, like paper toasting just before a flame. The smell overwhelms him, funneled from the crinkly plastic sheathes they’re sitting in. Some happier-looking stuffed bears smile down from a nearby shelf, surrounded by other slightly more solid things. The rose catches his eye. It’s soft but wiry underneath with fake thorns sewn in and everything. It’ll never wilt. The stem is long and strong enough that it can wrap around anything. Her bedpost, their arms, even Vegas’s collar if they feel like dressing him up. He adds the non-consumable to his pile of consumer-targeted wooing and fishes around in his pocket, hoping he has enough for this.

Betty’s smile is enough. The exhaustion evaporates off her face and she wraps herself around him so tightly that he’s glad he sprung for a fake flower because the real ones would’ve definitely been crushed. They’ve barely parted before Veronica swoops in like a rumbling cloud, Archie in tow, and demands they talk travel arrangements. Betty senses his barely-concealed annoyance and tugs him
aside appreciatively, kissing him until he can’t help but melt and curl like chocolate left out in the
sun.

Turns out she got him candy without even knowing they were going to the dance. But she would. She’s always good that way. And even though she offers to pay for the tickets, she doesn’t push him when he says he’s got it. It takes her a couple of seconds of staring, unwrapping the layers of his life before she claims that she’s got the next few meals at Pop’s then. Of course he can’t resist. He can never resist being doted on by the brilliant Betty Cooper, and his fingers twitch to do some doting on her of his own.

She dangles chocolates in front of him like catnip, tempting his tongue and teeth with whatever surprise is inside. It’s rich, thick caramel cradled in a milk chocolate shell that sinks into his mouth, one rebellious lick of it sticking to his face. He sees the way her eyes flicker to it, biting her lip in playful, light desire. A silent offering, he tilts his chin up, daring to wet but not clear it with his tongue. As she offers him the rest of the chocolate piece, her ring finger flicks up to clear his sticky residue. Perfect. His mouth closes over her fingers, savoring the mix of her own saltiness with the caramel. Caramel. Her stuffed cat. He wonders if this is her favorite flavor of the bunch and is determined to find out later, when he’s not sucking it off her skin.

She giggles breathily, withdrawing as he nips at her fingertips, trying to keep them in the confines of his mouth. “Delicious.” A dark color settles in her cheeks, spreading in her chest. Veronica the voyeur chuckles and tries to make Betty blush even more before turning her attention back to Archie, who looks so happy to be included in Veronica’s know-it-all directions that he’s beaming. The way Betty’s pressed her fingers to her lips makes something flare inside of him. He grins, about to ask if his hunger’s contagious when she steals the breath right out of his mouth.

At the very least, his dad helps him get a suit, if only because he’s curious what it looks like. Every boy should have one, at least once, FP declares, and warns him not to grow any more before prom. He’s not sure where he got the money and he doesn’t want to ask. Fred would’ve helped where he could, but Veronica’s already gotten Archie’s measurements and has sent both of them a list of things not to forget. Smile is one of them. Jughead rolls his eyes and slings his arms into the blazer. He doesn’t look…bad. Everything feels right in a very weird way. Archie’s slurping spaghetti over a bowl with a giant napkin sticking out over his button-down just in case the inevitable happens. Jughead wouldn’t be surprised if Veronica made her driver keep an extra shirt in the trunk just in case.

They climb into a foreignly expensive car, the seats smelling like a whole other kind of leather than the jackets he’s used to on the south side. The driver brings them to the Penthouse to meet the girls. Of course Veronica would want the extra alone time with Betty, and of course she wouldn’t want them to go in Fred’s pickup truck that’s more suited for construction than a grand entrance. For the first time, he finds himself in the lobby of the Pembrook, idly wondering how something so expensive can afford to operate in a town as small as Riverdale. There’s a doorman, who will probably hand his hat over to someone simple, dapper, and polite like Moose Mason when he retires. Archie clears his throat, nudging Jughead’s arm when the elevator dings open and the girls make their entrance.

He turns, expecting Betty to be beautiful, but not quite prepared for the dark red of her lipstick, the hint of a smoky coal around her eyes that emphasizes the force of nature she is. It’s clear from the bolder color choices that Veronica’s been involved, but it’s still Betty behind those blazing eyes. Still wonderful, gazing at him like he’s struck her with an arrow instead of the other way around. Everyone else fades away as she steps towards him, already reaching for each other until his arms are
around her waist, hers on his neck, and he can’t help but lift her a little in a hug, a throwback to some kind of dramatic dance move that he’s gathered girls fantasize about. Being lifted. Being free and weightless and in love. Betty’s fingers trail lovingly along and under his beanie, not a hint of the disapproval he might catch from Alice, Polly, or Veronica. They’re warned against ruining her makeup, but Betty still steals a few kisses here and there when the other pair aren’t looking, and he steals a few more, grinning when she has to smear the red off his smile.

It’s not awful, being her left arm, going to the dance. In fact, he’s pretty sure they get some new classic photos for Fred to put on the fridge when they’re all cramped in the booth. There’s a slight flare of satisfaction when he sneaks bunny ears into one of Archie and Veronica’s posed portraits. But then he grabs Betty and insists on doing two full sheets of photos alone, something even Veronica wasn’t ballsy enough to do. It’s not like he needs eight thousand angles to prove they’re together, he just wants security. A memory. How long has it been since he’s been able to capture a good moment in a photo instead of words? He thinks of the polaroid of him and Jellybean, of the ones Fred and FP used to have on the fridge of the three of them grinning and running and playing. How far they’ve come, he thinks, a flash sparking in on their kiss.

Dancing isn’t such an abstract concept now that they’ve found other rhythms. He’s content with his hands on her hips, dragging her close while she’s hooked adoringly around his neck. It’s entirely possible he has no sense of style, is a terrible dancer, but loudmouths like the Blossoms and Reggie have nothing on him tonight. Besides, Veronica and Archie seem to be having fun, and they’re close enough to be a buffer, occasionally leaning in for commentary or trying to sneak in for some kind of dance. They probably want to steal her for a minute, entertain her outside of the four-step he’s got going on. This isn’t a club, he wants to protest lightly, but who is he to judge if they want to jump around, grind, or use their hips like swinging rides at the carnival? He stays contentedly wrapped around Betty until his stomach starts grumbling and Archie’s practically panting for punch.

Veronica spins in her dress, making her way to the front to request a song for her and Betty while the boys are busy. Kevin’s looking rather pleased with his date, the two of them sort of on their own but near enough to stay in frame, although Jughead can’t help but notice the pointed look Kevin shoots at Moose and Midge like, see? I have a date too. Joaquin’s so relaxed he probably doesn’t even care if he’s being used as revenge or a hookup or if this is even a real date. Jughead’s not sure if he should ask him how it’s going. What does he say to someone who probably lights fires to burn evidence on a regular basis? For his father, no less? That he used to do that too?

Archie engages Jughead in sampling every flavor of cupcake, some of which they can tell Betty decorated because of the pastel color scheme and rich red velvet underneath. His best friend even chews to the beat, bobbing his shoulders like it makes everything smoother, tastier. Ethel politely offers Jughead a glass of punch and the boys look at each other, confused, before he declines. Blinking steadily, she turns to Archie and repeats the question. Mouth full, he shakes his head, and Ethel’s lips firm into a line she might think is a smile before she firmly sets the glass down by the bowl. It’s a waste, they frown, not to drink it for herself.

The clamor of Veronica’s pumps can be heard even over the saccharine love songs. Surprisingly, she stops in front of Jughead, demanding to know where Betty went. He’s not her keeper. Veronica scoffs, rolls her eyes and goes in search. Shrugging, he turns back to Archie but keeps an eye out for his loving blonde. When Veronica comes back from the bathroom, annoyed and clearly not satisfied by what she found, a tug of worry plies at his gut. He’ll find her. He can always find her. She comes back.

Reggie Mantle spins his date a little too aggressively, and Jughead has to swerve to avoid a face full of obnoxious sandy hair. Polly. He blinks, confused. She responds to his question about Betty much like he did to Veronica, and the sting of karma reminds him that she really is a bitch. There’s a
second Polly frowns him, when she must sense how angry and worried he is, and offhandedly says she'll tell her he's looking for her...if she sees her.

The thudding bass does nothing to help his heart rate. Jughead scours the hallways like an idiot, fingers itching to give her a call, but he knows her stuff is checked away with the chaperones just like his is. Feeling stupid, like a terrible date, he asks the chaperones if they’ve seen her. They nod, pointing to the doors, and before his heart can slam too powerfully in his chest they amend that she hasn’t gotten any of her things.

He spots the soft blonde halo amidst some of the courtyard benches, her arms wrapped tight around goose-pimpled flesh. His breath comes out in a relieved, angry puff. How could she? Make him worry about being a bad date, about setting her off, just leaving? Even if it is just outside, it strikes him as selfish. Something Polly would do. Something his mother...

Jughead would’ve gone with her, with Betty that is. Could’ve gotten her coat, could’ve…his worry trails to indignant fury. She turns to him, taking his rant with big glassy eyes, sooty streaks clinging to the hollows of her face and making his palms desperately ache to warm her skin.

“He was her first love,” she swallows, voice cracking with emotion, and the way her eyes are shining on him, dripping with anxiety, he realizes this isn’t just about Polly and Jason. This is about first loves. About him, them.

Although Polly and her parents may often be the ones to urger her to take the first step, Betty’s always been keen on doing things properly, following in their footsteps to some extent before beating her own path. Running. Honors classes. Fixing cars. Nancy Drew. Long after her sister abandoned these passions, Betty was taking them to the next level and seeing them through. Reassembling engines. Writing her own pieces, plucking at clues in town much like he examines them in his novel. She makes things better. Polishes and beats them until her eyes shine with wonder.

But watching Polly burn everything around her in the name of freedom, from pain, from people, from love, is something she can’t…won’t follow. Even if Betty anticipated dating based on her sister’s romantic trajectory, everything else about their relationships is so different. Polly and Jason were never friends, never annoyed each other on purpose or watched the same movie together a hundred times, talking through the whole thing. Polly’s a cheerleader. Jason’s a jock. There’s already some weird power dynamic there so much different than Betty and Jughead, one that strengthened them in some ways and prepared them for disaster in others. And as much as she loves them, the only time Betty’s iced or shut people out because of their relationship was that horrible moment outside the Andrews with a stupid misunderstanding, quickly embracing everyone once she figured it out.

Still, Polly’s recent split has confronted Betty with the horrible possibility that the first love isn’t always the one that lasts, and that terrifies her more visibly than it does him. Because he can’t imagine it. Not without falling apart like she is or destroying something else for the sake of saving what's them. She’s it. She’s Betty. The sun. The moon. The stars. Fire and water and earth and wind. But she’s also a girl shivering in a dress, crying because she can’t control any of it. Just treasures his heart and leaves hers in his care, anticipating he'll keep it safe.

Jughead swings his jacket off and nurses her into it, wanting to kiss the sniffling from her quivering mouth. “We’re not our families,” he reminds her, thinking of the fuzzy flower she has tucked above her headboard, the way she tenderly hand-washes his beanie and dries it carefully on the lowest setting of her hair dryer just so it won’t warp. He brushes some of the sooty dust off her cheek with his thumbs, cradling her so he can look in her eyes and promise that this thing of theirs is forever. In some ways he feels like he's racing in their relationship, constantly embracing the different ways to
keep her happy and held. But he wouldn't change it or break it for the world because he loves the one he's got in front of him.

The chaperones watch them, wide-eyed and whispering about young love and *isn't that sweet* when he brings her back inside, tightly wound in his jacket and arms. He directs her somewhere more private, walking, then swaying gently when some sappy song comes on, promising her that he's willing to stay when she does, subtly asking her to only go where he can see the path, where he can follow. Because he believes. This is it for them, this is infinite.

Their friends knowingly roll their eyes at the *lovebirds* when they cut out early, but they all seem happy enough with their own pairings, elbows bending as they swing towards one another. Betty tucks her arm in his, hair sweeping his shoulder in its soft waves as the chaperones exchange smiles, like the day's been saved and he's somehow some prince of teen angst and love. It makes him feel weird, like they have this sappy expectation that Betty's mess was somehow cleaned up by his endearment. Maybe he *helped*. Love *helps*. But Betty knows how to get out of a funk on her own two feet, he just happened to help her up this time. He holds her tighter and slides into sarcastic banter as they make their way to the garage just to feel more *normal*.

Carding his fingers through her wavy hair, he admires how easily she makes him at ease just by *being* there. His best friend. She teases him about being the *best*, setting up her friend and making sure Archie didn’t get frosting on his shirt. Giving her his coat. Those are things he’s *supposed* to do to make her happy. It doesn’t feel like he’s passed some invisible bar to be a great boyfriend. A great love. But she makes him feel that way anyway, sliding gently off his lap and pulling him to his feet. Somehow the intimacy of staring at her bare feet on the garage floor shifting to cover his own sends a tremor of nervous anticipation through him. It’s so *sweet*, her body moving in tandem with his, enjoying it until his emotions are a jumble and he has to kiss her. She lets him linger, savoring the taste of friendship and freedom and intimacy. When they take a breath, swallowing, he looks past the smoky eye and into the girl he’s always known, biting her lip under his quiet intensity. He knows he’s a lot, that she’s infinity, but it doesn’t feel like too much. It can’t be. It’s *Betty*. Slowly, she strips him of his blazer, his shirt and tie, carefully tears away all the frills and finery for what she wants underneath. It’s *him*. It’ll always be him.

Chapter End Notes

**OHHHHH to be young and in love~** Just to be clear, Veronica is getting Betty birth control pills. Probably with the assistance of "cool mom" Hermione. FP actively wants to be more in the loop of Jug’s life, even if their visits do have to be Serpent-free, but he totes is like, "They're not bad kids Jug, just misunderstood" and Jughead's just raising eyebrows like, "Hmmm would you say they have bad home lives DAD?! Are you making up for that somehow DAAAAADDD?" Jughead gets more angry than depressed at anyone questioning the permanence of their relationship. Like, he's really focused on not being a fuck-up like FP and learning the ways that make him AND Betty happy. If anything, he struggles to leave space for them to grow into their future instead of rushing towards it thinking that he knows what it's going to be, which is rainbows and butterflies and the occasional pep talk for infinity. In the words of the Beach Boys, wouldn't it be nice?

In brief preview/spoilers, Jug WILL find out about Veronica's Valentine's Day liberties. Any expectations how THAT's gonna go? I have feelings about Kevin and Joaquin. How are you feeling? Betty's anxiety flares make ME nervous but thankfully Jug is like,
"I'm on the case! EVERYBODY MOVE!" Hopefully that trend continues. Also Archie Andrews Is A Good Friend preventing murder and arson this chapter and Jug actively trying to include him in his life again makes me feel warm and fuzzy. Much love!
Chapter Summary

Betty wonders about the future and trust

Chapter Notes

Hopefully...HOPEFULLY the wait was worth it. As a reminder, last chapter at the Valentine's Dance, Veronica thanked Betty for teaching her how to love with a big ol' smooch. Betty's upset that no couples seem to stay together, and desperately wants to stay with Jughead. They shacked up in the garage together after the dance aaaaand yeah.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mouth still sticky with apple juice and pastry crumbs, Jughead kisses her goodbye. Even amidst groggy haziness he’s still tempting enough to change her mind, to fill it with thoughts of tackling him back into the garage to dance the day away. Eventually they’ll have to do this when they go to work, she supposes. Drag themselves apart to start their day. Sometimes, without him, it feels like the day hasn’t even begun. That her heart hasn’t properly stretched yet. Through long eyelashes and a devilish, knowing smile, he bends down and kisses her again. “Go get 'em, Betts.”

Even though her calves ache with the joys of dancing in heels, of balancing on Jughead, Betty lotions them up, still feeling phantom caresses of her lover across her skin. She delicately prepares to drown out the rest of the house while still in her room, whether it be with the song in her heart or the headphones in her ears. Her mother vaguely calls to her, but with a promise to fill her in after the run, Betty braces for the rush of fresh air against her skin. It washes over her, muscles shaking out in her own challenge. There’s infinite distance she can put between her and her childhood home, there’s just the matter of endurance and motivation.

Betty can feel spring in her bones, can smell grass and budding flowers sweetening the air. The day she tore at Andrews construction she’d felt like a she ripped her world apart before Jughead’s glowing eyes, the husk of who she was incinerating to peel back for raw flesh. But with Jughead, it feels more like she’s taking root. She’s cared for, tended, anything rotten just becoming fertilizer and mulch until she can bloom fresh and fragrant and bright again. She loves him. Her sun. Her moon. Is it possible for him to be water, earth, and air too? She takes a deep breath, filling her lungs with motivation to grow.

The end of her hair is still dripping from her shower when she’s directed to her interview about the dance. She sits straight with her hands in her lap, eyes on the table as she feels a rogue chill curl
down her spine through her button-down shirt. Next to her, Polly blithely recounts the material things of the night. The fancy car Reggie picked her up in from his dad’s dealership. The other girls’ dresses. What kind of decorations. The protein-focused restaurant in Greendale they went to beforehand. Nothing about it sounds even remotely magical.

Alice and Polly’s matching icy blue eyes regard Betty, waiting for her version of the night. At first, she’s not sure if she can properly express what last night meant. What love means in the context of her friends, her best friend. How Polly broke her heart by showing up with Reggie and pushing the rest of them aside. How Jughead helped her put herself together again.

She could tell them what they’d want to hear, about the inside of Veronica’s penthouse and luxury black car. But she wants to share how happy she is for Kevin that he got to finally dance with someone other than a platonic friend. How grateful she is to have a girlfriend like Veronica who helps her step outside of her comfort zone, even if it’s just with lipstick and eyeliner. That she’s proud of Archie for actually caring about his date and learning how to be a better man, a better partner, and somehow an even better friend.

And Jughead. There aren’t enough nice things she can say about him. He’s everything. Knowing her family, she keeps those details hidden beneath a loving smile, and says that the evening was amazing. Not that she presumed it would end in disaster, but she didn’t expect the ways it could be fantastic. Over the rim of a teacup, Alice asks if they can expect Jughead to partake in more dances, considering his general aversion. Yes, she thinks, remembering the soft smile he’d had, his hands wrapped around her waist and stars dancing in his eyes. In the gym, in the garage. It doesn’t matter. As long as they’re partners.

Polly rolls her eyes. Alice pushes a bowl of fruit at the girls and insists it helps with digestion. Wielding the banana like it should have a holster, Polly’s grip is sure to bruise. Betty reaches for the apple, teeth pulling back the skin into juicy nourishment, so much that it almost overflows.

Instead of asking, Alice snoops until she uncovers photos from the dance on social media and in the house. Polly’s polaroids had been casually strewn in her purse, never removed. Betty’s are stuck carefully on her mirror, surrounded by other fond memories. Of course her mother declares that dark makeup isn’t a good look on Betty, but Alice studies the photos with a curious intensity all the same. “You’ve fallen hard for this Jones boy, haven’t you?” she muses, sounding forlorn, although there’s really no reason to be, because Betty and Jughead have fallen together. Betty looks at his shirt folded neatly at her bedside table, the spot that’s infinitely his on her mattress, and remembers the feeling of leaves giving underneath the weight of their bodies, of Jughead’s joyous smile as they kissed away the fear of change. The lightness she feels with him, the laughter they stuffed under her pillows.

Maybe Alice and Hal were somewhere similar in their relationship when they won Homecoming King and Queen, although based on the way they pass each other now it’s hard to picture. Alice sighs at the memory, pulling up a photo from its buried place in the catalogue of their family history. Her mother’s dark pink lips are pulled into a familiar forced smile from their mantle. “You look beautiful,” Betty assures her, trying to study her parents’ faces for a clue. Some high school sweethearts do work out, she reassures herself, tracing the photos of couples like Hiram and Hermione Lodge and Fred and Mary Andrews, even if theirs are not the infinite love stories she’s striving for. It’s not impossible to learn from an imperfect past. Betty asks what held her parents together, the only ones who’ve stayed married through it all. Common goals. Alice snaps the book shut and drags it from her lap. The conversation shifts subtly to medication, Alice announcing that she’s going to start Betty on birth control the following week. For acne, she clarifies sharply, and it stings Betty more than it should.
It feels like something dries on her skin. Imperfections. A film that doesn't quite belong to her, bonded with her. Something she can't quite scrub off. Her stressed hairline. Her porous nose. The marks under her chin and along her back, where the sports bra cuts in tight and sweat no doubt seeps back into to her body much like muscle clings to her bones. There's a faint bruise though, right above her breast, where eager lips and loving caresses pulled the blood to her skin. She stops tracing her skin, tilting her chin up so the light catches her like a canvas. She wonders what exactly she's supposed to cover up with her family, her friends, the world, knowing she has nothing to be ashamed of when it comes to him. It's a struggle when she reaches for her makeup, not sure what expression she's expecting to draw for them all.

There's an uneasy truce with her sister as she joins their crew on the way to school. Apparently Reggie missed his alarm and can’t pick her up, which isn’t a shock to anyone, probably not even Polly. Archie ends up being her sister's confidante as Betty increases her pace, Jughead wordlessly matching it. Betty fights a scowl and a sigh as her sister prattles on about how all the Bulldogs and Vixens will be at some Pussycats concert. Falling into their natural rhythm, Betty and Jughead hook their hands together, the momentum making her want to spin.

Time ticks by in class. Betty keeps taking notes, trying to blot out the distractions. The clatter of rolling pearls against Veronica's nails when she's lost in a fantasy. Reggie’s low moan as he tilts his head back to look to the ceiling instead of looking for an answer. Soft thumping of Archie’s fingers on his desk, the rap of his pencil like a tambourine. Moose, leaning over to mutter to Midge, or maybe Kevin, who shush him back into his desk until it creaks. If she closes her eyes, she can hear Jughead thinking, his fingertips ghosting over the paper and pen instead of tapping out in sharp code like a pensive detective. The board swims in front of her, and she has to squeeze her pen until her nail beds hurt to make it stay in focus. Stay, she demands, twirling her ponytail as if to make sure it's still there.

The harmony inspires her to sway in the casing of Jughead’s arms, giddy that he’s at her back and Archie’s about to go onstage. Juggie’s chin prods at her ponytail, then her cheek to whisper colorful commentary into her ear. Even if he’d deny it, they are dancing again. Cheryl’s red lips look almost mauve in the light, and she licks them with focused intensity like she’d love to hop onstage with the Pussycats and bask in the spotlight herself. Jason must be somewhere or another. But Betty’s gaze is drawn to another redhead off to the side, paling like he’s going to hurl or pass out. The loss of Jughead’s warmth at her back makes her stiffen, but she’s grateful that he’s going to comfort their friend.

A touch at Betty’s waist makes her breath hitch in her throat. It’s not Jughead’s, which is the largest source of her anxiety in the sea of strangers. The imprint of the hand is too small, a skirt shifting against her thigh. Veronica squeezes close, a cheek resting on Betty’s shoulder as she gazes at Archie with a distant sort of fondness. When Jughead makes him laugh, Veronica bristles a little. Maybe because he’s comforting Archie before she could? Betty thinks she understands, but is relieved when Veronica lets go to straighten her dress and raise her arms up to capture and applaud Archie’s musical debut. They’re all friends…best friends.
Poking her fish with a metal fork, Veronica praises Betty for handling the dissection in their lab so well, pondering what new unnecessarily extravagant way to thank her.

“I don’t need anything. Just…don’t kiss me this time,” Betty teases, taking a bite of the white bread and cucumber sandwich Jughead had distastefully accepted half of.

“Don’t what?” She feels Jughead’s gaze burrowing into her, confusion brimming like coals sparking in the darkness of his eyes.

It’s not like that. A lump forms in Betty’s throat nonetheless. She feels small and hesitant, glancing from Kevin’s shocked intrigue to the frozen neutrality of Veronica.

“It didn’t mean anything,” Betty explains, shaking her head. But Jughead’s barely looking at her, his glare practically a blowtorch swinging across the table towards their friend.

“Is that true, Veronica? Did it not mean anything?”

Of course not, Betty starts to answer for her, stumbling when Veronica looks vulnerable before shifting into guarded irritation, a challenge in the tilt of her chin.

The possibility that Veronica’s kiss was more than a city girl’s thanks slowly sinks into Betty’s mind.

Dread sucks her in like quicksand as Jughead’s anger vibrates at her side, his thumb flicking at his skin like he’s going to ignite. It’s ungiving, and she’s unable to quell it by prying into his fist, so she clamps a pleading hand over his wrist instead. She scrambles for reason, for kindness. “But…what about Archie?”

“I like Archie.” Shoulders rising incrementally, Veronica turns to the boy in question as he’s joining them. Archie slows as he descends on the bench, brown eyes darting around, and looking as taken aback as Betty feels. “I kissed Betty,” Veronica declares frankly. “On the night of the dance.”

Startled, Archie’s eyebrows raise, the question marks popping up around him in silent thought bubbles as he looks to his friends. “Oh. For Valentine’s Day? I, uh, I missed that. Are you…kissing for any other holidays?”

“Archie,” Jughead barks, his fists curling, veins throbbing under her touch.

“Maybe, if there’s champagne and mistletoe involved,” Veronica winks, and suddenly everything’s shifting.

Betty doesn’t even realize she’s moving until she’s standing upright to stay at Jughead’s side, the entire table overturned and hailing food down on the recipients on the other side.

Archie slides around, arms up as a soda drenches his leg, burger patty saved by his thigh, whereas Veronica stumbles back with a skirt full of fish and ice. Kevin’s on Betty’s and Jughead’s side, but even he is barely able to snatch the remainder of his coffee before his salad is sacrificed to Jughead’s rage. It’s like the world is in slow motion and all she can hear is her heartbeat in her ears.

I did this, she thinks, horrified.

Instinctively, she wants to clean it up. It has to be clean. It has to be right.

Jughead’s wrist tugs against her hand and it’s only then that she realizes her nails have dug into him. “I’m so sorry.” The words come out, but she’s not breathing. People are saying her name. Nobody’s saying his, not even as he abandons the lunchroom, no doubt with her marks in his skin like the half-moons that litter her palms.
Archie scrambles after. He’ll get him. He’ll bring him back. Betty starts shaking, muttering orders to a shellshocked Kevin and Veronica, unable to process anything besides clean. The flats on her feet offer almost no traction, and her knees buckle and slide in a puddle of spilled soda as she tries to right the table back up. Kevin urges her to hold on, Veronica to stop, but Betty keeps pushing until the table is righted. Toes cold and wet, Betty stalks to the janitor’s closet and wipes errant tears in her search for the dustpan.

She broke his heart. She cheated on him. She didn’t even mean to, and she did it. Why would he want her after she’s proven herself so ignorant time and time again?

But there’s no time to dawdle on a broken heart. Hers or his. Or…Veronica’s, she supposes. So Betty marches back in and swipes up the remains of their meal. Kevin helps her with a rag and Veronica smoothly lies about it being an accident, and Betty just tries to keep her eyes wide enough that nothing else escapes.

She wanders the halls like a ghost. He’s not answering his phone. A disheveled Archie glumly reports he doesn’t know where he is. The air pockets keep shifting under her tense grasp on a chip bag. His favorite. To make up for the ones overturned on the cafeteria floor.

Every closet, every room, she feels his phantom. He’s especially present in the abandoned halls. Veronica finally stops her, hand on her arm. She’s beautiful, but Betty barely even sees her, trying to find whatever plane her love’s receded to.

“I just…didn’t know how to tell you, B. It’s not a big deal. I’ll get over it.”

“I love Jughead.” It’s obvious…isn’t it? In some other life, maybe Betty would be more apologetic or hold Veronica’s hand. But she loves Jughead. Jughead, her body cries, needing his validation.

“I know.” Veronica sighs, fish flakes still embedded in her dress. “I’ll help you find him.”

Betty jolts a little at the insinuation, shaking her head. This is her relationship, and Veronica had disregarded it in favor of indulging in a crush, even if just for one last time. “I’m going to find him,” she promises, and pushes past the school doors to a whole other realm of possibilities.

Her throat burns and her eyes sting in the attempt to keep tears at bay under the fresh, fat drops rain. Shuddering watery fingers slink down her sweater like they’re trying to sniff out where she’s stowed his bag of chips against her gut. Perhaps she can’t even keep that safe. It’s going to pop. Or get wet. Or lost. And then she’ll have nothing. Nothing at all to offer him besides a stupid apology. That she didn’t know. That she didn’t realize…

A barrel in the trailer park catches her eye, smoke curling and beckoning with slender tendrils. She runs towards it in the vain hope that he’ll be there, but there’s only the smell of wet wood, rain, and burned paper. The kindling words are charred, and although she could reach in and burn her fingers on the blackened edges to piece it together, she thinks the shadow of her love must be nearby.

The chill from wetness seeps into her toes. Heart aching in the same way she assumes arthritis creaks bones, Betty trudges up the stairs to FP’s trailer, sniffling and wiping under her eyes in the hopes that whatever’s left of her light coat of mascara isn’t streaked down her face. She knocks, the sound muffled like the trailer is made of cardboard. It’s a miracle it holds up at all during storms.

FP can barely look her in the face, gaze scooping at the muck by the stairs, plaid shirt billowing with
the wind. He turns her away, citing she should be in school and not to worry about Jughead. But she
does. And she knows... she knows he has to be here. The tether in her chest, the smoke pushing at
her back insists on it. She could barrel past, all passion and desperation in an attempt to throw herself
back in Jughead’s good graces. A chill numbs her fingers, and Betty shakily hands off the bag of
chips, embarrassed how small the offering is compared to the giant trays she’s brought here before.
FP looks like he doesn’t know what to do with them, what they are. His favorite.

“Please… make sure he eats.”

Her body twitches and shakes as she turns away, like it’s demanding she warm herself, that she run
to the fire. But Jughead might need time, more than he needs her. She curls arms under her breasts,
tucking her hands in her armpits to brace herself for the cold.

“Betty.”

His voice pulls her, softer than the smoke, finer than the mist.

Piercing blue eyes beckon her back, even as he leaves the trailer to come join her. She’s not sure
where FP goes, if he evaporates or simply drives away, because they enfold in each other’s arms and
everything else slips away.

A copy of their pictures from the dance mocks her from the table, guilt blooming back up in her
chest.

“I feel stupid,” she confesses. “I mean, how could something like that totally blow by me? You must
hate me. I hate me. I’m supposed to be some smart, great girlfriend and I thought you and
Veronica…and then when she…I just thought…I thought she was thanking me. For showing her
what love could do. Through you, Juggie. Through me and you.” Her thumb traces the tiny marks on
his wrist where she held on too tight. It was supposed to be the two of them as lovers. The five of
them as friends. “I’m so sorry that I hurt you.”

His eyes dart across her face like he’s reading a line from his manuscript. He blames Veronica. She
blames herself. They coax each other until she feels less stupid and he feels less tossed aside.

"Of course she learned to love you, Betty. You're the most loving person I know."

“But I love you.”

The assuredness reflected in their eyes flashes like lightning, striking her heart. There's kissing, not
just kissing but embracing, and it feels like maybe she doesn’t need to be hard on herself for once.
Maybe they can just be soft together, burn together. Bloom? Take root? It all becomes tangled as his
tongue sweeps across her mouth, her fingers gripping into his hair. But not in here, she thinks idly,
still not sure how safe it is to spark somewhere the past might come sweeping in. His eyes are cloudy
and dark when she pulls away, but at least they're not full of anger.

“Juggie, I never even considered the kiss that way, because there's no one who touches me
so intimately as you. You reach me in ways that nobody else can, that nobody else will. There's one
future I want, and that's to be with you.”

I know, he says, fingers worming through her loose, damp hair as he releases it from its binding.
Jughead brings her to the couch, his mouth softening against hers.

Cool shades of blue paint the sky as his hands warm the inside of her sweater.
"I'll only choose you," she promises, his tongue sweeping generously across her lips. But she has to choose herself too. And she will, she guarantees it. He moans, swallowing her thoughts as they push through the sounds of the storm.

They’re holding hands on the way back to school, having already snacked at Pop’s to make up for the lost meal. FP doesn’t even have an umbrella. She feels stupid for not thinking to bring one, for not even having a raincoat to share...for not thinking to make copies of their photos for FP to hang on the refrigerator and leaving it to Fred instead. For not thinking at all. Just letting it all pound away over her head. Jughead. Friends. Schoolwork. Family. The Future. Pressure in her hand diverts her attention back to Jughead, who’s staring at her in concern.

"Love," she reminds herself. "Love," she promises, and looks up at the faint beginnings of a rainbow.

Chapter End Notes

So...this chapter was really about Betty learning to love, take care of, and forgive HERSELF as much as she forgives other people. Hopefully you guys were able to get that vibe. Also the reason the scars weren’t mentioned in the scrubbing scene is because in a weird way Betty feels she "owns" her scars. V is slowly disengaging from her girl-crush, but how do you think B is gonna handle it after Jughead’s explosion? Kevin is definitely on the sidelines like, "wtf is happening with these crazy people? If someone spills my coffee ONE MORE TIME I am sitting with Josie!" B is getting better at disengaging from her crazy family and trying not to lean on Jughead and we have a few more of her chapters to go to see how they grow together and individually so I hope you’re looking forward to that as much as I am.

Jughead’s chapter will probably make us all tear up a little. But just know I love you all and I love Bughead and thank you so much for your patience and support. As always, I love hearing your comments so please shoot me a line or a moment that stood out to you <3
Chapter Summary

Jughead struggles with affection and things that start with the letter V

Chapter Notes

Jughead's chapter brings a lot of volatile emotions.

The sun filters through the garage door, perfectly highlighting the golden girl in his arms. With some deep, yearning satisfaction, he breathes it all in. The distant smell of earth and dog hair and now him and Betty ground into the very fibers of the cheap couch. He inhales the intimate elegance of Betty’s shampoo and mousse. There’s a quiet confidence in this soundproof sanctuary. Even though their makeshift bed on the garage couch is much smaller than they’re used to, they keep so little distance between their bodies as to fit comfortably in their little wrap of limbs and love. His chin nestles aside some of her wavy, soft hair to find its place against her flesh, arms wrapping her tightly to make sure she doesn’t fall off the edge. Not that she’s inclined to lean away. Even in sleep, she’s his dearest sleeping beauty, more likely to cause heat stroke by draping over him than leave him cold and wondering. He kisses her brow and falls back asleep, content to be languid and in love.

The light waves of kisses and laughter make him smile before he’s really awake again. She twists more fully to face him, cautiously peppering him in bursts of affection to test his awareness. He feels her cheeks flexed against his own. It’s gloriously freeing, almost intoxicating, to be able to talk at a normal volume, tickle her until a belly laugh lets loose, fuck her until she moans with abandon and her toes curl into the couch. They walk around naked, reigning champions of the garage while they make a spread of pop tarts and apple juice straight from the bottle he’d stowed away just for the occasion. It’s not as glamorous as what she’d be having if she was actually staying the Pembrook with Veronica, like she told her mother, but her big grin and infectious laughter indicates she wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. Neither would he.

He jokes about making a home in the soundproof garage, maybe just getting a bucket for bathroom needs. “No Juggie,” she teases, crawling into his lap to place a piece of pastry on his tongue. “One day we’ll have a home. A real one. With four walls and running water and even a bathroom, if we’re lucky.”

“We are,” he thinks, kissing a crumb off her finger. We are lucky.

“You look wrecked,” Fred chuckles when Jughead finally manages to drag himself into the main house. Jug fusses with the bedhead-sex-hair monstrosity atop his skull and toys with the idea of sending Betty a picture of it. The beanie’s not necessary in front of Fred, but Jug pulls it on anyway just in case someone spots him at the window when feet hit the pavement outside. As he eats his second breakfast of the day, he gets lost in a vague conversation with Fred about the music at the
dance, idly wondering if Betty’s tried eggs in every combination to figure out what she likes or if that’s something they’ll get to do together.

A thud at the bottom of the staircase alerts them to Archie’s presence, and Vegas sniffs his foot to make sure he’s okay. “You’re both looking a little wrecked this morning. You sure there was no alcohol at this thing?”

The thought of bottles rattling around makes his stomach flip, but not as violently as usual. “None whatsoever. Just an obscene amount of teen love,” Jug teases, and Archie snorts affectionately, because it’s not quite a joke. Fred makes extra copies of all the photos they came home with and hangs them up on the fridge, appraising them a good-lookin’ bunch of kids. Every time Jughead goes to the fridge, he scans them like a new piece of evidence in some mystery he’s yet to solve. A piece of his story. Jughead’s at the refrigerator a lot, his appetite perking up often and without reserve, but often he gets lost in his search for a certain smile, a craving beyond leftovers and soda.

The slow clacks of their backpacks combined with awkward pacing makes Jughead’s neck roll back in annoyance. Betty occasionally glares at a fidgety Archie and chatterbox Polly, who’s clearly trying to make up for being ditched by chatting up the next best thing nearby. Too bad Archie’s off the market, or they could both date Cooper girls. The pairing would be awful, and the family dinner a total disaster, but it might give Jughead some great material for his book. He wouldn’t wish that on Archie, even if he does somewhat wish for a way for them to be related, even if through...unusual ties. It’s funny to see them together, remembering how Jughead used to watch Archie and Betty walk together as if they were headed into the sunset, him the shadow trailing behind. Betty’s thumb itches along her fingers, and Jug knows her anxiety well enough to palm it down with his own hand. Her ponytail bounces happily at the distraction, and she probably doesn’t notice, but she hums a little when their hands swing together.

It’s only an hour set, which means he can stomach Josie’s “star quality” and Cheryl reverently trying to harmonize from the audience as long as Betty’s still snug and happy under his chin. Her ponytail is like an antennae, and when it stops against his cheek he follows her gaze, expecting it to be on her obnoxious sister. But she seems to have forgotten Polly for now, focusing on their sweaty, musically inclined friend. With a promise in her ear, he sets off, knowing Betty would only accidentally make Archie more nervous with her quiet affirmations and sweet smiles. Archie might take one look at that hopeful face and be terrified of letting her down, even after his repeated attempts to cajole her into listening to his sad breakup songs.

Jug slaps his palm on Archie’s meaty shoulder and reassures him that everyone will be staring at the girls in spandex cat suits. The only way he’ll get the full brunt of the attention is if he takes his shirt off and douses himself in glitter. Archie rewards him with a goofy, earnest laugh, and the panic seems to slowly melt away into relief, excitement. They joke around until it’s time for Archie’s set. The Pussycats are clearly unimpressed by his arrival, but Betty and Veronica cheer so loudly that it more than makes up for it. Archie finally looks relieved up there, beaming with exuberance like when he lost his first tooth.

Maybe they’ll all go on the road. Jughead on a book tour, Archie in some ridiculous band or a quiet solo act. The thought is confusing more than anything, because he can’t imagine Betty prying herself away from whatever amazing project she’s focused on to join the fray. But he also feels sick imagining them trying to be apart for weeks at a time. The way Veronica clings to her, she wouldn’t be lonely for company. Maybe she’d be happy at home. Or maybe she’d be his editor, his agent. But
she’s just…she’s so much more than that, he has a hard time with assigning her any title or role beyond his beloved.

Veronica would probably make a killer manager for Archiekins, but her ego demands something of her own, some kind of Lodge-stamped and branded business that leads to her being on the cover of a magazine for something other than being Archie’s main squeeze or attending a party in an ostentatious dress.

As he squeezes back through the swaying limbs, he weaves his own around Betty. For once, Veronica gives him enough space that it doesn’t feel like he has to wedge himself in. He watches Archie onstage and via Veronica’s viewfinder, a warm thrum in his chest buzzing with the guitar. He kisses Betty’s ear, murmuring his thoughts to her, hoping they’re as pleasant to her as the music drifting around them. Based on the way she keens back into him, they might be better.

Vegas keeps trying to nose into his lap when he’s typing. One paragraph, maybe two, and then those puppy dog eyes are peering at him just beyond the screen. At least he’s good enough not to drool on the screen. With a big sigh, Jughead takes him for a walk in the hopes that the stimulation will get him to calm down. They head over to the Andrews Construction yard where it feels like the world cracked open and stares where the earth should be scorched. Fred’s face lights up at the sight of them, Vegas’s whole body thrumming in excitement. Everything’s in order, Fred distracting himself from neat blueprints to tousle the quiet devoted companion at his feet. During the walk back, Jughead sneaks under one of the support beams and carves a crown and initials into the wood, the flaky bits of tree musk and ringed veins making him feel like he’s planting something out here, even if it’s been growing for years.

The sandwich is thin, cucumber and smear, suited more for a tea party than a hearty meal. It’s almost like eating air, so he doesn’t know why Betty gives him half other than she always does. It seems impossible that this wouldn’t leave her hungry. That sharing herself so wholly doesn’t leave her wanting.

Veronica’s listing off ways to repay her for some small favor: tangible, extraordinary and ridiculous things like spa days and cupcake imports, when Betty insists, “I don’t need anything. Just…don’t kiss me this time.”

The sandwich disintegrates on his tongue in a fuzzy mixture of horror and confusion. “Don’t what?”

Eyes large and clear, Betty turns to him, casual care quickly morphing to concerned hesitation. They kissed?

THEY KISSED?

Whatever acid’s in his stomach boils over, spitting up his throat in foamy hail. He wouldn’t be surprised if the next time he opens his mouth his tongue is forked and his teeth are fangs. His veins tremble at the change, Betty insisting that it doesn’t mean what he think it does.

“Is that true, Veronica? Did it not mean anything?”

But her eyes are narrow little slits too, dilating and refocusing as her hair expands with the electricity in the air, her body coiling around the catch of the day. The Big City Bitch shares no apologies, not even as Betty stutters over a defense, her innocent brain slowly wrapping around the potential
lethality of what she deemed an affectionate gesture.

Betty’s kisses have been claimed *many* times since *that night*…by him. By *only* him. With vehemence, not vengeance. Now *violence* is the V he associates with the girl across from them for daring to claim one for herself.

She *touched* Betty. Manipulated her…might even take it further one day. The girl that makes *everyone else* happy above herself. *His person,* and Veronica couldn’t keep her greedy little fingers to herself, or even to her red-haired musical jock boy-toy who *happens* to be his other best friend. And what? He’s supposed to be okay because it’s another girl? Because his girlfriend loves him? That viper needs to be wrung out and knotted to keep her swallowing any other part of his world. To take his bed, his best friend, and his universe with the barren longing of a bougie brat.

Down the table, Kevin stares with bugged-out eyes, tongue no doubt waiting to slurp out for a chance to jump at the drama.

Jughead’s thumb scrapes his hand, searching for a trigger he tries to suppress. The desire to *hurt* somebody. To burn them. Not like the leaves in the garage to make a crumpled, uneven mess, but to actually *break* them. Fingers fumble against his, only finding purchase around his wrist, like a manacle, a doctor taking his skyrocketing pulse.

“But…what about Archie?” Betty asks, desperately seeking evidence that her friend isn’t a terrible person, that she isn’t a manipulative, selfish *bitch.*

*What about Archie?* he thinks bitterly, grinding his nails against each other.

“I *like* Archie,” Veronica shrugs, turning as the golden boy himself joins them at the table. “I kissed Betty. On the night of the dance,” she announces, his friend glancing around the table for some kind of cue as to how to react. But what is *he* going to say to a girl he just started dating and his lifelong best friends?


*Betrayal.* That’s what this response is. Jughead hisses Archie’s name, urging him not to be a total *idiot* when it comes to sex and love for once in his ridiculous life.

“Maybe, if there’s champagne and mistletoe involved,” Veronica laughs, the sounds slicing something inside of him open like a knife.

The world shifts, the table with it. He upturns everything he can, shoving it in the viper’s face, her lap, all her pretty things spilling and staining that designer-brand dress she cares more about than disgracing Betty’s lips with her own. If he had an oil drum and a lighter there’s no doubt in his mind that he’d spill it and let it eat her alive. The violence consumes him so wholly that he has to leave, wrenching himself out of the manacle at his wrist, only half-aware of the sting, of the gasps around him, choking on their own oxygen as he consumes and storms away with a half-imagined “I’m sorry” at his back.

He’s halfway down the hall before Archie catches him, and it’s amazing how the most red and orange *angry* thing about him his earnestly inherited hair. A soda stain on his leg. “Hey, they didn’t mean anything to it!”

It means something to *him.* And he meant something by *this.* To Veronica, *How fucking dare you.* *How dare you take a piece of that light that wasn’t yours to taste.* How dare you steal things in the
night like a coward, right from under her nose, claiming to be her friend, claiming to be any friend at all. Eat your miserable manufactured life and stop leeching off of mine, off of her.

Archie doesn’t know what to make of the rage, of the evidence in front of him. “I think girls make out once in a while. I think it’s supposed to be…hot, most of the time. It doesn’t mean Betty doesn’t love you or that Veronica’s not interested in me. It was probably a one-time thing, unless you didn’t want it to be.”

Sheer incredulity scrapes over him, wiping his brain clean before the screeching sound of nails on chalkboard rings in his ears and he’s shoving Archie against the lockers, tousling to the ground. So girls can kiss and boys can fight, but not cry, not unless he’s in Betty’s bedroom buried in her scent or his fists are pushed up into his sockets like they can stuff his feelings back inside. Archie and him would never kiss. Not on the lips, not even the cheek, because even hugging too long or linking arms results in endless harassment from a homophobic freak, becoming a teenage rotting corpse, like it’s contagious to want to be touched in a way that isn’t a push, a laugh, a joke, or a little ruffle of affection like Fred gives Vegas when he’s busy reading a contract. Kevin never touches Jughead or Archie. He keeps his platonic hugs and affections to women because they’re safe, because they won’t slap him or push him away or be afraid he’s hitting on them, and maybe that’s why Betty thought Veronica was safe, or why Veronica knew it was safe enough to try something. What she did is not okay, he’s not okay and it’s not okay and all of it’s slammed into his best friend as they wrestle against the harsh tile floor.

Even though they’re not throwing punches, knees and elbows get jammed in places they haven’t put them since fifth grade fighting over stupid things like toys. With a big push, they separate. Through the wild black spots around the edge of his vision, Jughead knows the redhead isn’t the one to be ripped from the earth. “I’m sorry, just…don’t follow me.” His knees jostle and jerk on each stair, redistributing his rage as he storms out the doors.

Veronica’s kiss wasn’t two girls making out in some porn video, a mutually agreed upon affection experiment, or even a play to get an erotic rise out of their boyfriends. It was an attack, one she knew Betty wasn’t prepared to defend. It was selfish. It was evil.

This must be how Betty felt. Something similar. Rocketing, powerful rage at someone being used. Abused. Jughead feels abandoned, bereft. And he isn’t able to do anything about it…again.

Things knock in his veins and his brain, defunct fireworks in a glass box. He ends up at the trailer, fist pounding on the door, and when his father looks him in the eyes, instead of anger, Jughead lets out his despair.

Why don’t you love me? he wants to ask. Why haven’t you ever loved me more than this?

Throat squeezing around the words, his anguish shovels flaming coals in the pit of his stomach until all he can think of is how liquid charcoal is used to absorb poison. He thinks of Betty. Of FP. Of alcohol and vipers and Valentine’s Day and…

“Come in,” FP says, the trailer smelling like smoked...something. Jughead decides to label the odor as day-after breakfast. Boiling coffee feels like it takes more effort than normal, and even though his stomach is churning, Jughead doesn’t think he can handle anything besides the half-pack of stale crackers his dad probably doesn’t even realize are stowed behind the tea bags.

FP keeps blinking at him from the other side of the kitchen table like he’s waiting for an eruption or a reason to lie. The soft patter of rain hits the tinny texture of the trailer. Jughead notices a copy of the
dance photos next to an envelope with Fred’s handwriting on it.

“Glad it all worked out, that night,” FP says awkwardly, wiping a bit of spit from his lips. “You’re a good-lookin’ bunch of kids.” Jughead’s gut twists in a way that makes him want to purge and lay down and close his eyes.

Someone shuffles up to the trailer door. Out of instinct, Jughead slinks to the bathroom to hide. He doesn’t want to see another Serpent, another reminder of that life. But the dulcet tones of Betty drift through the thin trailer walls, and his heart seizes with something like panic, like desire. He longs to throw the door open, to pull her inside and hold her and love her. But he left destruction in his wake, and isn’t sure he won’t lash out for some poison that didn’t quite take. That she may not even regret. He doesn’t want to look at her and see the imprint of burgundy lipstick like a fucking bruise.

But her voice is so lilting, so heartfelt, that he squeezes his eyes shut against the bathroom door, willing himself not to spit blackened bile and cry. Because it’s her. It’s still her. FP ushers her away, the crinkle of foil wrinkling Jug’s brain as his lungs accordion aggressively in his chest, urging him to run to her. When the door shuts, it’s like the lights go off in his mind. He wanders out to the quiet patter on the roof and the emptiness of what might’ve been said. FP’s holding a bag of Jughead’s favorite chips, staring at it like it doesn’t matter, like it doesn’t make sense. Everything else starts to melt away.

“Betty.”

His whole heart squeezes, pushing out of the frame of the trailer and into the rain to get to her, cloudy eyes and flushed cheeks and beloved.

Betty.

It’s just them, and he doesn’t know how it happened and he almost doesn’t care because it’s a goddamn fucking miracle. He’s stroking her face and she’s clinging to his collar and he keeps having to resist kissing her just because he can, because she’s his.

“I feel stupid,” she says, and his whole body goes into shock. Betty? Stupid?

“I mean, how could something like that totally blow by me?” Because she hopes for the best in people.

“You must hate me. I hate me.” Never, he thinks fiercely, not without hating the world more, wishing he could pry inside of her and show her every tar-covered thought he has.

The cold from outside got into her bones, and he tries to cover her, protect her from it and smother the shiver out with his love. Tears prick at the corner of her eyes like they’ve been wallowing unseen in the rain. Her shame. His darling’s ashamed, and so is he. “I’m supposed to be some smart, great girlfriend, and I thought you and Veronica…” He remembers the ice she’d rather plunge through than think of his body against another. “And then when she…I just thought…” They both tremble, leaning into each other.

The mind is a terrible, wonderful place, and he watches reverently as she squeezes her memories into words. “I thought she was thanking me. For showing her what love could do.” Her hands trickle down his body with the patience and aim of a rain drop, saturating his skin. “Through you, Juggie. Through me and you.” The spot he thought he’d been manacled…their tether…it’s spotted with red scratches, barely broken skin. He’d accept a bruise if it meant they didn’t break apart again. That no
one could hurt them. That they wouldn't abuse each other.

“I’m so sorry that I hurt you.”

The earnestness of her apology crack his ribs open, a gummy obsidian tar leaking out in place of marrow. An overwhelming urge to ask her if she still loves him passes through like a shiver. But there are signs, he reminds himself. Actions. His favorite bag of chips she shoved under sweater to keep dry, the comfort and space she was willing to sacrifice for his own well-being, her hands trying to warm and heal him even as her teeth chatter with her own fear. The talk of a house, of a future, of the two of them...forever.

When his parents fought, it was I’m sorry followed by I forgive you and a kiss on the cheek, maybe a hug. Then the I forgive you turned into you’re a piece of shit, and I’m sorry turned into loosen up. Hugs were abandoned for eye-rolls, kisses on the cheeks replaced with shoves.

A nightmare. And here he and Betty sit, post-kiss, post-blowup, and they’re talking. Filling the trailer with oranges and pinks and blues reflected from the rain, the weird haze of the furniture, and Betty’s flushed cheeks. They’re holding each other. Listening. It’s like they carry each other’s souls and hearts in each other’s hands and it’s so fucking terrifying and wonderful and he just wants to cry and keep her safe forever.

“It wasn’t you,” he insists, knowing where the gnawing hole that burrows in his life originates. Betty’s the hope for a future. For understanding. For love above all else. The Andrews, too. They need resilience. Faith. Things that should't be impossible but sometimes can damn well feel like it.

But Betty tries to take responsibility on herself for something she was barely even part of, for not pushing Veronica away, for not making signals clear enough (when even the densest of their classmates know how irrevocably they’re intertwined), for betraying him by somehow letting it happen and not ruining their night by sounding the alarm. She’s not perfect, she insists, wiping her face, not feeling worthy of their love. Like she's any less innocent or worthy of happiness than Archie, who lured by music by the river, or Veronica, who was tempted by the fire of the sun. His fiery sun.

Moping won’t help, but he can’t help the misery that washes over him. Humiliated, embarrassed for each other as much as themselves, they cling to what they are. Heartfelt apologies, branded into his skin, into the air. But they’re not some empty promises, because they’re her…it’s her and every other stupid transgression on their lives and it’s just life. When he tells her her life is destined to be full of love, he means everyone's, but his for all eternity. “I love you” she promises, and he scoops her up and kisses her until words mean nothing and the actions that follow consume each other.

Betty is it for him. His war drum. His home. His life’s blood.

Their embrace evolves into fevered stroking of chilled skin. Textures fly across his senses. The ridged slime of their tongues. The broken gloss of her lips. Wet threads of her hair, smooth, goose-pimpled expanses of her skin.

She breaks away, gasping, daring a glance at the trailer door behind them, like she’s going to push out anyone else who dares come in. But he’s with her. He’ll battle too. The sliver of emerald in her eyes refocuses on him, swelling with her earnest pleas.

“You reach me in ways that nobody else can, that nobody else will. There's one future I want, and that's to be with you.”

I know, he assures her, when he means me too. He leads her to the couch, needing to be somewhere
they can thread together, somewhere soft, if not safe.

*I’ll only choose you*, she says, and he savors her resolution with an eager mouth, an open heart. He knows what she means. Not that they won’t have friends, that they won’t make mistakes, but that they will fight for each other every single time. He loves her so much that his heart burns.

Making up tastes bitterly sweet, like salty tears over apple-firm flesh. Even though she’s nervous about anybody coming back for them, Betty trembles and touches him until the sounds of the storm fades amidst the sounds of each other.

“*Careful,*” he warns, hand out in case she slips on the wet tile of Pop’s. They’re not the only ones caught without an umbrella, streaks of puddles near the front door despite the mat meant to absorb it.

“I’ve got it,” she sniffs, taking his hand anyway as they carefully slide into the same side of a booth. She wrings out his hat and her sleeves into a spare cup, carefully wiping up the overflow with a napkin in a way that makes Jughead want to take off all her clothes and sink her into a hot bath so she can thank her with the scrubbing sensation of his whole body on hers amidst airy, scented bubbles.

Pop doesn’t ask why they’re not at school, although he does raise an eyebrow and offer *the usual*. Jughead defers to Betty, who offers him a little smile and orders both of their favorites, except with hot tea and coffee instead of milkshakes. The warmth pools low in his belly, and he knows if his laptop was in front of him he’d just be staring at the words, reading. Absorbing. Even though they’ve known each other for years, he jitters at her touch over the damp denim of his jeans, wondering how Archie’s doing with the soda stain from lunch. But that sort of thing is easy enough to wash out with a little elbow grease.

They talk quietly, and not very much, but at least the rain has mostly let up once their lunch is finished. The puddles keep reflecting odd angles of the town, stray drops occasionally rippling the image of Riverdale. It’s an easy rhythm, the occasional fat splash of fresh water slapping his skin and streaking down until it’s absorbed by flannel. Betty frowns, lost in thought, no doubt searching for a solution for what’s to come, or what she might’ve been able to use in the past.

*I love you*, he wants to reassure her, squeezing her hand. She glances up, a flash of light in her eyes, more glowing than sparking as her lips part, eyelashes the slightest bit damp.

Just a little bit dazed, devoted, she looks up, not far-off and not quite near and he sees the reflection of it without really needing to turn his head. A rainbow. A prism of light, of color. He wonders if he could add it to their walls, their stories. The vivid hues draw them closer, untouchable visions amidst tangible beauty.

Chapter End Notes

So, I made myself cry…because Jughead’s not just asking why FP hasn’t loved him more than alcohol or the serpents, he’s asking why he never felt anger or despair that his son was being abused, why he never loved him enough to protect him.
Lots of feelings in this boy. How are you feeling? Are we all sad? Are you surprised how he handled the Veronica incident? Or the way he sort of sideways claimed the trailer as his own after FP left him (again, but maybe for good reasons this time)?

As always, your comments and the moments you choose that stood out to you keep me smiling and motivated, so please don't hesitate to share ^_^
I'm in a polar vortex of constantly slipping like a cartoon character the second I step outside, so I'm proud of Betty for being able to run, let alone walk, in any weather. Love this girl. I almost named this chapter "drizzle" but I think "stretch" fits better :) Let me know what you think at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Clouds hang low on the way back home. Her hand is generally protected, warm, wrapped in Jughead’s, but once the trio quietly parts at the seam between their houses, she ends up staring at her nails. There’s no blood. Just a faint purple tinge at the roots. White rims. Now would be a good time to run, to motivate circulation, but it’s too damp to do anything other than get a cold, so she goes upstairs and scalds herself with a hot shower. Her childhood pink fuzzy robe feels like its own security blanket, one she can wrap herself in until Jughead climbs back up the window. Despite potential damage, she blow-dries her hair, hoping the focused heat will protect her from this chill. There’s no one outside the window. Veronica texts her a clarifying question, but she isn’t sure what to say.

She keeps moving forward, the rhythmic jolts of her feet hitting earth grounding her in a way that nullifies her thoughts. Maybe it’s something to do with ions. Running through Fox Forest and Pickens Park is her go-to right now. The smell of damp wood and dewey grass comforts her. She doesn’t even mind her mud-speckled ankles.

“Sic her, boy!” Jughead teases, Vegas’s leash wrapped around his wrist. Eager to see her, to play, Vegas runs back and forth in the circumference of what his leash allows. Betty jogs to meet them, kisses and belly rubs for Vegas first, and then Jughead, who she thinks would be wagging his own tail if he had one.

The dull spinning of a football being passed back and forth in the yard next door eases her mind as she puzzles out her latest college essay. What's the greatest lesson you've learned? Photos of her friends adorn the handmade frames in her room in between mystery books that shape her life. She searches for other clues, for lessons amidst football jerseys and guitars. Cheerleading uniforms and pearls. Sheriff hats and pleated pants. Suspenders and beanies, ponytails and sweaters.

Love, she wants to write, but that probably isn’t right. So she tightens her ponytail and spins it into an essay about trusting your heart that her mother mulls over and returns streaked with red. The page looks like it’s scarred, trust your instincts. Maybe she should have known better.

Hal is almost more absent than Polly, which feels significant. Or maybe it should be, but somehow isn’t. There’s an empty garage. A place at the table that’s never quite full anyway, the only bright spot when she’s allowed to bring her boy-friend. There’s still a few questions about school, half-
listened to on the way out the door. Hal stares at Jughead whenever he emerges, at their shared smiles and held hands like he smells gas in the kitchen instead of love in the air, and excuses himself to go downstairs. She feels like she’s let them down somehow, by not forging a stronger bond for them, for any of them, but she doesn’t have it in her to be anything but disappointed that even with four people who share her home, there’s only one she can share her heart and hands with.

Being bright doesn’t seem to help. Not in gym, anyway. The other girls in her class pair off to stretch, Veronica eyeing her from a small group of Cheryl’s cohorts. Before she can even find a person to ask, Ethel declares she has a stomach ache, pushing past Betty and walking off to the sidelines with a discerning eye on boys like Reggie and Jason, who peacock on the other side of the track. She thinks Archie gives her a pained look, glancing meaningfully at Veronica as he stretches his arm across his chest. The emotional rejection, both receiving and giving, exhausts her. Sighing, she turns to face the track and stretch by herself.

In a stroke of luck, she catches sight of a familiar figure, his arms thrown back as he expands his chest, face relaxed in the sun. The little stripe of skin just above his shorts with a hint of downy hair pokes out from under his shirt, and she can’t help but bite her lip and want to reach under and expose the rest of him, crawl up and cover him.

He winks, catching her, so she gives him a bit of a show in return. The way his face lights up as she bends lower pulls her muscles tight, that little smirk doing more for her pulse than she’d probably like to admit. Even from afar, she feels the phantom caress of his eyelashes as his gaze rakes her skin. “Lookin’ good, Betts,” he pants at her later, his ocean-deep eyes brightened by the exercise, and she has half a mind to stop running and kiss him, sweaty lips and all.

“How long is this freeze-out going to last?” Veronica sighs, glancing forlornly across the hall. Betty doesn’t think she’s been particularly cold. There may not be the usual amount of familiarity, but that’s to be expected after everything that’s happened. A Cooper is nothing if not polite.

Well, civil.

Betty thinks of Polly, and internally scrambles for another family motto.

“I don’t know. You still have to make things right with Jughead. I’m doing all I can just to keep things good between him and me. I really love him, V.”

“I know,” she frowns, as if it’s an excessive reminder at this point. Not because there are still… whatever there was. Betty gets the impression that feelings themselves are complicated for V, and apologies even more so. Veronica can’t buy Jughead cupcakes or give him a hug (god, no). And she shouldn’t. Jughead deserves an honest effort to respect his needs and wants.

Don’t get involved, Betty reminds herself, even as they slide in to their respective positions for lab.

Jughead deserves every consideration. Instead of doodling notes to Veronica when she gets ahead of the lecture, she makes pros and cons lists of different colleges, she crafts little thoughts for him, what Jughead deems poems. They’re not very good, but he smiles every time she gives him one. At night, Jughead recites her words back to her in between heated breaths, throwing in blessings and curses of his own.

I love you, she echoes, seeking his heat.
Kevin finds Betty’s “drama blinders” amusing, and teases her about being in a love square.

“It’s not a square, Kev. I love Jughead. Jughead loves me. That’s a segment.”

“Based on the way you two have been all over each other lately, it’s more like you’re a point. Or maybe making one,” he hints, eyebrows raised as if he’s got insight on some inner gossip. It’s old news, though. Her and Jughead like touching. Archie and Veronica do it too.

Still, Betty flushes, wondering if everyone feels like their stolen kisses in the hall and hands on each others hems are some way of marking each other. Or proving something. She just…she just loves him. Unclenching her fists, Betty lifts her chin and strides off to English class. Kevin insists she shouldn’t get all worked up about it, but that doesn’t ease the tension in her hands. She’s trembling. Crumpled in her palms, is a damp, peeled layer of skin.

His head dips between her thighs, bobbing rhythmically until it isn’t—crafting an erratic pattern to tantalize and tame her with. The fervor of his tongue sends her legs vibrating, her veins bubbling with desire. She begs. He moans. Her eyes force themselves closed for fear of him catching them rolling back into her head. But it feels good, tension rolling over her body in waves, his fingers gently pulling at her hips while his tongue tells her a story like no one else can.

“What do you want?” he asks. When she’s on his lap, his hands cradling her ass. Above her, guiding her wrists together over her head.

Control.

They share it, no boundaries.

All of it? None of it?

The question.

What do you want? What do you want?

“You,” she answers, desperate, immediate.

He reads her body to learn things she isn’t even sure of yet. Writes them. And still, heart pounding, she feels overwhelmed.

Trust your instincts.

Drizzle is nice, cool against her skin. The bright, smooth material her mother insists is supposed to wick moisture away to prevent breakouts makes her feel like she should have a letter emblazoned on the front of her thin tank top. She could just rip off her jacket and jump into the heat. Protected. Safe. Her steady jog could morph to a sprint, fluid in motion until she needs to be a solid shield. But nothing out here needs her. Maybe the flowers, she thinks dismally, watching their heads bow with the weight of dew. But a few lost petals is normal. This is normal, she reminds herself. The sun will dry things and all will be well again. Maybe. Her fists flex, loose and clammy and ready.
Reggie seems to wriggle away in the halls whenever either Polly or Betty walk past, ducking his head in deference to the jocks and Jason. Cheryl’s trying to talk V into being her new best friend, the words fab and drab tossed over her shoulder along with yards of Blossom-red hair. Veronica rearranges her books with barely-veiled judgment, Archie most likely already in class and unavailable to soften her sharpness.

Lately it feels like perspective is shifting. That they’re all underwater, being pulled away by different currents.

Jughead notably appreciates the distance from the jocks and Veronica, strutting a little taller, happily munching on the apple Betty didn’t have the heart to eat. He’s grounded, at ease. At least she has him. At least he’s here. And happy. College essays, beta chapters, and lab projects weigh heavily in her backpack, but she’s been taught not to slouch, and kisses Jughead on the cheek before slipping into class.

“I’ve come up with a solution,” Veronica declares, sifting into their lunch pack. Betty straightens, knees together as Jughead’s hand falls on her thigh. It’s protection, she notes with some amount of dismay. From her best friend. One of her best friends. Former friends? It’s all muddled, and Kevin seems to be the only one neutral enough to ask, but it makes her feel worse every time she does. Like her love is… tainted by the lens of guilt. Or should be.

Her hand instinctively covers Jughead’s, squeezing tightly. “What did you have in mind?”

“A scholarship.”

Jughead scoffs, and Betty’s veins shrink, sucking her blood back up into her heart.

“You can’t buy us, Veronica. Nor an education.”

They argue, a cool droplet of sweat making its way down Betty’s spine. She shifts as it hovers on her tailbone, meeting Archie’s eye.

Run, she wants to tell him, to tell herself, but they stay.

“Can you believe her? What does she think we’re gonna do, look at our tuition and go thank god for that bribe from Veronica? Unbelievable. She wouldn’t know sincerity if it hit her in the face.” A headache blooms under her temple, sharp and hard.

On instinct, she glances out to the window. But he’s not there. He’s behind her, so she turns, trying to ignore the expanding presence in her brain.

She takes her ponytail out. Maybe that will help. Not being so rigid. Maybe she can read again. Edit. Mid-rant, he stops, an odd expression on his face at the way her fingers work through her waves.

“What?”

“I just…” He looks inexplicably young when he’s lost for words. Vulnerable. It makes her heart ache in a way that takes her from the desk to her bed, carefully relocating his laptop so she can
stretch alongside his body. It takes a few seconds for their body heat to transfer, for his brain and heart to fully expose itself to her. “I want to take care of you.”

“You do,” she promises, rubbing his shoulders. “You do. And I take care of you.”

But his eyes are wet when she meets them again. An urgency clamps down on her bones. She panics in the compulsion to rearrange them into something that makes him smile.

“I’m from a trailer park, Betty, and I want to write. How is that gonna work for us? How am I going to be able to contribute to anything?”

*Love.*

But she’s still horrified, frozen in the fear that she did something wrong.

“Maybe it was selfish of me to turn down Veronica’s money.”

“N…no.”

*Trust your instincts.*

The tremble of his lip is like a pickaxe through the ice, and she gasps for air, for reassurances. “We’ll work it out. We always do. You’re so strong, Jug. So amazing and smart. You’ve lived…you’ve worked through so much.”

He scoffs, pushing his hand on his jeans. “I can’t ask you to live on Archie’s floor with me.”

“I would,” she promises, kissing him tenderly. “I’d go to the moon. Or hell and back, Jug. You and me…I trust you. I trust *us*. And whatever your heart is telling you to do, or not do, I trust it.”

His lip quirks up, fondness shining through the glossy sheen of his gaze. “Guess I should probably kiss you then, huh?”

A smile lights her up from inside.

His hand comes up to caress her chin, and the idea of *living* together seems so active and present that she almost forgets to breathe.

Tracing various cans and stencils gives her a sense of peace. Bright colors. Sharp scissors. Even the sound of shredding paper with careful incisions is soothing as she leans over them, teeth worrying into her lip. Not too much. Not too little. Just perfect. She folds the construction paper and sits up, smiling at a shadow, waiting for the tell that it’s her genius sentinel.

“You can…you can be friends with her again, if you want to,” Jughead tells her, arms crossed, leaning against the door frame as if he’s just waiting to deliver a box of decorations instead of laying his heart at her feet.

Her hand weakens, scissors lowering to the table, blades nuzzled together. “Not if things are still… unabsolved,” she manages, not sure how else to say it.

Taking a deep breath, Jughead looks into some far corner of the room. “We’ll come to an understanding.”

That doesn’t sound promising. Or even…exciting. Betty stares at the construction paper in front of
her. It seems stupid now. Decorating the hallway. School government committee. She can’t even bridge the void between the people closest to her.

“Betty.” His voice pulls her from the flatness of the world, rounding it, bringing it back to earthy, moving colors.

Her mouth shutters without uttering the I’m sorry, that bubbles up. Instead, she stands, quickly moving to pack him up a box they can use together. She has a map somewhere.

“My heart is telling me that you deserve to have friends. That even Veronica needs them. Ones that aren’t Cheryl Blossom and her hoard of evil morons. Even if I’m not willing to accept a scholarship, I am willing to let her pay for Pop’s. He could use the revenue. I could use the burgers.”

She shakes her head, not sure what to make of it. “But do you…forgive her? Do you forgive me?”

“I love you,” he insists, somehow vulnerable. Raw. Hopeful, even.

A little exasperated, she melts into a smile. “I love you too.”

He flexes his hands, drawing them up across his sides before seeming to decide that hers are more soothing to him. “I can try harder.”

“I don’t want you to feel like you have to be nice to her on my account. You…you have to do what works for you, Jug. Your heart, your feelings, matter to me.”

“I know,” he murmurs, “I know.”

They take baby steps until she has to look up beyond the beautiful speckles on his chin and cheeks to catch his veneration.

What do you want?

His lips stamp a kiss on her forehead, sending a wiggly tingle down to her toes. She tilts her head up, bouncing on her toes to get a proper kiss. Instead, she gets a sly smile and a peck on the nose.

No, she insists, shaking her head until he’s grinning at the fluff of her ponytail flicking from side to side.

Her lips.

Trust your instincts.

Idly wandering through the hall, Polly stops outside of her room. “What are you listening to?”

“Archie.”

“Really? He sounds pretty good.” Without an invitation, Polly plops down on her bed. At least it’s on her side, and not Jughead’s. The girls sit quietly, listening to Archie’s music gently wafting through the room as Betty works through her stacks of pages and Polly tilts her head back as if it’s just a certain angle she needs to access to be able to listen. She only sits for a few minutes, but it’s more than it has been.
Jughead’s arm slung around her waist braces her against the chill of morning fog. On the lookout for puddles for either of them, Betty barely even registers a girl in black before being bombarded by a bag of pastries and a coffee.

“What are you…?”

“We did it!” Veronica all but squeals.

“What?”

“We made up!”

“More like we came to an understanding.”

Jughead saves the bag of pastries from being crushed just as Veronica envelops her in a hug. The coffee sloshes, but doesn’t spill against her back.

“Careful, don’t damage the goods,” he protests lightly, kissing Betty’s forehead just as she’s coming up for air from the hug. With a crumbly bite of pastry, he winks at her, holding the door open as he falls in tow with a very pleased-looking Archie.

Veronica stays close, but doesn’t loop their arms as Betty is all but dragged incredulously through the doors. “Please don’t leave me alone with Cheryl. That girl is delusional.”

Archie keeps modding song rotation, hoping to please Josie, while V points out which color swatches work best, much to Kevin’s chagrin. Spring Fling doesn’t feel like a desperate plea for sunshine anymore, especially not when Jughead appears with a box of twinkly lights and a slightly boyish smile, asking what’s next.

Everything, she divines.

Chapter End Notes

Running themes? Pun intended. Please let me know any scenes or segments that stood out to you to warm my heart ^-^ I even like heart emojis if you're not feeling particularly loquacious. V and B back together again! Jughead is a fucking awesome boyfriend. Usually. Get excited for his chapter which will probably be posted on Wednesday, possibly earlier if I think it won't be overwhelming amidst the V-day love. Love you all so much and thank you for loving this story. Predictions? Possibilities? Praise? Love them all!
Chapter Notes

Jughead's definitely still in rainbow mode, happy to be around and cultivate his sunshine in many ways to make their love glow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

With a little smile and sniff, Betty kisses him on the corner of his mouth and hurries to class leaving little adorable puddles in her wake despite so carefully wiping her shoes on the useless mats near the door.

Veronica stays hidden in her corner, assuring everyone it was an accident (his rebuttal, not the kiss—the kiss hasn’t spread like some zombie virus through the school yet, amputated by his push of the table). “Lo siento, Torombolo,” she says with a little hair flip, and it takes everything in him not to flip her something of his own.

Archie looks embarrassed, hovering by the line of lockers as if he’s trying to read if it’s safe to approach now.

Before he can even get out a “Hey, man,” Archie’s eyes light up with hope.

“Don’t worry about it, man. We’re like brothers,” he smiles, patting him twice on the back, somewhere between a hug and a reassurance.

“We are brothers,” Jughead corrects, strong amidst the thick muscle of his friend.

“Brothers fight, right?”

“Right. I’m still sorry though.”

“I’m sorry too,” he admits sheepishly.

Jughead genuinely wants to keep his friend. His ridiculous, loyal, jump-into-action friend. His brother.

They walk home and make ample chatter to make up for Betty’s lackluster energy. He squeezes her hand at the point they have to split.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

With one last tight grip, she turns, every footstep heavy with the echo of the rain. He watches as she struggles with where to put her hands—pushing them in her pockets, straightening them at her sides. She studies them with an anxious, morbid curiosity. Prone to caution, he’d smoothed her palms just before they parted, and since the trailer there hadn’t been any more blood. There shouldn’t be.
I love you, he texts her, after he and Archie have had their fill of pizza and games at the arcade. Archie’s still clacking away at the fighter game, jamming in random combinations he obliviously thinks will lead to victory. They might. The unlimited soda refill is still fizzing as Jughead drains his cup, glancing down at the vibration of his phone.

I love you. An attached picture of Betty looking cozy in her pink fluffy robe makes him smile in a way that has Archie nudging his arm. Without looking at the screen, he knows who it’s from.

“Nice,” Archie says. “Glad you two are going strong.”

“Me too,” he smiles, raising his phone to send her a photo of his eyebrow curved up like he’s a debonair hero for slaying virtual enemies, Archie sneaking into frame with crossed eyes to complete the picture.

“You boys doing all right?” Fred asks, and it’s nice to be on the radar of someone besides Betty. And Archie, he supposes, although Archie’s back in jock mode and doing practice and music and… Veronica. The thought sends an annoying shiver down his spine, but he shakes it off in favor of reaching out to pat a momentarily concerned Vegas. Everything’s all right.

Vegas senses his own eagerness every time they hear padding feet outside, and gets in the habit of pushing up against the window in the hopes to bring them together. Not one to resist fate or encouragement from a furry friend, Jughead halfheartedly calls out to Fred and Archie that he’s taking Vegas for a walk. The leather strap feels good in his hands. An errant train of thought begs the question how much Betty would like leather in general. When the weather gets nicer, he wants to take her on his bike. It should be safe. Maybe he can get her a helmet.

It doesn’t take much strain to find the source of sunshine out in the dewy park. Breathless, she stops, smiling so sweetly that he feels his heart swell into his throat.

“If it isn’t the best boys in town,” she teases, ruffling Vegas’s fur before kissing his forehead, Jughead practically nudging him out of the way to get the same. “The best.”

Watching Veronica circle like a vulture at the edge of their friend group offers him a strange satisfaction. He’s not the only one saying no. There are no allies to sway things in her favor. Archie won’t get involved, it’s not like Kevin’s ever been a particularly bright fixture in his life, and Betty seems determined to be polite but firm in his defense. So the little drama queen huffs, shoulders squared, as she bears what is no doubt the least attention she’s ever received from her friends.

The fresh air and grass smell doesn’t offend him or make him want to hide from the potential roar of bikes, the whiff of cigarettes. He actually stretches back to get a deep lungful of what he thinks is just regular earth. Betty’s stretching across the way with the girls, shaking her head with a little smile. Her gaze darts to the strip of skin just above his shorts where his shirt’s ridden up. The idea that Betty Cooper is checking him out certainly puts a pep in his step that wasn’t there before.

They’re supposed to run today. Her specialty is long-distance. He supposes toddling after her under
the pretense of walking Vegas and a host of other pleasant Betty-centric activities may have gotten him in better shape. Even tossing a football with Archie and the small things they’ve done to help break ground for Fred do something, but nothing gets him eager to work out like watching Betty bend over with such deliberation, big beautiful eyes on his smirk, her muscles strong and stretched. He’s fine with not being the best runner, Archie and Reggie all but lapping him, because on days like today he gets to jog behind his girl and watch her glow with success, bounce with determination. Later, he’ll make her glow with something else.

Betty’s thighs tremble on either shoulder, her head thrown back as her body grinds closer to his waiting lips. “You’re so good. I love you,” she pants, even as his tongue writes his name on her clit. Fancy script seems easier to twirl into her skin with all the decadence she deserves. I love you, he writes, varied blessings and affirmations until she’s shuddering so hard that it’s almost difficult to stay pressed against her. He wants to tangle himself in her bones, her flesh. As she slides her sex along his chin, he’s utterly lost in transcendence of the power of the written word.

The clack of heels draws his attention away from his locker, from Betty behind him talking about decorations for Spring Fling and asking about the Twilight reopen. Matching vipers with manicured talons and red lips walk down the hall, Cheryl eyeing Veronica with obvious admiration. For what? For kissing Betty? For being a giant bitch? Veronica, for her part, seems to be mildly appeased by the sound of heels next to her again. There’s a moment they look over at him and Betty with something akin to wistful annoyance. His throat tightens under the phantom taste of lighter fluid and iron, but Betty’s lips press up to his and everything else fades away. He melts like a candle left under a flame. Her flame.

Everything is soft when she slips back into her bubble. Not that they can stay inside of each other in the hallway at school. Visibly, anyway. She slips into neutral territory, resuming the conversation with a certain resignedness now that she knows he wasn’t listening. Still, his fingers find the soft strip of skin between her skirt and her sweater as he walks her to class, bowing his head for another lingering kiss behind a doorway until he can feel a drip starting at the base of his neck.

“Love you,” she tells him.

“Love you,” he smiles back.

A flurry of notes slips out of his pockets like confetti as he hauls his laundry into the washing machine. Swearing, he ducks down to grab them. Usually he stuffs between random reading assignments, memorizing his favorites for inspiration, but he can’t imagine purposely or carelessly letting them get sloshed around his with his dirty underwear, even if some of those notes might be inspiring enough to soil his clothes. Once the thoughts are scooped back up, he sets the wash on, the noisy tumbling of metal, water, and cotton thumping encouragingly for him to get out his words. Jughead smooths out the strips of paper next to his laptop and brings his fingers to the keyboard for thoughts of his own.

Thankfully, him and Archie have a fairly clear expectation that neither of them hook up in their shared room. They save those kinds of escapades for the soundproof garage, each of them having their own blankets to spread out before the recording in progress sign goes on the door. The
separation keeps the sheets clean and the awkwardness less palpable. The room already smells of B.O. and old water bottles and pizza boxes they’re too lazy to bring downstairs.

He wonders what it would be like if he kept a room at the trailer. If he and Jellybean would sneak in bags of chips under their pillows, or if he’d still be tripping over glass bottles on his way to the bathroom. A whoosh of the shower kicks in, meaning Archie’s back from whatever sweat-inducing activity he’s chosen today.

The window in the middle of the room offers him a glimpse of Betty with her head bent over her desk, fingers pushing back her ponytail as she focuses hard enough that he worries the endearing line between her brows is gonna stay etched that way.

But maybe that’s not the worst thing.

Getting to watch her life leave its natural lines on her skin alongside his touch is definitely not the worst thing that could happen. But he’ll smooth them out as best he can, anyway.

“What do you want?” he asks, tracing the slope of her jaw, her breasts.

Her eyes might as well be galaxies, full of possibilities.

“You.”

A cavity of sunshine expands in his chest, so much that he has to bend down and spread it with his tongue, with his hands. But it comes out in other ways too. He keeps asking her, pushing into her dark universe, blood swelling under their veins.

“What do you want?”

“You,” she gasps, head thrown back, hips canting up in the hopes she can catch him, even with her wrists tied lovingly above her head.

“What do you want?”

“You,” shimmying her black nothing-there underwear to the side, wrapping her hands around his shaft and licking a needy stripe that has him fisting her hair.

“What do you want?”

“You,” their faces lit with wax and candles, skins painted and peeling with desire.

“What do you want?”

Even when she says nothing, his riding kerchief used as a makeshift gag, she soaks it, telling him everything with a long, heated look. They have a system. Stop. Slow. More. Yes.

He relishes the nights, the weekends where everyone else fades away, where she can want anything, and he can give it to her.

With what he’s come to anticipate as a speech, Veronica declares she’s found a way to absolve her indiscretions. Money. A Lodge tactic, no doubt. Or a Catholic one, according to the historical penchant for bribery.
“You can’t buy us, Veronica. Nor an education.”

_Can’t buy me love_, his brain provides. _Can’t buy our love._

Betty’s thighs tense under his hand, but since she’s wrapped herself around him, he knows her hands are doing okay.

“I’m not trying to _buy_ you, I’m trying to give you something you want.”

“I’ve already got it, right here,” he gestures firmly with his chin, rubbing Betty’s thigh under the table. Archie’s here too, as is his laptop, and food. “So unless you also wanted to field me unlimited burgers at Pop’s, I suggest you try another path of indulgence.”

“Is that what you want? Seriously? Will burgers get you to stop glaring at me every time I walk into a room?” He scoffs. Like she doesn’t deserve it? “Or is your appetite for my indignity?”

“He’s not trying to humiliate anyone, V.” Jughead indulges himself in the feeling of Betty’s fingers linked around his.

As Veronica starts up again, Archie studiously turns down to his lunch like he wishes it could speak to him.

“It was one kiss, and it didn’t even mean anything. You and Betty are still soulmates, you’re affectionate as ever, and that money will help the _both_ of you.”

For a second, he’s scrambling. Maybe he _should_ take it, in case the scholarships don’t come through. With his luck, they probably won’t. But then Veronica smiles, like all is settled. Like love and morality is a business decision, and she’s just found a way to broker it.

“I may have less than a hundred bucks to my name, but I worked for every single cent of it. That _scholarship_ is probably funded by Daddy’s embezzlement schemes and blood money, so don’t come here throwing grand gestures of how much it’s going to _help_ us when you trampled someone else to get to it. You act like it doesn’t mean anything to you, Veronica. And neither does your apology.”

“Jug, stop. And Ronnie, leave it,” Archie warns when he sees the shocked indignation on her face. “We can talk about it later.”

“But…” Baffled, Veronica looks around the table. Her palms slap on the surface, rattling the silverware. “If that’s what you all think of me…for trying to do something _nice_…”

She storms off into the courtyard, Betty’s gaze trailing worriedly after her. Like there’s still something there to be saved. And maybe there is. But not today.

Betty lays her cheek on his shoulder and mutters something about really needing to work on her college essays before dance committee. His fingers still itch with the desire to ride. He almost texts his dad to see if he wants to go. To talk about the _future_. About college. But he’s too worked up for that, so he sets himself against Betty’s headboard and tries to write, ranting about Veronica’s _nice_ gesture of trying to buy them out after hitting on his girlfriend. Not loudly, not enough that her stiff family would bother cracking through their indifferent exteriors to pop in for the latest gossip column or lecture about the corrupt nature of the Loge family.

He _knows_. Everybody _knows_.

That doesn’t mean she’s exempt from it, or that he has to perpetuate this stupid under-the-table idea that people with money can escape jail while assholes like his dad will rot in it. Or get scraped off the pavement.

The thought makes him sick, bile leaping up his throat.

Did his dad have this kind of dilemma? About taking beer money, about…all the things that gang wrangling inevitably involves? There was never anything in the house. FP’s too smart for that, at least. But not wise enough to start a college fund. Not strong enough to stay out of the bottom of a bottle, not until…this. Whatever this is, however long it lasts. The guilt. The shame. The desire to better oneself. Redeem the ugliness.

“Am I supposed to be grateful?” he practically spits, not even seeing the screen in front of him. The words spark off his tongue, Betty’s legs twisting in her desk chair to avoid them. Sorry, he wants to say, but something is still roaring inside of him. Keeps going until her hair fans out his flames, unleashed from its bindings to wash away his hateful words and guard her ears in golden waves.

I’m sorry, he wants to say again, but he’s too fascinated by her fingers, by the way she’s trying to bend and steel herself for this despite how innately soft and pliant she can be. His anger is changing her. Spreading.

“I just…” Alarmed, she stops untangling her locks, gaze fixed on him like she’s afraid he’s going to split. He breathes deeply through his nose. She shouldn’t have to placate him. Tip-toe around the halls and kiss him better. Make him feel like he’s a part of the universe. Worthy of a great love story.

Sensing his change, she springs into action, gently slipping his laptop to safety and covering his body with her own. As if his hat, his home, his self isn’t enough, isn’t whole enough not to fracture and burn. He needs her. He needs this.

“I want to take care of you,” he admits with astounding simplicity, his fingers linking with hers in the hope to complete his utter vulnerability.

“You do, you do.” She kisses his cheeks, rubbing the tension from his neck where her love softens his poor posture, losing him in another world. “And I take care of you.”

It’s not that simple. He wishes it was. He wishes that love was enough. That college didn’t matter. That money wasn’t just a luxury that girls like Veronica could throw around to patch up the holes they blow in the universe.

Maybe it was selfish of him to turn it down. To think of the implication of what the money meant instead of what he could do with it. What he could do for them. Save for a home, a ring, a promise beyond words and open hearts.

But Betty assures him he’s anything but selfish and unforgiving. How many chances did he give his dad? How kind is he to her family despite their constant misgivings? How much of himself has he given her, let alone the words on a page? The world, she insists.

It doesn’t feel like enough.

“I can’t ask you to live on Archie’s floor with me.” Scraping the hate away on his jeans, his palms feel more real.

“I would.” He turns to her, feeling like his hair is tinged in smoke, his body a crater. She looks utterly, hopelessly in love. Believe, she urges him, lips soft and sweet. The universe cracks open again in the grass-green faith of her gaze. “I’d go to the moon. Or hell and back, Jug. You and me…I
trust you. I trust *us*. And whatever your heart is telling you to do, or not to do, I trust it.”

*I trust you.*

He feels like weeping, like fucking, like marrying her right now and burrowing under the covers until hunger drives him further out to build a new home. For *them*. He’ll do anything. Even forgive Veronica enough to let go of this ember inside of him. Forgive his father.

He doesn’t really have a mother to forgive, not anymore. But he doesn’t think it would’ve mattered in the long run. He’ll let some things go, if only so he doesn’t burn his hands, and burn hers. They have enough scars. He just wants to hold this—hold her with both hands.

“Ronnie’s not like most people,” Archie says carefully, when asked for his opinion. “I don’t think she knows how to apologize normally. But she does feel bad.”

“How bad?” It’s petty, but he wants her to feel worse.

“Bad.”

*Anger is like a coal, you only burn yourself by holding onto it,* he remembers seeing on some stupid poster in elementary school. “Fine.”

Archie’s eyebrows raise in surprise.

Not *it’s* fine. But *fine. Enough.*

The socialite looks a little less disgraced and a little more distinguished than he’d like, hands humbly clasped on the table. To his surprise, her nail polish is cracked like she’s been prying at it for a while. But he supposes being on the outs sucks for people who aren’t used to it. Might suck for everyone. She takes a deep breath, offering a politically neutral smile across the booth at him. “What can I do for you, Jughead?”

“Pop’s. You open a tab. You stop manhandling Betty. You treat Archie with respect. You treat *me* with respect.” She doesn’t say anything. If he had to guess, she looks a little disappointed. Whether in the chat or herself, he isn’t sure. “You can keep loving Betty. Just not the way I do.”

“I don’t think anyone loves each other the way you two do. It’s obvious Betty wouldn’t want anyone else to feel that way about you, let alone entertain someone feeling that way about her,” she scoffs self-deprecatingly, “But Archie is an attentive beau, and I appreciate that. I know I won’t have something like…something like you and Betty’s relationship, in any sense of the word, but I’ll continue aspiring to my best *else*. Even if Archie and I don’t work out, there’s something to be said about the way you all care about each other.” She doesn’t say it, but he can tell she’s struggling with, *the way I want to care and be cared for.* He knows that burning feeling. Wondering if it’s possible to love. If it’s stupid to hope for it. Maybe if she works on her tact, him and Veronica will be able to get along after all.

“How about a milkshake to celebrate our truce? On me?” he smirks, and thinks there may be a glimmer of gratitude under all that veneer.
Archie’s going to give it away, half-skipping and humming, eagerly looking back to them every few steps with his hair askew because he didn’t want to be late for their walk to school and forewent a shower.

*Relax,* he wants to tell him, but Betty’s looking at the ground anyway, gaze tracing various puddles like they’re paintings in a museum.

“B!”

She starts, receding back into his arm slung low on her waist, eyes shining almost neon green in the flashing instant she spots Veronica flinging herself down the steps.

“We made up!”

“More like we came to an understanding,” he corrects, carefully displacing the pastries so they’re not crushed in the reconciliation. There’s almost an incident with the coffee, his hand shooting out just in case, but Veronica manages to tame her enthusiasm before full-on disaster occurs. Betty shoots him a worried glance, almost asking for permission, and he nods, smiling just before a kiss to her forehead. “Careful, don’t damage the goods.” There’s a weirdly possessive instinct to pat her butt or shoulder. He winks instead, leaving the girls to their whirlwind kinship that involves a lot less touching that it did before. He still feels Betty’s emotional tether tight around his waist.

“I can’t believe it.” Archie grins with almost as much energy as Veronica. “We’ve got our girls back.”

It’s a poor choice of words, but Jughead chooses to ignore it in favor or admiring the taste of french pastries, mentally pairing it with Betty’s peppermint chapstick. Wordlessly, he passes the bag, tugging it away when Archie goes for what Jug thinks is Betty’s favorite. Rustling it into a crumbly goody bag, he lets him choose again.

The line on her forehead is still there when she’s planning, pointing at people to show them where to go, visualizing and replanning when Weatherbee shoves another responsibility off on her. Jughead does what he can to alleviate boredom and stress, which is mostly untangling twinkly lights. But the evil barbed things must be more flattering than he thought, because they’re not even plugged in, yet Betty looks at him with stars in her eyes. When he lights them up, he hopes she sees the entire galaxy. And maybe, as they look at each other, she does.

Chapter End Notes

I hope the Veronica and Jughead "reconciliation" lived up to the name. I just love how much he wants to give Betty everything he wants. Watching him struggle with his pride and her not wanting him to sacrifice it gets to me. Anyway, comments are my lifeblood and I love talking about writing, even if you just leave a sentence or a fav moment or a general emotion. Clearly I'm a fan of emotions ^-^ hope you love these two as much as I do!
Everyone else sad when writing/reading Fred scenes? Me too. Well. Not sure if this lives up to the wait, but it's what happened in my mind, so...I hope you enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A sliver of sunlight passes on the steel catch under the chalkboard, where an eraser slides with a dull thunk. Jughead’s steady typing through the quiet moments in class indicates that he’s not listening to the lecture. He’s writing. Which is good, if she thinks about it. So good. His work always interests her, the sound of his thoughts going into a keyboard a soothing symphony. Jughead hones in so sharply that he has a magnifying glass into the world, the power to burn and expose everything around them. Last year she might’ve been afraid of that. Of him looking too close. Listening too carefully. Hurting something. Hurting himself, before she understood what was hurting him.

There’s still an anxious tug to ask if he’s okay, if there’s more they should be doing to forge… the right track. Her mother says this year is important. Betty pretends to adjust her shirt sleeve just for the excuse to look over her shoulder at his furrowed brow, the way his hat sits back farther now that the weather’s warmer and his hair is a bit greasier and fuller because of the humidity. The phantom warmth of his soft mane runs through her fingers.

Every day feels important. Every single one.

The spring dance is more casual, pastel instead of the elegant, rich colors of the Valentine’s Day dance. With her mother’s permission (and Jughead’s), Veronica comes over to get ready in her room. Veronica is so excited that she brings a lovely bouquet for the occasion. Hal and Alice exchange a wry glance, and Betty drags her elated, nervous friend upstairs before the Coopers search the gift for a listening device right in front of them. The girls are already dressed, and tease the boys through the window with dramatic poses and dancing. Jughead offers her a small head shake and fond smirk. Her joy feels like it could travel faster than a bullet through the glass, shattering every barrier between them.

At the sound of giggles, Alice enters the room. “What are you girls doing up here?”

“Just having fun.”

“I see,” she says, with a twisted expression and a glance across the way, like she doesn’t trust any of them at all.

Betty likes the idea of the dance. A chance to dress up and enjoy a different side of herself. Lately, the dances have lost some their appeal since Jughead and her explore every inch of each other’s souls. Still, it’s fun to swish in an elegant dress she wouldn’t wear otherwise, and to enjoy Jughead with his suspenders on his shoulders for reasons other than it makes it fun to hang onto him and drag him closer. Archie looks kind of precious with the tie that matches Veronica’s dress. It’s always fun
to watch Archie sing along to a song without realizing it and get flustered when he realizes people are watching him and his awkward dance moves. Everyone’s moves are strange, she supposes. Polly’s pretending not to notice Jason, and he’s doing the same. Seems silly that he’d take another girl to the dance and spend his time looking over to see if Polly’s paying attention, but Betty’s thoughts are happily drawn elsewhere.

Jughead asks Betty about the history of *spring fling* and attempts rolling her in and out of his arms in a spin. She laughs so freely that Principal Weatherbee shoots her a stern look. Tonight she can’t be burned, and cuddles into her date’s embrace. Jughead’s grin and Kevin’s wry little smirk as he does a careful, polite two-step with his beau makes her feel the slightest bit proud of her little rebellions. Jughead rarely puts her in a mold anyway. They’re fluid and solid and free. When she goes up on her toes to kiss him, his hands tighten around her lower back like he’s lifting her feet off the ground to get her at eye-level, or just to get more. Her head spins in a whirlpool of self-love that keeps on circling back to him.

Strange grooves that will fade by the morning are etched in where her shoes clung to her sweaty skin. Walking around her room feels so much more deliberate when her feet are bare. Flexing heel to toes, she stretches her fingers up like she might be able to reach the ceiling. The curtains are drawn, but she centers herself in front of them, knowing the world is on the other side. *Her* world. Directly across the way.

The dress slides off of her body. Silk and satin, skin and sweat. She steps out of the circle on the floor towards her bed. She could shower. Be clean. Or revel in a rebellion of messy skin on pristine sheets, wake up with her body radiating nothing but its own heat, her skin cool and prickly until or unless her love slides in behind her, his arm around her waist.

“I love you,” he whispers into her hair, his lips on her ear, and it doesn’t matter if she’s soiled or spotless, because she’s *everything* and everything is him.

His legs settle over each side of the *metal monstrosity (as her mother would call it)* and his palms flex over the handles, eyebrows waggling in nervous excitement. “Are you ready to ride?”

“I think I can handle it.”

Teeth chattering, she climbs behind him. Her outfit is supposed to help her get comfortable, her legs wrapped around Jughead in a way she’s unfamiliar with. Her heart rocks uneasily in her chest, so she presses up against Jughead’s back like that’ll steady it. The bandana headband on her head offers her a touch of relief. She’s washed it since the last time they played. Jughead offers to clean it at Fred’s, but she likes having it ready in her nightstand for when she wants to scream or moan or anything else. This ride might make her want to do both.

Even the care he puts into making sure her helmet is strapped securely makes her blush, fine hairs in her ears tingling in anticipation.

“Thanks.”

He smiles, tapping her chin up with a little fire in his eyes that’s more than the familiar heat that he wants to savor her. Settling her chin between his shoulder blades, Betty takes a deep breath and prepares to sink her nails into the leather fingerless gloves she’s picked for this. Jughead squeezes her clasped hands, wriggling back into her almost like when they cuddle at night.
“Hold on tight.”

On instinct, she presses her mouth to his shoulder, urging herself not to bite down as the bike roars underneath her.

*It’s just running. It’s just moving.*

She squeezes hard, trying to pull some of his unwavering bravery inside of her. *Please.*

After a few seconds the lurching feeling settles into general rumbling. When she can breathe again, her nails unknit themselves from the leather grip of her palms, and she opens her eyes to the whirring beauty of Riverdale.

There’s something about being outside and having the world whip by that makes her uneasy and thrilled all at the same time. Jughead is part of her, part of this. She catches a glimpse of his beauty marks as he attempts to see her in his peripheral. There’s no way he can, of course, not at this angle, but it warms her just the same, even as the impact of their movement chills her exposed skin. It’s this balance, maybe. Of stillness and movement. Of fire and metal slicing through air, skating across the earth.

When they stop at a lookout point, she’s still trembling.

“How do you feel?” he asks, charcoal in his eyes and a nervous smile on his face. There are no marks to indicate he’s as shaken as she is. Just tousled hair and a helping hand.

“Powerful,” she answers carefully, and for a moment he looks like he might laugh or cry.

“Me too, Betty. Me too.”

When he buries his face in her neck just to feel her racing pulse, she feels a deep-seated urge to wrap her legs around him again.

There’s something about how peaceful it is that makes her want to read or hike or just lay on Jughead’s chest and listen to his heartbeat while they look out into the world.

“I saw them by the river. I was running Fox Forest, and I heard a song, and when I went towards it—I saw them.”

She’s not sure why she’s mentioning it. Why it even matters.

Jughead sits up behind her, listening.

“I’d never run so hard in my life, Juggie. The horror of what happened to him…and I ran away.”

“You got help,” he reassures her, fingers tracing gently down her spine.

“Water drips down her cheeks in slow, unsteady streams. “I love Archie as one of my dearest friends, and I still couldn’t protect him. Guilt and grief and just…a lack of control all started to drown me until I couldn’t even breathe.” She inhales deeply, reminding herself that *she can,* now. “I’d never felt that kind of desolation. Not until that night, when I heard the song again at the—” *Graveyard,* she almost says. “The construction yard, when you saw me…you saw me…”

He squeezes her shoulder. “*I saw you,* Betts.”
“You saw me.”

She looks at him, his soft eyelashes, compassionate brow, earnest eyes. The same boy she’d seen harshly shadowed by the orange glow of poison, thriving and loving and **everything**.

His hand comes up, the gentlest brush of her cheek, to remind her he’s **here**. “I see you, your character, your passion, your soul. You are **strong**, you are **good**, and that doesn’t mean you have to be all those things all the time. You can be weak or afraid or naughty,” he lightly teases, continuing on with an impassioned plea, “That doesn’t mean you’re any less the fierce, loving inspiration that you are. Without that night at the construction yard, without seeing you **free** like that, I might not’ve… I might not’ve known it was possible to save **myself**. To feel… **real**, and **alive** instead of just **living**. Being with you goes beyond surviving. It’s…transcendent.”

“Juggie,” she murmurs, palms his own cheek, and relaxes into how they always seem to sync up. “You gave me the beauty of Riverdale again just by being you.” His mouth hangs slightly open, brow furrowed. “I can see it through your eyes, and I look for you, traces of your heart or what you’d see in me, let alone this town. I don’t hear that song in Fox Forest because I catch the rustle of leaves where we kissed. My house isn’t a loveless prison because that bedroom window is a gate to the nights we spend together. Pop’s isn’t just a diner with warm fries and good milkshakes, it’s a palace where you can write the world. Your words, your soul, your passion inspire me to be healthy and hopeful and **happy**. The way you see and treat me reminds me that I am powerful. That we can make things that are **good** to outweigh the darkness. Thank you. Thank you for giving me that joy back, Juggie. Thank you for being **you**, and for being **with me**. You’re my best friend, and I love you. I always will.”

She feels the light prickle of grass under her fingers, quickly replaced by the need to rebalance as he chuckles, moving in for a kiss. “Me too, Betts.” The world keeps tilting but she's not afraid to fall.

Being with him feels like finding truth in another person. Her truth, maybe, or the world’s. They rub noses and chat, finishing little snacks until he kisses her ear and insists on finding her flowers. It’s more of an excuse to hold hands and delve further into the lookout point.

“Can I… can I carve our names here?”

The glint of his switchblade surprises her. She knows he won’t hurt her or himself—that he doesn’t hurt others, either, but she wonders why he has it all the same. It has to be more than convenience. Metal digs and scrapes into bark until she can make out the jagged initials **BC + JJ**. A crown above.

As he traces a heart, she moves closer. “May I?”

He reluctantly helps her with the first few shavings like he’s afraid the knife will slip and slice her open. The jerky, giving nature of the tree almost diverts the intended course, but Jughead’s hands steady her waist until the heart is complete.

“There we are,” she says, admiring their handiwork.

“There we are.” His soft smile has her grinning up at him, needing a kiss, a hug. It’s one of the few times she requests a selfie, and he grants it, chin tucked into her shoulder, and their woodwork in the background. She takes pictures, and a tiny video. His lips on her cheek, her neck twisted to meet his kiss, a few smirks, and him nibbling on her ear. The one of Jughead kissing her cheek becomes her phone’s lock screen. Whenever she checks for the time his whole face lights up. His smile is etched deeper in her heart than any letters in tree bark could be.
Her knees lock up when the words hit her. Out of state. Again. Her parents want her to leave Riverdale. A great opportunity to grow. Wrist shaking, Betty swallows hard, the practice essays she’s been filling out sticking in her throat like wet paper towels. Alice moves the piles of internship papers around, a much smaller stash for Polly now that she’s been accepted to college.

“I’m not leaving Jughead.”

With a dramatic sigh, Alice flops her hands down on the table and shares a pointed look with Hal, who thins his lips and enlarges his chin like he’s daring someone to strike him. “You can’t let that boy drag you down, Elizabeth.”

“I’m not. Leaving. Jughead.”

Being grounded just means being quiet. Jughead still sneaks in through the window and kisses her. They turn on the faucet or play music on her phone to drown out their chatter. Eyes darting nervously around her face, he gnaws on his lip, bracing his hands on either side of the bathtub. “Even if you did have to go…maybe I could go with you.”

“You would?” His life is so intrinsically tied to Riverdale that it’s rarely occurred to her he’d seek anything outside of it until college. But her life had been tied here too. And now, if they’re building this together... “You should!” she exclaims, leaping off the vanity to grab either side of his collar. He’s so bemused that he nearly topples back into the spray behind him. But he’s warm and she’s so happy that she almost wants to lick the length of his smile. “Juggie, let’s apply for things together.” She kisses him so enthusiastically that they lose their balance, sliding back into the tub with a loud thump and rattling the curtains with their legs. Even though her teeth hurt from colliding with his, she laughs, touching his head and his butt to make sure he isn’t bruised.

“You’re lucky I love you,” he teases.

“Yes. I am,” she agrees, kissing the tip of his nose before pressing into his smile.

The first few times she’s let out for a run, Alice watches her from the window. Polly refuses to babysit, and when forced to check on her, walks behind, frowning at her phone as Betty jogs ahead, but not too far, because right now they’re basically weights strapped to each other’s backs. Their parents try to use a fairly invasive family safety app that maps their phone’s general GPS. Betty feels like she’s an ant tracked by a hovering lens just waiting for the moment to strike. Every stride just makes her more determined to fly.

“I’m not qualified for any of these,” Jughead protests, pushing his laptop away. There are at least eight different ways to spin his resumé and scholarship essay, but he’s so frustrated he can barely process what she’s saying to him. He declares he’ll end up sleeping under her bed and working at the local gas station wherever she ends up, because that’s all he’s fit for. After the day at lookout point, and as observant as he is, she’s taken aback that he can see himself as anything other than exemplary. He’s one of the hardest-working, passionate, intelligent people she’s ever met, caring and detailed over the simplest things. But she knows how hard it is to accept compliments, especially when faced with a line of possible never-ending rejection and adjustments after working so hard just for a
glimmer of hope for approval. The springs in her mind buckle, knowing his are overburdened. He fears that all his value is wrapped up in Riverdale and in her. It’s in him. It’s in him, too. She just needs to make this easier for him without pushing him, somehow. She digs the blunt end of her pen into her palm and wonders how to be helpful without being firm-handed. To cool the steam in his head without dousing the fire of his passion.

Brushing Vegas gives her something good to do with her hands while she waits for Archie to dig through his backpack for the homework he wants a “second opinion” on. Fred sings under his breath out in back, his easy timbre rumbling mid-range. It might the smokey smell, or it might be the voice, but Vegas perks his ears and whines quietly along. “Go on,” she smiles, wrinkling his fur. The sound of his feet padding out to the grill makes her heart swell along with their song.

She can picture Fred’s smile by the tone of his voice.

“Hey, buddy.”

Archie procures a pile of askew papers, eyebrows furrowed together. “You think you can help me with this?”

“Of course.”

Archie lets out a breath of relief, scooting closer. Without realizing it, he drums his pencil on the counter to Fred’s tune, and her heart swells to the Andrews’ song.

Fred heartily agrees to write a recommendation letter, and chuckles when she claps her hands together and bounces on her toes. The owner of the drive-in is harder to track down, but she finally gets them on the phone and confirms their information. Wrangling Weatherbee requires a bit more finesse and political leveraging than she’s used to, but eventually he agrees to help. Clearing his throat, he indicates he may write something even more glowing if they restart debate or the student newspaper.

That’s something for her to chew on, so she goes to Pop and asks him for a milkshake and a favor. At the end of her meal, he nervously slides her an envelope with a rough draft written on a spare sheet of notepad paper. “It’s not much. You and Jughead are the ones with immortal words. I hope… you’ll let me know if it’s all right? It’s not every day I take a picture of a kid to put on the wall and expect his signature to be famous one day. That boy and his brain are going places.” Beaming, Betty reassures that’s exactly what he needs in his letter, and squeezes Pop in a hug over the counter. Her boyfriend’s photo with a burger and the #1 ribbon on it. Even though it’s for being a customer, he just…is. She wipes the underside of her eyes, overwhelmed.

Kevin thinks her whole project and emotions tied into it are too much, but Veronica argues that it’s sweet, helping Betty fix her makeup before escorting her home. At least she understands the power of a confidence booster.

More than a random thought on a slip of paper, Betty writes a recommendation letter for her boyfriend. Just for him. To remind him that he’s the strongest, most resilient, brilliant, passionate person she’s ever met.

He quirks an eyebrow and sighs when she hands the file over, under the impression it’s yet another stack of applications. The actual content stuns him for a second, her work the “cover letter” of the
bunch. “You’re sweet, Betts.” He wrangles her in by the crook of his elbow to kiss her forehead, sniffling against the glint betraying his emotions. When he gets to the letter from Pop, his fingers go to his mouth, almost like he can taste fry grease and the words together. After he skims through the others, he does a cry a little, but laughs through it, kissing her as he asks, “Why would you do that?” She leans over him to grab her letter again, but he spins her into his embrace, declaring he has to earn and court his positive reviews.

“You have.”

Her attempts at seriousness are swallowed by an array of kisses that should earn him several blue ribbons and possibly a Nobel prize.

Hal kisses Alice on his way past her to get the silverware. It’s not much, just a brief brush of the lips, but it startles Betty all the same. She nudges Polly with her foot under the table. “Did you see that?”

“No,” she mutters, clearly unimpressed. “Why does it matter what Mom and Dad do?”

Betty’s face drags tension into her jaw. Alice warns them that scowling is unflattering, but she also says that about red lipstick, no matter what the shade.

The daytime/weekend make-out spot is pushed aside to make room for a rusty jalopy, and even though Betty’s grip tightens on Jughead’s hand (because after working all week on getting their club up and running they deserve an intimate break), she’s curious about what it’ll turn into. Red, Jughead shrugs, the only information he’s gleaned about it so far. Their little couch is squashed in the corner, so she runs her hand over the metal frame of the car, impressed by the engine. It’s something the Andrews are doing together, just like she helps her father with his restorations. Sort of. She’s not sure if he considers her help or some vacant thing to pass tools and spit out suggestions when he would normally stare into the silence.

Jughead rubs her back with an open palm.

“What are you thinking about?”

“I’d like to help.”

His slow, affectionate smile makes her insides feel like that creamy texture of a milkshake swirling inside a lazy, sturdy blender.

“I think they’d like that.”

Sweat drips down the back of her neck, mugginess swallowing the atmosphere outside. She’ll need to shower again later, if only to exfoliate the layer of perspiration that sits almost like a membrane on top of her skin.

“Lookin’ good,” Jughead murmurs, sliding into the room sideways. He tugs at his hat, clearly itching to take it off in this humidity.
“Go on, Arch, I can finish up.”

Distracted by the whir and flash of spinning rims, Archie only registers the address on a follow-up prodding. “Oh, thanks! Jug.” He nods a hello. “I think I might cool off by the river or something, get me out of my head and this heat. You guys wanna swim?”

“Sounds good. I’ll help Betty get ready and we’ll meet you in the house.” Jughead playfully knocks Archie’s arms in the sidestep to switch places in and out of the crowded garage. His teeth cut into his smile, giving him a boyish, mischievous quality, highly accentuated by the slight swagger as he moves behind her. It’s part of a game, and she lets him sidle up behind her, peer over her shoulder.

“So why are you so invested in this car?” His arms are bare on either side of her. Today has him in a thin, sweaty tank top and his usual jeans.

“I want us to be able to go places. All of us,” she says, carefully tightening another bolt.

“Anywhere in particular?” The beanie gets tossed into the back seat, so soft that it lands without a noise. She looks over her shoulder to catch him ruffling his puffy, greasy, dark nest of hair, his long fingers poking out through the ends of his locks. He’s beautiful.

After a quick wipe on a spare rag to clean her fingers, she reaches for his hand. Smiling, they lean into each other, his arms threading through the inside of her overalls to link her to him. He kisses her cheek and the soft spot on her neck that makes her shiver.

“As long as we get to enjoy the ride,” she starts, trailing off into a heated exchange of smiles. It doesn’t really matter where they go, she thinks, because wherever they end up, they’re spending the summer together. They’re spending forever together. A car is just another way to get there.

Chapter End Notes

Aha! My beauties! Thank you again for your continued support. Jug’s chapter will come soon, but how do we feel about this one? Also, the next set of chapters will be the last. I have some ideas, but please let me know if you have any others. Right now it’s either going to be finishing the summer to make the fic a whole year, fast forward to the summer before their first year of college, or general time jumps post-college, like when they have their own place, etc. I wish you all every happiness and thank you for every comment and kindness you’ve sent.
There's a lot of Fred here, so just prepare yourselves emotionally. A lot of love, too.

Social studies, a concept and class that sadly does not afford for much socialization, gives Jughead time to think. They're going over something he's already read about in four different books, so he looks out the window for a salvation. If he readjusts his focus from the neatly manicured lawn of Riverdale High, he can catch Betty's studious reflection, her lightweight pastel cardigan filtered in dark glass. It strikes him as an oddly fitting metaphor for the town he loves, the book he's writing. So he tunes out stories of war and forges his own battle, every keystroke a strike of his own making. Every sentence brings him a little closer to what might be peace.

There's less fanfare for the Spring Fling. He uses the same suit from months ago, just a different shirt underneath. Archie's tongue nearly pokes out as he tries to knot his silk tie into something presentable, which is kind of hilarious and endearing because Jughead doesn't know how either. As he's buttoning everything up, Jughead catches a glimpse of the girls out of the corner of his eye. They've only done makeup to get ready together, but Veronica seems happy. Not elated, thankfully. Betty's purposely left the curtains open to see him, to tease him, to smile and shine. Everything feels clear as day when his heart warms his chest, and her body melts too.

"You boys mind if I take a picture?" Fred asks. Jughead smiles and wraps Archie in a rough embrace. He anticipates this moment on the Andrews' fridge. Realizing that a memory may be missing from the impromptu scrapbook, he offers to take one of father and son. Fred jerks his face back from the viewfinder, surprised. "Oh! Okay. Yeah. You mind, Arch?"

"Of course not."

Jughead swallows against a swell in his throat, carefully framing the Andrews men with their arms around each other, grinning at each other, then at him. It's a snapshot. For his novel. For the fridge. Forever, maybe.

It's a feeling, a moment he might not get with his own father. Maybe by prom, things will be different. They're already so different than a year ago. Better. Infinitely better, and maybe it'll just keep expanding that way, like the universe, spreading the possibility of strength, and kindness, and love.

Each click feels too loud amidst the quiet, and he cracks jokes to make their smiles widen until there are creases on their faces. Even Vegas gets in for a photo or two. The boys play around until the house is filled with laughter and scrambling lint-brushes.

When the girls arrive, Betty senses the joy and offers to take a picture of all three of them.

"Oh, no— I don't need to, Jughead begins to protest, but Fred cuffs him around the collar and brings him into the embrace. Jughead tries not to let his eyes shine as he straightens his suit jacket
and smiles. First for the camera, then for Betty, who can read what’s in his heart and helps him cup it with both hands as it overflows. He smiles for the family he’s always wanted, the one embracing him in this home, the one he’ll remember for the rest of his life.

Maybe the pastels make him giddy with the thought of her, because Jughead can’t stop playing with Betty. The ends of her hair. Spinning her in and out of his arms. He never lets go of her hand, not until she goes to bathroom with Veronica and he gets a snack break with Archie where they sit at the table and recount the times they put marshmallows in the microwave and watched them morph into bulbous mounds that had the same fluid ginormous qualities of parade floats they’ve seen on television.

Kevin, surprisingly, doesn’t want to dance with either of the girls, and is content to go to the bathroom with his own date during breaks. Joaquin seems content. Happy, maybe. Jughead doesn’t get it, but he doesn’t care to investigate too much. By the time Betty gets back, he’s eager to either pull her into his lap at the table or tug her close on the dance floor to pretend it’s another slow song.

He whispers puns about tulips and two lips that have them kissing with teeth when no one else is looking. Weatherbee seems particularly annoyed at teenagers having a good time, but Betty avoids the negativity by tucking her face into Jughead’s neck with a happy little sigh. He tugs her tight against him, smiling into the crown of her hair, wondering if he could give her one. A real crown. Maybe of flowers, or light. Not like he can weld or has funds to purchase something like diamonds…but he thinks she’d like that. Being his queen, he thinks. So much more than a princess.

That night, he watches her silhouette. There’s not much he can actually make out, but he knows the shape of her so well he could sculpt it out of clay. Give it warmth. Her smile. The stars in her eyes. How he wishes he could do her soul justice in words.

The deep-seated urge to go to her feels like it has to wait. It’s important to do the post-dance breakdown with the Andrews’. Archie collapses on a stool, wiping his sweaty forehead with the expensive tie Veronica got him with no idea of its luxury. Fred’s earnest curiosity fades to tired nods, and eventually he kisses Archie’s gross gelled-up hair, massages Jug’s shoulder, and goes upstairs with Vegas for a good night’s rest.

“You comin’ up?” Archie asks, elbows already raised in an attempt to rid himself of his shirt.

“In a while.”

Archie understands, and Jughead feels shy about it, but wistfulness overrules any reservations about hinting his late-night intentions to his friend.

Climbing up to Betty’s window is a risk, but the moon is bright and the stars are flexing and he just feels like it’s right. Like the world is a great big place and yet theirs is a beacon the stars are watching, rooting for.

“I love you,” he whispers into her hair, slipping under the covers and around her bare flesh. She presses into him, and he wants to hold her forever.

Laying on his back, Jughead stares at the ceiling and presses the key to his lips. The natural smells of wood and linen from acoustic instruments and the worn-out couch filter through the muggy garage,
just a hint of smoke from when Fred tested out the grill and offered to show the boys how to while keeping Vegas distracted enough not to steal the spoils. The jagged metal edge of the key slides past his lips, into the groove of his teeth like floss. Maybe it isn’t thick enough to send the message he wants it to, to give them what he wants it to. As a tangent thought, he shuffles through the toolbox and finds a switchblade they use for camping. Not quite like his father’s. But similar. He’ll borrow it for now, even though he knows Fred would just let him have it. Maybe he’ll ask to keep it, if it feels right. The metal feels heavy in his pocket, substantial. Combined with the key and the knowledge that Betty will arrive soon, Jughead finally feels prepared.

The sight of Betty wearing that oh-so-versatile bandana, her lips a matching cherry red, and biker gloves tight across her palms while she clutches a lunch bag, is almost enough for him to forget the drive altogether and lift her in his arms, back into the soundproof garage where he can bite her collar and let her ride him. But this is important, so he doesn’t. She looks so deliberate and nervous, eyes large, trembling fingers as she snaps her helmet on, his fingers tugging playfully but seriously to make sure she’s strapped in and safe. It’s like she’d rather run next to the bike than ride atop it.

It’s okay, he wants to tell her, I’ve got you.

The kickoff has her gripping him so tightly that her arms become another set of ribs. Atmosphere skids away from them like oil and water, and he wishes he could see her. As the minutes pass, he grins at the way her clenched her thighs finally relax. She takes a chance to look around, fire under their feet, carefully encased and directed with metal. The world whirs by in blurred colors and buzzing noises, until the green grass and far-reaching Sweetwater River wind off into a lookout point. Hooking their helmets off, panting with excitement, he squeezes her hand and starts to help her up. She looks pale, a bit shaken.

Knowing her as well as he does, he never wants to impose a feeling on her. This must’ve been scary. Maybe thrilling, though. He hopes it was thrilling.

“How do you feel?”

Her eyes reflect the sky, white puffy streaks somewhere between exhaust and clouds.

“Powerful.”

Yes, he wants to shout, to praise her and cry and kiss her just like he wanted to that night in the construction yard, when she tore apart everything so it could grow back together. Better.

“Me too, Betty. Me too.”

He buries his nose into her neck, hugging and smiling until he feels her heartbeat against his lips like the caress of a flame and he has to hoist her up into his lap. They kiss and rut and do some stuff but they don’t fuck on the side of the hill like animals. Part of him wants to…just to feel that savage tenderness with Betty, but her thighs are still trembling and he knows that this is enough. To be together.

The stretch in his neck feels good, chin tilted up to the sky.

“I saw them by the river,” she says, staring out at the landscape. He’s not sure what’s happening, only that it’s important, and turns to her with what he hopes is the right amount of reverence. “I was running Fox Forest, and I heard a song, and when I went towards it—I saw them.”
Swallowing, he sits up closer to her, understanding thick and awful in his throat. Archie’s…**better** now. Safe. But Betty recounts to him how she felt like the earth was crumbling under her feet. How grief drowned her, even though she cleared Archie a path to air. And then she heard that song again, and instead of sadness, felt **fury**. “You saw me…” Her eyes turn down, guarded. But that was nothing to be ashamed of. That should be **celebrated**. Immortalized.

He squeezes her shoulder. “**I saw you**, Betts.”

“You saw me.” She studies him, green flickering as windswept grass in her eyes.

“I **see you,**” he reaffirms, touching her face to reaffirm how present his is because of her, in some ways. That their very existence is tethered in his mind. “Your character, your passion, your soul. You are strong, you are good,” At her disbelieving chuckle, he guides her cheek back to him, affirming their eye contact so she can tell that he means it. “And that doesn’t mean you have to be all those things all the time. You can be weak or afraid or naughty,” he muses, gaze dipping to her lips, and back up to her bandana before resting again on her face, the way her smile seems to hold up her cheeks like some display of inner strength. “That doesn’t mean you’re any less the fierce, loving inspiration that you are. Without that night at the construction yard, without seeing you free like that, I might not’ve…”

It’s not something he thinks about often. How he might’ve let the flames swallow him, how he might’ve shoved coals right down his throat so he could choke on that instead of the numbing isolation. But that she emerged from that day like a phoenix from the ashes and seen **him**, and it **mattered**.

He tries not to avoid her gaze, but even after all they’ve shared, he still feels a little vulnerable. “I might not’ve known it was possible to save myself. To feel…real, and alive instead of just living. Being with you goes beyond surviving. It’s…transcendent.”

“Juggie.” Her soft, comforting voice urges him to nuzzle his cheek further into her waiting, crescent-grooved palm. Whatever bones and solid bits of him exist, they belong to her just as much as the tender ones. “You gave me the beauty of Riverdale again just by being you.”

Confused, he frowns at her, trying to understand. He knows she thinks he’s handsome, that she loves him, but the whole **town**?

“I can see it through your eyes,” she expands, “and I look for you, traces of your heart or what you’d see in me, let alone this town.” He keeps searching her gaze for grounding, emotionally shredded that she not only inhabits his body but seeks his soul in the world. Looks for their love, from his perspective, as well. Like…like he makes this town a place she can love. “I don’t hear that song in Fox Forest, because I catch the rustle of leaves where we kissed. My house isn’t a loveless prison because that bedroom window is a gate to the nights we spend together. Pop’s isn’t just a diner with warm fries and good milkshakes, it’s a palace where you can write the world.” She’s phrased everything so beautifully that he’s stunned, amazed that their footprints are so embedded in the town for her, maybe as much as it is for him. “Your words, your soul, your passion inspire me to be healthy and hopeful and happy. The way you see and treat me reminds me that I am powerful. That we can make things that are good to outweigh the darkness. Thank you. Thank you for giving me that joy back, Juggie. Thank you for being you, and for being with me. You’re my best friend, and I love you. I always will.”

His lips twitch with emotion, amazement. He knows. He knew. And yet…

His voice wobbles, the sky drifting into the lightest blues and orangest he’s ever seen, like even the atmosphere is eased by her presence. “**Me too, Betts.**” It’s a stupid response for a supposed
wordsmith, and he laughs, tilting his chin up to kiss her. Their lips keep meeting, smiling between each kiss, and it feels impossibly like the world is streaked with a color that only belongs to them.

To his delight, their small picnic involves an obscene amount of feeding one another. Jughead wipes the crumbs off his lips and determines that this was one of their big dates thus far. Not even so much the effect of having her ride with him, but of…reopening their gate to recognizing each other’s souls. She laughs when he suggests finding her flowers, caressing his cheek and calling him sweet as they wander hand-in-hand further into the lookout, to a more private cove. He knows he’s whittled their initials at the construction yard, but he thinks it might be fitting to tether them here, too. Beyond Riverdale. Into the future. It’s metaphorical in a way that would have him rolling his eyes if he wasn’t such a goddamn sap about what he needs from this.

“Can I…can I carve our names here?”

The cool steel in his hands seems to surprise her, but she doesn’t judge, just curves her lip and acquiesces, watching over his shoulder with each shaving that falls apart to reveal their initials.

“May I?” she asks, and a round ball of stress jiggles in his throat at the idea of her holding a weapon, even if it is a tool. Like his lighter. She’s safe, he knows she’s safe, and he knows she’s smart, but this instinct to cuddle her in pillows and kisses instead of indulge her in steel and fire still tugs at him. Her hiss when the knife moves farther than intended almost gives him a heart attack, and he keeps his hands on her waist just so he does lunge at her, because she wants to do this for them, and for her. He understands. This is more beautiful and intimate than the solo carving he did at the site. But maybe that makes sense. He didn’t know what they’d become back then, only that it was irreversible. He doesn’t know how they’ll evolve, but changing rand staying together is undeniable.

A final stroke completes the rugged outline. “There we are,” she beams quietly, the knife put back in its shell.

“There we are,” he repeats.

She captures the moment on her phone, his mouth against her skin, their names buried in the bark of the lungs of the very earth. He breathes.

After a brief visit from Mary, where she leaves nearly orange lip-prints on all the Andrews-Jones cheeks, Jughead decides to call his mother. It’s probably a waste of time, and he feels like an idiot stumbling over, ‘Hi, how’ve you been?’ with his own mom, but she, at least, seems unbothered. After she rambles for a few minutes about work, you know, got my own business and evading any follow-up questions, he volunteers something about himself that he hopes won’t draw censure or sting of ambivalence like his living situation. “I…I have a girlfriend. Did you know? Betty? Betty Cooper?”

“Did you get her pregnant?” His mother’s dark, yet still strangely conversational tone, strikes him so off-balance that he almost trips over some stationary furniture in the living room.

“What? No! I just thought you might want to know.”

“Oh. That’s great, Jug. Want me to tell Jelly you said hi?”

“I’d like to talk to her, if she’s there.”
“Sure. I guess that’s fine. JELLY!” He hears them screaming in the background at each other, and isn’t sure what to do with his face or his racing heart, so he paces awkwardly in the vacant living room and listens for signs of Archie’s new song upstairs. He thinks he hears someone outside, but it’s more than one person, so it can’t be Betty, and he almost doesn’t bother looking. While he’s waiting for Jellybean, however, he doesn’t have anything better to do, and wanders to the window to catch sight of an agitated Polly trailing behind an equally irritated Betty, disappearing at a rapid rate past his window.

Sisters, he thinks idly, wondering if there’d still be that much space between him and JB if they lived in the same town. He hopes not.

“I called my mom,” he tells his dad, calves jostling under the table at Pop’s.

“Yeah?” FP still has that greasy, unwashed sheen on him, but Jughead chalks it up to the heat because thinking anything else doesn’t serve him at the moment.

“Jellybean goes by JB now.”

FP laughs, although Jughead doesn’t find it very funny. Maybe he thinks it connects them in some way, going by two letters instead of a full name, but he’s had his dad’s name his whole life, and that hasn’t mattered any more than his blood has.

Neither of them asks about their vices, but they’re nice. Enough. When they’re about to part, FP claps him on the back and hugs him a little longer than he probably needs to. “It’s good to see you, son.”

“Yeah,” he says, resisting the urge to add, but I want it to be better.

It’s unusual for Betty not to return his texts, so he ends up stopping by her house to check on things. Alice glares at him with narrow slits for eyes, her arm a barrier across the threshold. “Betty’s rearranging her priorities. She can’t come out and—” Play? he thinks dubiously, wondering how old Alice thinks her daughter really is. “Be disturbed,” she finishes, annoyed.

“O-kay,” he shrugs, knowing any message won’t get passed along. So he walks up to Archie’s and his room and watches through the window as Alice marches up to Betty’s room, slamming the curtains closed on him right in front of Betty’s outraged face. His own blood hums, itching for the lighter, for his knife. Instead he goes for the door knob, adjusting Archie’s door so the mirror on the back can be used as a signal for her flashlight when she’s able to talk.

“They’re crazy. They already have me applying to early admissions and internships for all these programs that I’m not even sure I want, and when I tell them the one thing I do want, they ground me!” The absurdity of it strikes him as odd, especially since he’s talking to his girlfriend from the bathtub, some ridiculous music on her laptop playing since Alice temporarily disabled the wi-fi and they need something to cover the noise.

“What do you want?”

She shoots him an aggrieved look.
“Oh.” A little surprised that it’s taken this long for his inherent Jones-ness and her fondness for him to result in a grounding, Jughead sits back on the edge of her tub. He remembers her father saying that he would hold her back. That she’s meant to go places. And Jughead would hate to be trailing behind or have her slow down just because just because they’re in love with each other. But maybe she won’t have to. His thoughts scramble for a way to make this work.

“Even if you did have to go…maybe I could go with you.”

He tries not to hold his breath or suck the words back in, and keeps his grip tight on the edge of the bathtub.

“You would?” she says almost blankly, like she hasn’t considered it. Then, lighting up the whole bathroom in an exclamation he’s sure is going to summon her mother, “You should!”

He barely has time to smile or quell the nervous bile in his gut before she’s launched at him, hurriedly entreating him to apply to the same things she is in between eager kisses. There’s no time to mention application fees or his zilch experience in anything useful because she surges with glee again, this time actually knocking them back into the tub with a slightly painful thump.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” she whispers, caressing his head, his ass, his lips, anything she thinks might be bruised.

“It’s fine,” he chuckles, even as her kisses catch his moving lips. His hands roam the soft material of her cotton cardigan that no doubt battles the blasting air conditioning as she burrows against his chest and soothes his racing heart. “You’re lucky I love you.”

“Yes. I am,” she says decidedly, kissing the tip of his nose in such a self-satisfied way that everything feels just as fizzy as if they were really relaxing amidst bubbles and warmth.

Twisting a spoonful of yogurt in his hands, Jughead stares at the blue links of death on the screen. Each one leads to a more ridiculous program with even more obscure requirements, ones he’s not even sure Betty qualifies for.

“Whoa, what’s that?” Fred asks, rubbernecking as he goes into the cupboard for a can of what Jughead thinks are preserves and a loaf of bread.

“Internship…college stuff. Betty,” he says by way of explanation, and Fred ah’s in relative understanding.

The silverware drawer rattles a little. “You going somewhere this summer?”

The earnest inflection drags Jughead’s frown from the computer screen to the copper tones of the adult in the house. He actually cares. If he goes. Where he goes. When he goes, and when he comes back. Not just out of some need to know, but he probably wants to help him prepare for it. Would take him shopping for clothes, scope out living arrangements. Jughead feels grateful and ashamed in a way that makes him wiggle in his chair.

“Maybe.”

“All right. Keep me posted. You know, Archie and I were gonna take a kind of college road trip sometime in the next year or so, and we’d love to plan to have you come with us. Maybe we could all go. I assume the Coopers had Betty go with during Polly’s big tour, but if she wants another look, the more the merrier.” Fred offers him an unassuming smile, and Jughead feels his insides stretching
as he attempts to do the same. Even Betty is part of the *all of us*.

“Thanks. For everything.”

“You got it, kid.” With a wink and an easy smile, Fred spreads the preserves on bread, and without even asking, pops two extra slices in the toaster for the boys, or maybe even just Jughead. This is love, Jughead knows. Somewhere between love and just being *good*, and he doesn’t know how he got here, but he knows he’s grateful he can stay.

The idea of losing out on a summer camping with Archie, of letting Fred down at the construction site, of losing his job at the Twilight, of Riverdale *changing*, overwhelms him amidst Betty’s planning and lists, like they can organize away a solution. People don’t *like* him easily. They don’t *love* him almost at all, and he’s going to leave the little he has for the off-chance that Betty and him can play house for a summer. And he wants to, he wants everything with her, but he also wants his *other family* and *everything* he’s worked for and he’s not sure if that’s selfish. When she gives him a suggestion about yet another cover letter, he snaps, shouting, “What’s the point? I’m not qualified for any of these!”

She flinches at his raised voice, the rattle of keys as he pushes his laptop away. Her big, burnt brown-lined eyes follow him as he rants about corporations, about this horrible vision he has of begging for scraps of her time and jobs at gas stations while he sleeps under her bed to avoid the wrath of some internship-approved roommate because he’s *nothing* out there.

“Jug…” she starts, glancing at his askew laptop screen.

He closes his eyes and pushes his palms to his brow. “I’m sorry. I know you said you’d live on Archie’s floor with me, but I’m still having trouble with that being okay with *me*. I mean, I’d live on some floor with you, no question. But it’s different when it’s not Archie’s house, and you’re literally forging a path of greatness while I’m some loser you’ll introduce your friends to as *my boyfriend*, who works in the projector room, whom I brought along because we can’t be apart for a summer without losing our minds because he’s a desperate loser with more suspenders than friends.” Before she can champion him in this hypothetical scenario, he puts a hand on her leg. “I’ll go where you go, but I just… I feel like nowhere else wants me. Riverdale barely even wants me, and it might not feel like *home* when we go back. It sucks, because I’m not qualified for anything outside of this. I can’t be *home* without you, but who am I outside of Riverdale? Outside of us, even?”

“You.” Her hands cusp either side of his face. “You’ll still be *you*, Jug. And you have *so much* love, it’s not just me. Someone will *want* you. Not the way I do,” and he gets that she means not as *deeply* and *life-consumingly*, “And we’ll make that work. If you want to stay, we’ll stay. I can find an internship here, maybe even one that satisfies my parents, but I don’t want you not applying because you think you’re not *good enough*. Because you are, Jug. It’s competitive, but—”

“Can we just… put this on the back burner for a little while?” he sighs, resisting the urge to remind her how painful this process is for her, and she’d been doing it for *months* with preparation and actual accomplishments and recommendations. But she doesn’t seem to need reminding, reluctantly abandoning her spreadsheets to cuddle with him on the couch and sink into the mindlessness of a movie they’ve seen before.

But Betty sits upright, chewing ever-so-slightly on nothing, and he knows her brain is whirring in overtime.

“I love you,” he reminds her, rocking her shoulder to fit closer into his body.
“I love you too.”

She doesn’t relax, but she does take away the papers and kisses him as sweetly ever when she leaves him at the door. When she leaves, though, it still feels like a part of her is taken with him.

The low hiss of gas keeps the bunsen burner flame constant save for the very tip, which whispers like it’s lost its balance every once in a while. This kind of flame seems less vibrant, more safe, even if it does contain such focused, intense heat. Jughead stares at it for a while under the pretense of catching up on a lab until Archie finds him and pulls up a chair, leaving the one by Jughead empty. It’s probably for Betty, he rationalizes, still spacing out until Archie’s words catch up to him and he realizes that Fred’s getting him a car. Them a car, kind of. A junker, but they’ll fix it up. Archie brings his bag to his chest and furrows his brow, seriously asking if it’s okay if he visits Betty and Jughead during their summer in the event that they leave. Archie’s knee bounces up and down with such anxiety that Jughead finds his voice getting clearer and more compassionate in an attempt to console him.

“Arch…yeah. You’re our best friend. Of course we’d want to see you. It wouldn’t be a real summer without you and the three musketeers, right?”

“Cool,” Archie exhales, relief straightening his back. “Wanna get some grub, or are you still working on your lab?” They both stare at his work station, empty except for the bunsen burner. He feels irrevocably stupid that he didn’t use his time better. But there’s still more of it, at least, and turns the nozzle to shut off the gas and get his priorities straight.

His eyes burn from the white LED screens and jumbling words, “I have always been passionate about…” He’s tried switching tabs and gears. Playing video games when things get blurry. Having a snack. A soda. It just makes him more anxious. Even working on his novel brings little comfort to the static in his brain, and when Betty shows up with a nervous smile and a manilla folder he just about starts smoking out his ears.

“It’s for you. Read it.”

Dubious that it’ll be worth the mental exhaustion, he glances at the material on top. Recommendation letters. From Betty. About him. If it wasn’t so earnest it might even be cute, and he ends up smiling back his emotions as he reads a professional, well-thought letter as to why he’d be great for any position, from someone who’d been in quite a few with him. He chuckles, wrangling her in for a kiss on the forehead, because this is sweet. Giving him words back. Giving him love.

“There’s more,” she insists, and he’s expecting fake articles like Top 5 Reasons You Should Know Jughead Jones, but instead he’s confronted with a slightly greasy lined sheet of paper. “It’s a first draft, but it’s a good one.”

Pop. Talking about the moment he sat down in the booth and started ordering, that anything Jughead put his mind to, he could conquer. That he has an endless curiosity and a bottomless gullet. He’s seen highs and lows and always noted the diligence and dignity Jug carries himself. In three generations worth of patrons, only one was worth framing up on the wall, and it’s him. The boy Pop knows is going places.

It’s shocking to be cared for this way, to be put down and recorded as something other than the troubled youth who plays with matches and wears a funny hat. He smears his mouth with his hands,
not sure what to say, what to touch.

Even the person from the Twilight who’d given him exactly one orientation and entrusted him with everything talks about the amazing things he’s done and is doing, how he’s a stand-up, diligent employee who treats his job like a passion. That he trusts him no question to do the right thing.

Fred’s letter is harder to read, his eyes blurring amidst letters he thinks spell phrases like, a son to me, a bright kid, an earnest man, a loyal friend, a passionate artist, a resolved conquerer, and someone I’d trust my life and business with.

Someone who understands the values of their roots but is never afraid to climb. Someone who tends to things until they blossom and bear fruit. Beyond. A man who’s capable of honoring the past, loving the present, and building the future.

He laughs and cries, pulling a breathless Betty close as he asks, “Why would you do that?” Why corral these words and these people? She leans over him as if to reread him her letter, but he drags her more firmly into his arms. Still emotional, he teases her about earning his reviews.

“You have,” she protests, pupils dilating as he leans in close enough to brush their noses. He’s happy and exhausted and in love. The earlier static is replaced with a pleasant adrenaline high as he kisses his girl into oblivion. The phrase build an empire with his hands rolls around in his brain, and he decides to test exactly how enthusiastically he can get Betty to testify.

Impatience more than jealousy motivates him to enter the garage where Archie and Betty have been working for the past hour. He’s not sure Archie actually understands anything of what’s going on under the hood beyond what Betty or Fred tell him, but he seems focused like he’s actually working through something, or maybe he’s just distracted by the shiny rims and wondering if they’re polished enough for Veronica to see herself in them.

Betty’s always been good at multitasking, and perks up as soon as Jughead enters, like she’s about to show off a project at a Science Fair. “Lookin’ good,” he tells her, vague enough it can be interpreted for the car, but his eyes rake over her flushed, wet skin, the way her overalls dip in front with just enough space for his arms to thread through. It takes her a few tries to dismiss Archie, who brightly offers a trip to the river to temper this mugginess without laying indoors, trying to find the right balance between freezing in front of the air conditioner and suffocating on thickness in the air.

“Sounds good. I’ll help Betty get ready and we’ll meet you in the house.”

They don’t often roughhouse, but Jughead needles Archie a little with his arm as he passes and gets a playful push in return. There’s energy of potential in front of them and he’s eager to find a way to let it out. While Betty may find that in being productive, he needs a physical outlet right now. Horsing around with Archie at the river is one way. But the heat of the day seems contagious, and he saunters towards Betty with the knowledge that this garage is soundproof and there are still a few things he’d like to do before they strip down to their bathing suits with Archie.

Reading his mind, Betty turns back to tuning, allowing him to press close and lean over her shoulder and indulge a strange fantasy he never knew he had.

“So why are you so invested in this car?” His hips canter forward, pressing himself against the backs of her thighs.

Her gaze flicks over the puzzle of machinery before her, but he feels her wiggle a little closer into
him as she solves it. “I want us to be able to go places. All of us.”

He hums, tossing his sweaty beanie into the back seat, which he’s already promised Archie not to baptize with Betty before they’ve at least all been out in it. “Anywhere in particular?” Betty watches him over her shoulder, pupils dilated as he strokes and untangles his hair. Bemused, he wonders if she thinks that’s yet another way to fix things.

Before he can think too much on it, Betty turns back around, taking his hand and helping it loop through her clothes so he can act as her makeshift seatbelt or ribs. It reminds him of when they rode together. He kisses her damp cheek, the scoop of her neck, and enjoys the way her body rumbles even better than a motor or cackling fire.

“As long as we get to enjoy the ride…”

They haven’t decided where they’re going, but he has a pretty good idea. As he presses open-mouthed kisses to her neck and feels her blood race under his touch, he holds her tighter in anticipation of this life.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not ready. Don't let me end it! *sigh* As stated last chapter, the next two chapters will be the wrap-up for this fic. So far the votes are for life milestones, so leave your thoughts below, especially on any feelings or passages that resonated with you for this chapter. This journey wouldn't have been the same without your thoughtfulness and kindness. In a of ways, love begets love, and I'm so proud of how far Betty and Jughead have come.

I think Jughead hoping for a Fred-Archie moment with FP one day really resonated with me for some reason. Fred's letter made me cry. Most Fred things made me cry, let's be honest. Betty and her utter devotion always leaves me with an ache in my chest, too. A good one, one that's good for you too, I hope ^_^ What do you think?
Ultimately, Betty decides to endure helping Polly move into her dorm instead of enjoying a day and a half of having the house to herself. There’s something therapeutic and insane about the Coopers being jammed in a car together, needled incessantly by stray objects and sharp comments. Running up and down the dorm stairs with armfuls of bags and furniture creates a clingy musk, and Betty’s not sure if she’s grateful or sad Jughead’s not present to joke about getting her into the shower amidst her variant on the morning cardio. After listening to Alice try to dictate everything down to the duvet, Betty’s teeth ache from grinding them, but it’s better than swollen, bloody palms. It takes all three of the other Coopers and the RA to guide Alice away, who hugs and kisses Polly’s hair, weepy but proud. “Call if you need anything!”

“I will.” Polly waves breezily, eager to get whatever meager freedom a 7x10 space with a roommate can offer.

As their parents make their way back down the stairs, Betty chews on the side of her lip and tries to think of how to say goodbye, or at least a ‘see you later.’ In the few moments it takes for Betty to collect her courage, Polly takes a short, wet, steadying breath.

“Aw, Pol. You’re gonna do great.”

They hug, tighter and longer than they have since they were girls. This’ll be the first night Polly isn’t supposed to be on the other side of a hall, and yet it’s the first time in a while Betty hasn’t felt those five tense inches of drywall between them.

“Good luck,” Betty sniffs, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

“Same to you. You’re gonna need it, riding back with Mom and Dad.”

They laugh because it’s true, and Betty cries sporadically on the way back, her parents diligently ignoring her labored breathing. Alice offers her a tissue to clean herself up before they get back to Riverdale.

“Jughead won’t want to see you all coon-eyed,” she chides.

But he does. Because he wants her all the time. And she wants him now just as much as ever.

Warmth and movement lulls her to sleep, her face suctioned to the ridge right under the car window. His hand is heavy on her leg, his thumb tracing small circles on her knee. Hazy hours of driving make her thoughts fuzzy around the edges. The world is a blur of terrain and sky. But every detail of him is sharp, defined. She could map every curve of his face, every feathery eyelash with her eyes closed.
His lip quirks up in a smile, his hand sliding up further on her thigh. She’s not really sure what he says, but the sound of his voice makes her happy. She’s safe and in love. And tired. Slipping her fingers into his, Betty shifts in the car seat and ticks up the volume of the radio that he’d turned down to help her sleep. Her thoughtful boyfriend. They talk about books. *On the Road. At Home.*

Intersecting themes.

*I love you,* she sighs, and falls back into their dream.

Nothing seems to put him off her. Not even the slightly questionable contents of the watering hole. He cradles her against him as he kisses and nips along her throat, her thighs sliding up and down the ridge of his hips. Drowning’s never been so heavenly. Their friends are off on a romantic walk and Jughead’s fingers are pushing under her bathing suit as easily as she’d let him under her skin. They fuck in the filthy water and the world feels vibrant, like they’re setting the whole thing on fire.

Afterwards, he holds her hand to keep her balanced while she squats to pee in a bush. The way she has to hold her bathing suit, the spray diverts over the material. They laugh at the gracelessness of it and Jughead *shows her how it’s done* with that smart little smirk at his much less complex process. Thankfully, the campground has an actual shower, and they rinse off and both agree peeing in a bush with each other is much better than risking the smells of the outhouse alone. Pretty much anything is better when they can do it together, even if it’s messy. Even if it’s wild.

The bonfire cackles in front of them, a low, constant rumble. Jughead’s so hypnotized by the flames that she wonders if he can see a story in it. If he sees everything. As he pulls himself out of the void for her quiet questioning, he plants a hand on her dirt-speckled calf and offers her a tiny smile that makes her heart rush with more strength than Sweetwater River. She lays out in front of the fire with him, the endless sky. They let the rhythm of the world take them beyond it.

The poster evens out under her palms, thick and glossy and great. Even if it’s just words, she wants to savor this. Spread it and stick it to the walls of Riverdale High like it’s a fresh layer of bricks. “I like the looks of that,” Jughead murmurs, his hand on her hip and mouth pressed to her ear for a quick kiss before he gets dragged away by Kevin for “tall person things” like hanging banners. She smiles, letting out a deep, satisfied breath at the neat angles, the way their names naturally weave a tighter bond. They’ll make things better.

Cupcake after endless cupcake, smiles and petitions abound, but Betty finds herself enjoying it, even daring to lick stray vanilla frosting off her fingers. Since Jughead can’t be trusted not to eat the marketing materials, he handles the bulk of the research for their debates and platforms. He seems to prefer that, anyway, so he doesn’t have to deal with “the public” as often. His brow is often furrowed in interest towards whatever’s on his laptop, fingers creeping over the keys and then into his bag of chips whenever they’re not squeezing some part of her knee. Veronica’s more than happy to do the shmoozing part of the campaign with Betty, and Archie’s got his eye on Jughead to make sure he stays out of trouble. Things are fine. Great, even.

Maybe a little too focused on *them.* After catching an exchanged *look* between their three main friends at the lunch table as Jughead starts up about an upcoming point of contention, her hand steadies on his knee, pausing the thought so she can ask about Kevin and Veronica’s latest
obsessions, some kind of celebrity event and a reality television show. Although Jughead glowers, she knows that with enough thumb strokes on the inside of his thigh and an extra helping of pudding he’ll be happy to pick this up later. Her friends look so excited about the chance to shine that she has to smile. Archie squirms patiently in his chair, probably forced to marathon this kind of with Veronica on the regular when he’s not at practice, even though it’s not exactly his style. By the way he keeps running his hands through his hair, she can tell he’s getting uncomfortable with its length, and makes a mental note to check in on him later.

The boys’ experiences are totally different. Jughead cracks jokes constantly, eyes twinkling and lip curled in bemusement even as she soaks his hair in the warm water. His neck is so beautiful arched back in the sink, elegant and ridged. If Archie wasn’t apprehensively watching them from the corner, she might run her hands along it, feel him swallow and stare up at her in that raw, trusting way that pumps his blood through her veins. “Too warm?”

“Just right.” He shakes his head just slightly, urging her nails against his scalp. This is his favorite part, she can tell. Dark, thick, waves of him almost dissuade her from wanting to cut or change anything at all. He’s so at peace, eyes closed, her hands running along his brilliant brain.

Absently pushing at his chair, Archie leans over to look at them. “How much are you taking?”

“All of it,” Jughead answers cheekily, and she’s tempted to scoop water until it makes his tank top cling to him in all the right ways.

“You’ll be fine, Archie,” she tries to reassure him.

It shocks her when the first of Jughead’s hairs fall through her fingers. She almost wants to put it back. Stick it to his skull and apologize for thinking she could help when he’s already a masterpiece. But Jughead seems unperturbed, patiently waiting for the rest, enjoying it, even. Sheared like a happy little sheep. Taking a deep breath, she takes another section between her fingers and straightens it out. Just a little trim. The little clippings are so soft, but her sentimentality fades as soon once they hit the floor, once it’s not a part of him anymore. This’ll help him grow. Row after row of hair, she palms it, grooms it, focused and precise with the sharp edges of a comb. At last, when she thinks he’s just fuzzy enough, she stops, and although his gaze does hover warily on himself in the mirror, it quickly diverts back to her. “A masterpiece.”

With an indulgent smile, she ruffles his pretty hair and asks him to vacate the chair for Archie.

“You know, Ronnie probably has a stylist—” Archie begins, sinking into the chair like he’d rather slide right out of it.

“Whatever you want to do, Arch. I won’t be offended, either way.”

After a moment, she realizes he can’t say no—can’t back out and imply she did a bad job with Jughead or he doesn’t trust her with something potentially as trivial as his hair.

“Never mind.” She blushes profusely and snaps the clippers closed in the hopes of rebalancing the noise in the room, in her head.

Overcompensating, Archie insists she do the job, his knuckles nearly white on the edge of his chair, face reddening like he’s holding his breath while a flurry of dark red, almost brown mulch rains down on her feet. Once she’s done, he lets out his breath, touching his whole head to make sure there’s still something left. Game controller weighed in one hand, Jughead eyes them through the
mirror, and she wonders what both of them see, how much they really look at things while their shavings tickle and stick to her bare feet.

“You look good, Arch,” Jughead says with calculated, careful sincerity.

Archie runs a hand through his hair again, scanning his reflection and tilting his jaw for every angle. “You think?”

“Not better than me, but you’re alright.”

With a beaming grin, Archie turns away from the mirror and bounds towards her boyfriend to play another game. They all work great together.

Responsibilities give her a sense of order, of purpose. Sharing those burdens with Jughead makes them feel more like an honor. They do student council, debate, newspaper, and gaming clubs on top of the occasional show with the drama department. She feels herself getting starry-eyed when Jughead monologues particularly poignant thoughts. That beautiful mind translated so that other people can even get a glimpse of his genius. Whether with an article or a scene, he is often, always a storyteller who captures her heart. His fingers rub across his lips, dance across keys, jab at the air. She wants them all over her. Inside of her. Even just caressing her face.

After a particularly enthralling gaming session, she all but corrals the other players out the door. Idly, he cleans up, not fully registering the click of the locks she turns in place. As Jughead asks her opinion on the campaign, she crowds him up against the file cabinet, kissing his face and spreading his jacket off of his body to make sure he knows it’s him she wants, not the fantasy.

“This doesn’t get you any extra experience points,” he teases, words muffled by a disinclination to put even an inch of space between them.

“Consider it a charisma check.”

His laughter fades into grunting as she pushes past the familiar texture of his jeans to caress his dick. Heady desire centers around a soft adoration in his eyes, and she treasures being a part of his universe. Sometimes it feels like she’s at the center, spinning with him until they’re both dizzy.

Senior year she does a favor for Kevin and takes one of the leads of the high school musical. Nothing, not even her pleas, can get Jughead to sing for other people or audition. But he’s there every night of rehearsal, either at the beginning or the end, supposedly to cover the process for the paper, but stares at her so intensely and lovingly that Kevin finally kicks him out because when he’s there, Archie cringes every scene he has to hold her. Not everyone can compartmentalize as easily as Veronica, who has to pretend to be interested in some jerk from their grade and flips back to being herself on a moment’s whim. Things aren’t great between Veronica and Archie, but they’re not bad, either, so at Jughead’s behest, Betty mostly stays out of it.

Besides, they all have fun when they can work together to put together a story, and it’s a particular brand of wonderful to watch Jughead swell with admiration and pride at the result. She wonders if his stories will ever be plays, if she’ll ever say or hear his words on a stage.

Betty’s family only comes to the last performance, presuming the first one will be about as enthralling as a dress rehearsal. But she doesn’t mind, because Jughead’s standing there after each show, usually with a still-sweaty and chatty Archie whose post-stage cleanup is a lot less intensive
than the girls’, or maybe he’s just faster and switching between things.

When she comes out, Jughead’s face softens with the big smile that makes her shoulders set back like he’s given her wings. She flies into his arms, welcoming his peppered kisses and murmured praises that she’s not even sure Archie can hear. They all go out to celebrate, riding some kind of an adrenaline high—Kevin from drama, Archie from music, Veronica from the spotlight, and Betty from just...seeing everyone so happy. For doing a good job. For...enjoying this. Maybe Jughead’s riding high on love. She wouldn’t be surprised, at this point. In fact, she still takes a potentially absurd amount of pride in it.

Before they part, Jughead holds her, long and tight. He’s going to stay with his dad overnight for the first time in years and it feels like he’s going dark, drawn to some deep part of the ocean where they can’t see two feet ahead.

She trusts him, god, she trusts him, but she also needs him safe.

*I love you* her heart thumps constantly, shivering and twisting underneath their sheets. The stage will need to be struck tomorrow. All their hard work undone and stripped bare.

Unable to lull herself into any sense of security, Betty has fitful fever dreams all night until finally she wakes up with the pale moonlight filtering in her window and her phone glowing with a voicemail from Jughead. Her racing heart stops in shock when she hears the first few verses of a lullaby. It isn’t an S.O.S. It’s a serenade. To keep...forever. When she’s worried, when they’re apart. Tears streak down her face. She can’t stop laughing in disbelief, hand covering her mouth. She cradles the phone atop her pillow and plays it on repeat until she has the good sense to upload it to her computer and play it that way until she realizes she wants to do the same. Sing to him. For him. Forever. So she calls him back, but his barely coherent sleep-deprived self picks up. Although he’s unable to fully process, he still says sweet things, hums when she sings *I love you*, in so many words. Even though she wants to keep listening to his voice until she’s enveloped in a softer dream, they settle into each other’s songs, the mattress dipping with the weight of them.

The sizzle of pancakes keeps her brain burning. Moving. Eggs and bacon bubble on the griddle as her tongue wets the edge of her mouth, a spatula oh-so-carefully wedged under the pan and the product to cradle its shapes. During the flip, everything shifts. It’s not perfect. Resisting the swelling urge in her chest to start anew, because he’ll love it no matter what, Betty slides the breakfast message onto the plate and tries to ignore the way her bare thighs chafe under the hem of his *S* shirt. Although he may want to spend the day naked in bed, there are windows without coverings on the first floor, and she’d rather the Andrews’ didn’t witness their wonderful weekend more than necessary.

Her pastel pink bedroom is so *alive* and vibrant with possibility. Little white flowers seem like they’re sewn and seeded into the wallpaper, tiny stars drifting around the ceiling, with soft clouds swelling under the covers, rosy light emanating from the carpet. Jughead’s hair puffs up like she’s left him too long in the dryer, but thankfully he’s the kind of awake that’s lucid enough to glance up from his phone and grin at her in that lazy, sexy way that makes her want to disregard his rancid breath and smother him in kisses. He loves food, and she can tell he’s excited for breakfast, but he reaches for her first. After a brief kiss that has him looking a little put out, she tells him to *enjoy*.

Attention reluctantly moving to the plate, Jughead’s eyes get round and bright, his laughter bursting out in magnificent, vibrant delight.

“They say the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach,” she says bashfully, smiling along with
“You got mine a long time ago, Betts. Pretty sure you went straight for the soul.”

He grabs the $M$ first, leaving $PRO$ ? and a surge of pride in Betty’s chest while she kisses his full, happy cheeks while they conquer what’s becoming a $w$.

With the slide of some pins, Betty’s hair spreads out, every part of her is stretching, pores opening. She grins at Jughead, whose bare hair is such a rarity for their classmates, and reads the twinkle in his eye and bend in his knee. In tandem. Together. They’ll leap. In her peripheral, their peers do the same, but there’s still something different about Jughead’s gravity. Even amidst a flurry of blue squares and shimmering robes, they find each other for a tight embrace, Jughead pressing a firm kiss to the side of her face before the caps have even reached velocity. Everything feels possible when she’s holding onto his back, Archie colliding into them while Kevin and Veronica are soon to follow, squealing, for a big group hug that even Jughead seems to like.

The diploma probably won’t go on her wall, framed and signed by her provost. It doesn’t hold nearly as much meaning as the notes Jughead wrote to her every day, the photos of her friends that she has pinned to her mirror. There’s so much blank space on the singular declaration. But she has an idea.

After capturing the moment a million different ways, stretched from genuine smiles and posture-perfect poses, Betty offers her friends lipstick and ink to stamp either their lips or fingerprints on her yearbook.

“Oh, Betty,” Alice scoffs, already lecturing her on how messy that will be. Hal rolls his eyes but is too busy trying to figure out how to edit and export the graduation video to get involved.

Veronica reapplies her iconic lipstick and blots a vibrant kiss on the page, then Archie’s mouth, and lastly Betty’s cheek in a sweet little gesture that leaves a warm, happy feeling instead of a mark. As Archie and Kevin debate about how messy to be, Jughead nips Betty’s ear and tells her he’ll be right back. She tries not to think about his absence as her friends continue crafting their unique signatures. Her and Veronica encourage Archie to make a mini boxing glove with his thumbprint, a hobby he’d taken up when his musical ambitions didn’t seem to give him the right outlet for everything. Therapy seems to be going well for him. Betty’s so proud that he’s always fighting for the people around him, but also for his own heart. Even though Veronica’s not one to put weight in feelings, she seems satisfied, patting his back for a job well done. Seeing their tenderness evolve makes Betty’s heart thump with satisfaction.

While Kevin details a little flower and quotes witticisms, Jughead reappears, one hand cradled close to his body. Feeling light, curious, she pulls at his wrist to see. Black. They make room for him to leave his mark. As he smirks, his print absorbing into the page, she realizes what he went to get. Ink. From his typewriter. From his stories. He went to the Andrews’ to sample the spirit of his world and give it to her. Emotion wells up inside of her, and she tries to inhale at a normal rate, blink to hold back the tears as his fingers pace out a heart on her page. It’s like he’s stamping into the rhythm of her own heart, the shape getting darker and fuller with touch.

“Aw,” Veronica coos, catching Betty’s sniffles. “It’s okay, B.”

This feels like an ending. But she doesn’t want it to be, even if Kevin turns his chin up like he’s resigned about sentimentality of their time at Riverdale high, idly commenting about being surprised Co-President Jughead didn’t leave a crown behind, like that’s what he sees of Jughead instead of the passion and love he holds. She looks at all of her friends, fingers twisting into where Jughead’s clean
hand rubs her shoulder. “We’ll all be friends forever, won’t we?”

Archie frowns, the little scar between his brows lost in crinkles of focus. “Yeah. Of course.” There’s a moment she senses him look to Jug for reassurance. Her boyfriend straightens like he’s overcompensating for the others’ lack of response as he cracks jokes about always having Pop’s.

As the conversation devolves into parties and plans, Jughead’s lips press into her hair. “You know I’ll always be here for you, Betts. Always. Right by your side,” he promises. She knows. She knows. But it’s good to hear all the same.

In the quiet of candlelight, of the soundproofed garage, she pricks her finger on his blade and watches the dark liquid well along the creases of her skin. Self-inflicted. She feels the intensity of Jughead’s gaze heavy on her bones. It’s fine. I’m fine, she wants to tell him. So she lays her blood where he wants it and takes his hand, Archie’s too, their heartbeats throbbing in the very tips of her fingers. The night glows pitch black with promise. Forever.

The Lodges throw a graduation party that feels elegant and staged like New York Magazine. Posh decorations and elegant food are frills compared to the way it feels like they’re honoring and breaking out of Riverdale society. Betty finds it heartwarming that Mary and Fred are still so good together, so warm and kind, even if Hermione and Hiram act like acquaintances at a cocktail party and her own parents treat the event like an opportunity to get a story instead of celebrate, but Betty comforts herself with the idea that maybe they’re a bit more callous because they’ve already been through all this for Polly.

It feels like she has to be excited for herself, but she can’t always muster it. Change can be good, she knows, but she wants certain things to remain constant. They’re still lost. There are still things that are unknown, groups of elegantly dressed people that she fills silly approaching or celebrating with.

Thankfully, Jughead is steady by her side as he bemoans the appetizer trays being not nearly filling enough. Betty sneaks into the kitchen and bats her eyes, using her most polite voice to get a sampling to bring back to him as what they dub the party platter. “You’re amazing,” he moans, kissing her cheek and popping a treat into his mouth.

FP approaches, weaving nervously through the crowd with all the grace of someone carrying potential humiliation on their shoulders. It’s nice that the Lodges considered FP might want to celebrate one of his son’s friends graduating. Bizarre, but nice, as was inviting all the other parents. Even if they all knew each other back then…it’s reassuring but also suffocating to know that they could be in the same boat in twenty-some years. That their children might bring them back together, should their friendship ever fall apart.

Jughead stuffs his face with food as if he’s afraid of what will come out of his mouth if he doesn’t. When the conversation about summer plans and FP’s job falls into a lull, Betty squeezes Jughead’s hand and suggests she gets a picture of all the boys. They wipe their hands free of crumbs on the back of their pants, Jughead sucking his fingers and tugging down his hat. Both of the Jones men look over their shoulders before posing, their arms guarding each other’s backs as they weave into the Andrews’ embrace, smiles shifting from stiff to sincere after the first button press when Fred politely asks for a copy for his fridge.

“I’m proud of you,” the boys tell each other in soft, special ways, and Betty has to distract herself so she doesn’t melt from the sheer beauty of love surrounding them.
Once she fades into the crowd, Kevin and Veronica wrap their arms around her, swaying off-balance until their singing and laughter is loud enough to drown her self-doubt.

The sheets smell like Jughead and her hair’s all tangled around his arms in a way that makes her nervous to move and wake him.

“I know I’m pretty, but you shouldn’t stare,” he murmurs, swollen lips barely moving. All she has to do is grin and he smiles back. It’s like he can see her with his eyes still closed, her psyche imprinted on the back of his eyelids. As they wriggle in closer, she revels in the knowledge that she never has to convince him to stay. Will never have to convince him to stay. Part of her feels like she’ll never need a metal band to get these warm fuzzy feelings of belonging and loyalty. And yet…another part of her wants it. To declare her devotion and reassure him and the rest of the world that they’ll have forever.

Her nails trail distractedly down his chest, his hips readjusting as other parts of him start to make a more poignant outline in the sheets. They instinctively move for each other’s relief.

He curses into the night, hands massaging her shoulders. They’re filled to the brim with each other’s desire.

“I love you," they pant against each other’s mouths. “I fucking love you.”

As a little girl, she’d imagined her wedding would be dove white and pastel pink. Soft. Pretty. Surrounded by her smiling, saccharine family. Now it’s more about a feeling. Safe. Quiet. Warm. Bare in the moon or morning light. The only thing keeping her from that is some vague idea of pacing. But they’re ready. The world’s opening up and they’re together and patient and loving and she doesn’t want to wait anymore. Can’t imagine going home someplace that isn’t his, theirs, their oaths written in ink and signed by witnesses. She wants to be his emergency phone call, his partner, his wife.

Fueled by determination, she crawls into Jughead’s lap, peppering him with kisses until he’s ignoring the movie entirely and holding her close.

“What?” he asks patiently, gaze flicking to her mouth in expectation.

“I want to marry you.”

They say it often. A mantra, a promise. Usually it’s, I want to spend my life with you, his eyes going dark and soft with desire, but today she feels the need to be specific.

“Yeah?” He smiles warmly in pleased adoration. His hands shuffle her up closer to his chest. “You will. Soon, I hope.”

Her heart feels full and solid, even as her fingers tremble on his shoulders. “Now?” He blinks, brows drawing together as he puts the words together. “I want to marry you now. And forever.” This is something she needs. Wants. Will go down to City Hall and do right now if it suits them both, but Jughead straightens, searching her face insistently for some sign this is real. His muscles tense like
he’s ready to pick her up and take her with him. Elope and fuck and hug…but maybe just run, so she grounds him with a brush of her lips, rolling her hips, his body hesitantly relaxing under her soft touch. Stroking away his urgency, she coos, “I don’t care about Polly and my parents being there, I don’t care about waiting until we’ve got our own place, and I don’t care about a ring. I want to marry you, Jughead Jones. As soon as possible.”

His whole face lights up more beautifully than the sunrise, palms wide and supportive at her back. “We’re getting married,” he cries joyfully, his loving, promising kisses cracking her open and filling her with grainy, fluid, warm cement.

A strange, twisty anxiousness knots in her throat thinking of some stranger pushing back her cuticles, cutting out a part of her and sharpening the edges when she normally has to keep her edges short and neat and harmless. She just wants this done so she can get ready.

“You have to get a manicure! For pictures,” Veronica insists, but Betty shakes her head.

Pedicures are something else. The bubbling warmth feels good against her calloused feet. Rough texture sheds away her dead skin, and Betty leans forward to watch the white dandruff disappear into foamy ripples below.

Even though it’s kind of Veronica to offer to help with makeup and outfits, Betty wants to feel herself for their big night (what she presumes will be their big night if the way everyone keeps grinning at her is any indication).

She shapes her own nails, cleans them, gently applying lotion to her faded, pink scars. The morning run doesn’t feel like enough. She needs to clear her head, to keep her heart from beating straight out of her chest in its urgency to celebrate. Regulate her breathing. Keep herself strong. Steady.

The bedroom door clicks open without a knock, her mother walking with a certain resignedness that makes her heart clench. Visibly blinking away what might be despondence, Alice’s expression clears for a somewhat sincere smile as her fingers follow the gentle curve of Betty’s hair. “You ready?”

She is.

Waiting makes her anxious. They’re just barely old enough to get married and he’s a part of her earliest memories. But she doesn’t want to waste any time. She wants to be with him.

The Andrews’ door opens and closes and her heartbeat nearly doubles as she picks up the sound of footsteps crossing over the yard. Jughead, her brain fizzes as she launches off the bed, checking her reflection one last time. Adrenaline blinds her to everything but her smile, so she bounds down the stairs and flashes her parents a grin as they nervously emerge from the dining room where they’ve been working. Three little knocks and her love emerges, her enthusiasm nearly carrying the door into the wall.

“Betty,” Hal chides, but she’s beaming. Because Jughead is there.

Jughead with his suspenders on his shoulders, long fingers flexing around a lovely bouquet that might as well be burst forth directly from his palms in its layered beauty. His nervous side-smile quirks when she thanks him, bashfully pressing her lips to the petals to inhale, to savor every sense she can. The silk of flora, the richness of scent. A warm honey coats the inside of her chest when she looks up and catches his eyes crinkled in soft adoration.
She’s about to walk right out with the flowers when her mother appears at her side to relieve her of them, put them in a vase. “Jughead.” Still dazed, Betty realizes the syllables have finally blended together for her parents. A name. “We could use these for…later,” Alice finishes gamely, as if they all don’t know what’s coming.

There’s some vague exchange of pleasantries, Betty’s cheeks already aching from the stretch of her grin, and then their arms crook together and they’re off.

Her energy’s so high that she might as well be skipping. Jughead can barely bite down his grin, not even teasing her, and everything’s perfect. That word used to make her uneasy, but it’s the closest thing that she can think of besides pure that expresses how happy she is. As she smooths her skirt to slide into the booth at Pop’s, she notices Kevin and Joaquin conspiring together at the counter. The wolfish, obvious watching makes her feel like she should wave, but Jughead rolls his eyes and wraps her closer into his side so they can have some greater semblance of privacy. Even though the world buzzes happily around them, it feels wonderfully, selfishly like the beauty of it is meant for just them two. Or maybe it’s beautiful because of him. His eyes, his words, his hands that link with hers in their laps. The official ask might come on a straw or in a box or even written on a napkin, and it doesn’t matter if it’s any of them because the only part that fits is that it comes from him.

The fresh air in Pickens Park and Fox Forest makes her feel wild, magical. As she kisses Jughead, she tries to remember why she’d ever stop. Her moans slither out like smoke into the night and she can feel him shiver in the urge to let them burst into flame, but they have plans to keep. Wonderful plans. So she presses her lips inward, their hands are solidly together as he leads her to the clearing along the pebbled ground, petals and foliage spread out under tiny dug out candles of flame that shape a beautiful flaming heart.

Water floods her eyes like a veil. They’ve been building towards this for what feels like forever, but she never could’ve prepared herself for the sudden onslaught of emotion of knowing that it’s here. That he did something so grand, that he loves her and chooses her and wants to make her life special. She feels dazed, following Jughead’s careful footsteps into the center of the pulsing, glowing heart. Everything around them might as well glow. Fireflies. The sky. The ground. It takes all her strength to keep holding onto his hand and not throw herself into him when he takes off his beanie, his eyes shiny and dark and deep.

“Betty.” He kisses her knuckles, a throbbing pulse of affection spreading through her limbs.

“I do.” As he loses his breath, surprised laughter bubbling out, her knees buckle. “I’m sorry, go ahead.”

“Betty,” he starts again, supporting her forearms, kneeling on the pebbled ground while his eyes shine with mirth, with emotion. His love is her universe. As she sinks down to join him, his words wrap around her like a mantra. “I want to spend my life with you. Beside you. My best friend, my sweetheart, my president, my partner. Betty Cooper, will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

“The honor is mine, Jughead. I will. I do. I love you.”

It’s overwhelming. Like the moon’s shifted and gravity’s still spinning so they’ll stick together through everything. Her best friend. Her lover. Her person.

They kiss, sweet and sincere. There’s salt on their cheeks that migrates to their fingers and lips. Nothing but love. Pure emotion leaking out in spades as they hold each other tightly. Jughead slides a ring onto her finger and kisses her hand, holding it tightly in his.
This is so much better than anything she could daydream or pretend. This is a wonderful, loving, reality.

“This is ridiculous,” Hal keeps muttering, even as Alice fixes his tie. They’re going separately because her dad wants to swing by the Register. The news doesn’t stop just for the event of her young life. She understands. She tries to, anyway.

Betty distract herself with happy things so her ears won’t fill with ash, nor her lungs with Polly’s toxic hairspray. The smooth purr of the Lodge’s luxury car is so different than the trucks and motorcycles she’s been used to lately, and her sister finally puts down her phone to eagerly climb into the opportunity for opulence. As Hermione steps out in all her elegance to welcome Alice, make sure there aren’t any toes being stepped on, Betty turns to look at the Andrews’ house. It’s not like Jughead seeing her in this dress will be bad luck. Part of her wants to say hello in person before they go.

Mary comes out with a big smile and hello, squeezing her former school friends in tight hugs, holding Betty even longer before gushing about how the ring was probably meant for her all along. That their families are so intertwined that it feels like destiny.

Destiny, Betty agrees, reminded of the way Jughead’s gaze bore into her as she jogged past Pop’s. How she always felt more real with him, and how in some ways she feels like they’re both part of some fantasy.

Part of her wishes Mary could come with them in the little black car just for her positive energy, but Archie needs him mom. Jughead needs his, too. Wherever she is.

Graceful and generous. That’s what these women are. What she aspires to be.

With one last hopeful smile over her shoulder, Betty moves forward towards her friends’ sparkling smiles and cider.

She’s too excited to even care about the repercussions of the childish squeal squeezed out of her amidst Jughead’s loving embrace. Everything just feels so good. Jughead looks energized, so excited and fresh and relaxed. It’s like their happiness is contagious, looping back and intensifying the more time they spend together. Betty’s so giddy that she barely even feels her feet put back on the ground. As they go into the chamber, swinging their clasped hands together, their families file in behind them. It feels like marching into paradise. All she can see are smiles. All she hears is I do. Trembling with adrenaline, she almost wants to shoot back into his arms instead of carefully sliding a ring onto his finger.

“I now pronounce you…”

Partners in life.

He dips her into a kiss, light bursting under their lips, across their faces.

A camera flash. An eternal flame.

Orbiting, orbiting, happy and free.
When they step out of the car, Betty’s a little astounded, her sensible, pretty, shoes sinking into the
dirt as she takes in the backyard streaming with twinkly lights. It’s something straight out of a fairy
tale.

Jughead clears his throat, gently guiding them towards the food table where things are being set up so he can help himself, quietly asking, “Can I get you anything?” with his hand parked on the small of her back. She notes the way he keeps spinning his ring on his finger, making sure the fit’s tight enough, making sure hers is still there.

“Have you met my brilliant wife?” he jokes with anyone who approaches them, his heartbeat racing under her fingertips. But he’s so happy that she lets the beautiful words fall off his lips as many times as he wants, wondering how many millions or more times she’ll get to hear them.

Her father disappears into the Andrews’ soundproof garage, her sister absorbed in Hermione Lodge’s extravagance, but at least her mother stays, cleaning and checking in, even if it’s like a needle prick every time she suggests a reapplication of lipstick after a sparkling toast to a newlywed kiss. Everyone seems to be having a really good time, and their special day is made all the better for it.

These people are her chosen family. They chose her as much as she chose them. Kevin and Joaquin dancing and watching the scene. The Andrews’ boys and FP nodding their heads with big grins along as they play their songs. The rhythmic elegance of the Lodge women able to make anyone feel comfortable with arm touches and compliments. Mary and her mother making sure everyone has what they need.

Of course, there’s her and Jughead. He’s pretty much a part of her. They feed each other dainty slices of cake with their fingers and kiss off the frosting when they think no one else is looking. Every time he sucks on a part of her, a tingle curls down into her toes.

Tonight they’ll be at the Five Seasons, and then it’ll be every night together, wherever their room happens to be.

The strain of living in her room for the summer doesn’t seem to be wearing on Jughead too much. Most of the time they spend their days out or working. The only time she worries is when she goes out for a run. Leaving him with her family makes her anxious that someone like her father might try to tell Jughead he doesn’t belong there when the absolute opposite is true. Even though things are fine, it adds a vigor to her step, the desire to make sure he feels safe. The stronger she is the better she’ll keep him, support her husband, her lover.

Some days he still sits in Pop’s and looks up when she passes, concentrated frown melting into a familiar, tempting smile. Other days he’s in the Andrews’ yard playing with Vegas or Archie, jogging up to her for sweaty hugs and kisses. Yet other days there’s this strange sense of déjà vu. Jughead’s sitting in her window sill, working on a story. Their gazes click into place on each other through the window pane, and she’s home.

By the way he snatches the remaining fries off his plate and chews like he’s tearing them apart, she knows the apartment search isn’t going well. They might have to take up Veronica’s offer for all of them to live in a house together. The Lodge’s New York residence.

“It’s just for now, Juggie,” she pleads later, when they’re both situated on their bed and her parents
aren’t home to weigh in on their plans. Although it’s another place that’s not quite their own, she
tries to reason that it makes sense to save their money on rent so they can use it for school, for a
home down the road. New York is expensive, and they’ll be on their own floor, with their own
kitchenette, and it’s only a few years.

“A few years, Betts!” he reiterates, the back of his hand incredulously slapping her comforter. “A
few years of being tied to a Lodge as our landlord.”

“More like guests, Juggie. And we can go to the library or the museum or find a coffee shop or diner
where you can write and make the place your own. At least until we can afford a place of our own.”
She sighs, palming his calves where they cross under his legs. “I just feel like…it’s where we’re
supposed to be. Better than the dorms, at least. More privacy. No parents. No RA’s. No rules. Just…
you and me,” she shrugs, ear tipping to her shoulder.

Expression softening, he wraps his arm around her, playing with the zipper on the back of her shirt.
“And Archie. And Veronica.”

“For now,” she reminds him gently, nudging forward to brush his nose with her own.

“Only for you, Betty.” He sighs, closing his eyes and leaning into her smile for a kiss that she’s more
than ready to give.

Getting prepared for her classes and her morning runs feels strange, like she’s transferred high
schools instead of going to college. So much is the same. Her urge to smooth her ponytail and curl
the ends. Photos on the walls. Even her sweaters and jewelry, vanity littered with his rings they got at
Renaissance Fairs over the summer, his and hers. Their wedding bands rarely leave their fingers, but
sometimes they act like the new additions are other promises. To ask for help. To be patient with
friends. To love themselves as much as they love each other. Betty takes a deep breath, tightens her
hair, and heads out in the hope that she learns.

Sliding her palms together, Betty fights the freezing wind with as much friction as she can in spandex
and running shoes. It’ll be a blessing once they get started. Archie’s already focused, stretched,
hopping on his feet like he when he was preparing to box for half an hour instead of running in a
marathon.

“We’ve got this,” he chants, staring at the flags. Betty nods distinctly enough that she feels her
ponytail slap the back of her chilled neck. The bare of a horn slams into her like a volleyball to the
face. People take off in a blur of bodies, all different paces, so many sounds. It’s a miracle there’s a
path at all, that people know where they’re going. Red hair fades amidst a sea of bobbing numbers
on stark white slips of paper. Somewhere out there is a high, an epiphany, or a purpose. She keeps
moving towards it, propelled by the desire to see and feel her pulse in tandem with the veins of the
world. The sky opening in shades of pink and blue, a different richness than that of her childhood
bedroom’s walls, of Jughead’s infinite, patient eyes.

Her knees protest the pace with a jerky, forceful rhythm. Lungs burning, her mouth crackles as if
she’s trying to consume air instead of breathe it. There’s a cause for this pain, a fundraiser, but the
last thing on her mind is dollar signs. At each landmark she calculates how much farther it is until she
gets to see her family again in this worthy agony, this pursuit of a cure.

Veronica bounces in her glamorous coat and gloves, waving and cheering with a brightly decorated
sign like they’re superstar athletes or coming home from a trip. The sparkling letters twinkle in encouragement.

Jughead’s presence is more like a stare that Betty can sense deep in her bones. His brow furrows as he chants some variance of, “You’ve got this! Stay strong! Stay hydrated! We’ve got you, Betts.” The shine of his rings against the coffee cup steaming in his hands makes her want to run over and bury herself in his warmth.

As much as Betty’d love to smile in thanks for the support, it’s too hard. She burns, constantly fueling herself with the numbness that strikes out along the pain for running so long, so far.

There’s nothing out there but her mind, just her and the earth and her worn, rigid bones.

And maybe, as she takes in the trees, the people, the community, she gets a little more clarity.

As she crosses the finish line, she cries in relief, veins throbbing, feet stumbling like they’re mechanically wound up to trod through lonely, quiet scenes.

“I’m so proud of you, baby,” Jughead whispers into her ear, arm around her shoulders, leaving just enough space that she can widen her arms above her head and breathe.

People-pleasing comes with a sharp edge. One that comes with the satisfying churn of an old-fashioned pencil grinder, of lead on paper, the grooves of Jughead’s manuscripts under her fingers. Betty learns everything she can while networking at events like the Women in Leadership summits Hermione Lodge encourages her to go to. Sierra McCoy looks surprised but pleased to see her there, and they talk about campaigns and Riverdale and she asks if Betty’s planning on going back. It’s hard to say, she thinks, because in some ways she’s brought so much of it with her. But she imagines what it could be if she did go back where they first carved their names into the earth and wondered if the world would ever be bigger than this. It’s something she thinks she wants, but she wants it to be right for them, too.

They snap together like magnets are buried under their bones. Nothing feels as good as this. Nothing. Sometimes he holds her like she’s his oxygen and it makes her feel like she’s about to catch on fire. His lips skid along her jaw, thumb tracing down the throbbing ache she has for him. Every possible way they could wind together, they do, even their brains and bodies sparking until they share that crack of lightning that shatters her bones and thoughts until nothing’s left but being a part of that with him.

Her whole body jerks, shifting his arm. Something jolts inside of her, and her knees have the good sense to bend and shift before her brain catches up. She’s almost off the bed when he murmurs her name.

“Betts?”

It’s soft and she wants it, wants him, but something wants out and she barely manages to slam the lights on in the bathroom before she’s shoveling her face in the toilet and emptying the contents of her stomach.

The soft padding of footsteps behind her underscores the violence of her purge.
His hands support her back, her shaking ribs, checking that her hair is still twisted to the side in the loose braid they’d idly fixed before bed. “You’re okay, you’re okay,” he assures her, shushing her without any condescension, trying to soothe her, even as her whole body revolts against her.

Tears stream down her face, and something clear like snot rolls over her lip. Part of her wants to smear her face on her shoulder, wipe it free, but that’s secondary to what her body needs. Stability.

As she retches again, the faucet sputters to life and she feels Jughead’s cool, wet fingers against the back of her neck.

“I’ve got you,” he murmurs, “I’ve got you.”

The thoughts in her brain slowly stop swirling as she stares at the acidic bubbles combining in the bowl before her, Jughead in her peripheral.

A moment that she caught Jughead smiling at a blonde baby in the grocery store, her chest flooded with warmth. “Oh my god.”

His grip on the back of her neck tightens like he’ll never let her fall, like he’ll stop whatever sickness this is through sheer force of will. “What?”

“Juggie…” She licks her lips, tasting her insides, searching his gaze for his.

“What?”

The possibility is still forming, shady at the edges. The recesses under his eyes. Long lashes. Bowed lips. There are so many combinations of what it could be.

“Betty?”

“Forsythe…”

He says her name again, and her gaze pops back up to his concerned face.

“What if I’m pregnant?”

His mouth sort of wobbles, brows twisting like he’s not sure whether to laugh or puzzle it out. “Really?” She nods, slightly terrified, his expression softening. “I’m just glad this isn’t food poisoning.”

All the breath leaves her body in a wet exhale and she’s not even sure if it comes close to a laugh, but Jughead’s there to hold her before she can fall apart again.

“Hey. Hey. I love you. We’re gonna be great. I’m gonna take care of you.” He pushes back her damp hair, lips hot and reassuring on her brow. “All of you. I promise.”

The scoop of cereal gets shoved into her mouth without a second thought. Just—hungry. Like Jughead, she thinks. He’s still staring at her, setting the bowl aside, and she doesn’t have the good sense to realize why until it’s too late to do anything but swallow and squeal. With an incredulous grin, Jughead wraps his arms around her growing circumference and silences her defense by sucking on her mouth like he can siphon his breakfast back again.

“It’s for the baby,” she insists, randy and uncomfortable and warm. As things heat up, her breasts graze against him, but the heightened sensitivity makes it feels more like they’ve been slapped.
Sensing her discomfort, he lets his hooded gaze travel to her swollen breasts. “So are these, which I think isn’t fair. Let me help ease your burden.”

As he hoists her heavy, awkward body on the counter, he regards her with a sleepy tenderness that has her hairs standing on end. It’s possible he’ll fuck her (because she wants to be full all the time lately), or maybe he’ll rub her feet, or maybe he’ll just get her breast pump, but when he smiles at her, his face all soft and affectionate, she thinks even that will be enough.

Everything’s stretched. She runs, but her body doesn’t feel like her own anymore. It’s heavy and throbbing and needy for more than just love. People stare at the protrusion on her front. Ask her invasive questions, give unwarranted advice. The attention makes her nerves prickle and she takes to wearing giant sweatshirts to hide herself, to hide it.

Running just makes her think, shoves her weight up and down until she feels sparks of pain with almost every gesture. It scares her. Frustrates her, being so out of control of her own body. It’s not that she’s letting it belong to someone else, because in some ways that’s been the way it is with Jughead. Maybe because it’s so constant, so public. Although she welcomes the Andrews’ excited guesses and hands, she certainly doesn’t like hearing snide remarks from people who don’t love and support her. People like Ethel, who eyed her baby books at the library and commented how big she’s gotten, almost as big as Jughead’s novels. People ask her if she’s still fit to work. They try to take away her projects, make her sit, tell her what to eat, what to weigh.

When her hard stomach lurches, she sits on the riverbed and tries to regain her rhythm. Peace. The water is quiet, the park neatly trimmed with almost neon grass and sprouting, flowering bushes planted in rows, getting wilder the further out to the river they go. It’s even prettier than the drawings and plans in her office. Betty plants a rebellious bare foot in the river in the hopes it will refresh her aching feet.

At least Archie, Fred, and FP promised to play for the town picnic. It makes her think of her wedding reception, of dancing barefoot with her loves while Vegas barked excitedly in time with their song.

Humming, she lets her feet soak and remembers. The thing inside of her rolls. Dancing? It’s weird to have some inner world inside her body changing, but she can feel it all the same. Jughead holds her like she’s literally got the entire universe in her body and soul, even more than usual, and she wishes he was here for this dance.

She’ll walk back today. Her back hurts. Her knees hurt. Everything hurts. But it’s hurt before. Betty will come back from this. They’ll come back and feed ducks safe things for them to eat or play fetch with Vegas Jr. Maybe they’ll play sports. Jughead might hate the practices and games and insane parents with poor sportsmanship. But she thinks he’d do it. For them. For her, at least, if his dreamy expression during even the most terrible community theater performances she’s in are anything to go by.

Stretching her toes, Betty tilts her head up to the sun. A little nibble alerts her to a minnow clearing the dead skin off her feet in tiny little tickles. It’s fine, she thinks, and maybe even good to be gnawed on a little, because there’s still plenty growing healthy underneath.

She no longer belongs to herself.
It’s the most bizarre, wonderful thing. A small bundle of flesh and bones reaches for love, and both her and Jughead immediately answer it. The bassinet is easy to roll, and Jughead murmurs soothing words for both of them, nervous and excited and devoted to them both. It seemed impossible that she could love more, give more. But she thinks they both have. Evenings spent staring at Jughead, cataloguing his every freckle and curve come back as she takes in downy black hair and an elegant little nose.

Everyone comes to see the pink, wrinkled ball of love that’s theirs and a miracle. Veronica switches from cooing to crying at an alarming rate, one that has Archie panicked into comfort mode. Even Polly comes to see, her hair the longest Betty’s ever seen it. She seems like a natural when she bounces the baby on her knee, listening patiently as Hal and Alice reminisce about when the girls were young. How Polly would always think she could away with peeling wallpaper or making a mess in the dark. How Betty cried because she thought she was alone.

How they always needed a light.

As she looks from their bouncing, squealing baby to Jughead’s soft, exhausted smile, she squeezes his hand in the firm belief they’ll always make their own.

Balancing just enough so her ankle doesn’t roll in her loose wedge heels, Betty barely registers the familiar red door as she fumbles with the lock. Disjointed tinny harmonies waft from the kitchen on the colorful xylophone Archie provided to get a head start on the music lessons, the clack of her favorite typewriter ringing out underneath. As she moves inside, dropping the Pop’s bags on the entry table, she scans the living room covered in books and crayons before landing on her husband, already moving up from his desk, eyes alight in anticipatory adoration and relief.

“Hey.”

His greasy, thick hair probably hasn’t been washed yet today. A single scented candle sits on the counter, which means that he cooked earlier, too. She wants to drag him upstairs to the bath, rip their clothes off and submerge their bodies in each other. Before she can do more than admire the way his long fingers push back his tempting locks, his sharp blue gaze raking her with interest, and that sideways, boyish grin she hopes he’ll never grow out of, there’s a chorus of “Mommy!” and “Auntie B!” that draws their attention. A stampede of little feet and hands reach up for her as her heart pounds with their excitement and glee.

“I know, I know, hello,” she tries, doting on everyone until Jughead reaches above them all and pulls her in for a deep, soul rending kiss.

His eyelashes brush her warming cheeks, fingers rooted deep in her hair. They could live a million lifetimes and she still might not get used to this buzzing, slightly unhinged feeling she gets—almost overwhelmed by all that’s become home.

A light glimmers behind the warm, soft infinity in him she knows so well.

“Welcome home, Betty.”

Adjusting closer, noses brushing in intimacy, she agrees. “Welcome home.”

Chapter End Notes
As always, Jughead's POV will be posted the day after next. I, personally, am emotionally compromised. This story has meant so much to me and I hope it means a lot to you. Thank you so much for your thoughts and support, I treasure and reread them all the time if you're so inclined to leave them for me. Anything that stood out, fav scenes, gosh this is the ending T-T Someone hold me! Or send me brownies and tissues. We'll make a marshmallow party out of it.
J10: Home

Chapter Notes

This is it. Imagine any one of eight million quotes about hearts and homes in here because I’m emotional

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jingling attracts Jughead’s attention off his laptop and towards the window, because Vegas is perked up, and that means someone’s coming around the drive. Always, he assumes and hopes it’s Betty. Slipping his shoes on, he gets outside just as she’s closing the car door. Alice rolls her eyes upon seeing him, but her and Hal retreat to their home with a mild hello as Betty jogs into his arms. Feeling her melt into him is such a relaxing motion, each vertebrae letting go of its stress.

There must be something in missing her own sister, because she asks him if he’s like to go with her to see JB. A void opens up, static and white. They have nowhere to stay. Even if they go, they won’t have anywhere to stay. But she immediately covers her own tracks, wiping her face and suggesting his going camping with Archie instead, so he grabs her face and reiterates. “I want to go with you.” Everywhere and anywhere.

Making his own tune, Jughead drums his fingers on the steering wheel. If he could type out lyrics just by touch, he would, but he doesn’t want to wake Betty when she’s all soft and tucked into the side of the car, hair glowing in the sunset. It’s in the quiet of moments like this that he feels the world open up in front of him. There’s no need for fire or to rev the engine and slice the air with metal. There’s just peace, lulling him into quiet, anticipatory complacency. He wonders what Betty dreams of. Touches her thigh, reciprocates her dreamy smile when they reach for each others hands. Whatever this journey is, he’s glad they’re making it together.

The uncovered parts of the seats are sticky, but the breeze is a blessing. It cools their skin and sends Betty’s hair behind her like fluttering ribbons on the end of her childhood bicycle, the freedom of it making her chin tilt up and eyes slant closed in pleasure. He loves that look on her face. Wants to write it. Paint it. Touch it. Absorb the lingering warmth of the sun on her skin and the gold of her hair.

By the time they get to the watering hole, Veronica’s a little ruffled-looking, jerkily untying the knot of her silk scarf that had been protecting her hair. An aimless precaution, he thinks, especially considering they’re going to swim. She tip-toes to the water’s edge with a smile that looks more like a grimace and looks to Betty, who’s already gleefully shedding her sweet, summer outerwear.

“Last one in has to walk Vegas for a week!” Archie shouts, sprinting and bounding off a rock, his shirt long-discarded.

“You ready?” Jughead asks, grinning at Betty as he steps out of his jeans.

“Jug,” she warns, finger up, but she’s not fast enough, and he grabs her around the waist and hauls
them both in, turning his body so he takes the brunt of the impact. Veronica sputters at their splash and Betty shoves him amidst the wave coming up around them, but he wouldn’t have it any other way. He barely even registers Archie and Veronica doing their weird little dance around each other as Betty butterflies to a more secluded corner.

Having her flesh slide against his in the water, weightless, floating, makes him want to tether them together and float forever. As if she can tell, she hooks herself around him. When no one else is looking, she kisses him so deeply that her eyes are almost black with devotion when they part. He wants to consume her, light her on fire from the inside and burn on their pyre. It’s violent and beautiful and wild and he fucks her any way he can in the possibility of day.

It feels good to strike the flint, watch the sparks ignite and give life before them. Lava bubbles under his veins, his throat swelling with the urge to swallow it and vomit magma until there’s a river of it, a crater he can carve just for them. Veronica flinches, grabbing onto Archie’s muscular arm at the merest irregularity, but Betty’s not afraid. She edges her toes closer, smiling quietly and watching him as he rearranges things for the controlled, long burn.

They tell stories, throwing their words around easily with as much consideration as kindling. Betty keeps feeding him marshmallows, the stickiness coating his throat until he can taste ash and softness all as one. Eventually the pops and cackles die down to comforting gurgle under his tongue and Veronica whines to her Archiekins that she needs her beauty sleep. Just as well, Jughead thinks, still shaking, even with Betty’s soft fingers stroking under his arm. His hand lands on her calf and he tries to smile without anything orange and vibrant leaking through his teeth.

But she sees him and feeds him. The fire and the stars, their passion burning, burning into infinity.

Ranting, raving about the ineptitude of the school system, Jughead gets derailed when Fred asks him, “And what are you gonna do about it?” It’s something his dad would’ve said on nights where everything got blurry. But Fred’s expression is totally different, eyes soft and strategic instead of bitter and hard. “How are you going to be a part of the solution?” It strikes him. Surprises him.

FP’s been urging him to use his smarts to get out, not to change things here. But he could. Take a page out of Fred’s book and build something to be proud of in this town.

That night, Jughead brings a freshly-typed manifesto to Betty and gets on his knees, her mattress cushioning him while she struggles to contain a laugh and a kiss, giving into every apparent impulse when he asks, “Will you run for student government with me? I want you as my partner, my co-president, my everything, my wife.”

“Yes,” she laughs, giddy, her hands on his face. “Yes, yes yes.”

She kisses him so hard that he feels dizzy, his brain full of steps and actions and proposals and relief, his arms full of Betty. Once her shirt is off, she tells him he’ll have to ask her again.

“As many times as it takes,” he agrees, eagerly reaching for the parts of her he can get.

With an endorsement event at Pop’s, Betty’s good sense and smiles, his own sharp determination and plans, and Veronica’s custom t-shirts handed out by strangely willing Bulldogs and friends like Archie, they end up beating out the preppy ego strokes they’re running against.
“You’re an absolute miracle, Betty Cooper,” he swears, grinning so much he can barely kiss her. He whoops and applauds the team effort while she hands out hugs. Eager to hurry things along, he corrals them all into a group hug, his arms long enough he can even squeeze Archie in there. Other students press in, pushing their friend group to the core. He can lead them. He can do it, he knows he can. Especially with Betty by his side. The hug pulses, twisting in and out, and somehow he’s become one of these people, a champion in a different way than his quarterback best friend. Maybe those people don’t care about more than cupcakes and popularity. But he does. This can mean something. It will mean something. He’s going to make sure of it.

Observing people, writing them is one thing, but manipulating them is something else. He can see what people need, what moves to make, what stages need to be set to enact the change he wants, and he sort of hates himself for it. He doesn’t want to be like a Lodge or some dirty politician. So he channels as much of that desire to control that he can into a roleplaying game. The dungeon master. People get excited. They take risks. Archie runs around doing jumps and tackles him in fake fights. The game forces his best friend to learn things he doesn’t understand so he knows what spells are coming, even opens his eyes to the benefits of diplomacy versus physicality. Maybe it’s the gradual therapy, or maybe it’s something else, but at least in some ways Archie seems like he’s coping with his eternal restlessness.

Once in a while, Jughead will let Doiley do a guest session just so the power doesn’t go to his head. Joaquin brings his little brother to a session with Kevin, and even though at first it’s annoying to cater to a little kid, the brother is fierce and wants to prove himself, so Jughead ups the stakes. It makes for a totally unpredictable, volatile dynamic that makes him feel like the scenery is fire and stone and wonderful. Even some of the other young Serpents ask to play. It’s…inspiring. To see people of all walks come together, even if it’s just for a fantasy as his own keeps building higher and higher.

They chase each other’s minds and bodies across campaigns, across universes. They fuck hard against the cabinets of the Blue and Gold, her leg bare and hoisted up around his hip as they thrust and scratch and bite. He dives into her neck for a taste of her salty sweat, kissing and soothing and needing her. A conduit. A gravity. All they need to do is look at each other and he feels a rogue sensation not unlike that glowing lick of orange flame peeling open his skin until it's black in its acknowledgment of her. Of the power of them. And he loves being the one to make her unfurl that fire in her veins, her passion. The balm to soothe the itch under her skin, the restless urge for rhythm in her bones.

He hammers on the door of the trailer, battling the urge to rip the hinges off himself because he has the right, has paid his dues and can destroy things in the names of celebrating them. But his father, thankfully, answers before his foot raises to burst through the flimsy lock. “What, boy?” Exhaling what feels like a plume of smoke, Jughead raises the bent paper in triumph, far more impactful than some tiny text on his screen.

“I got it.”

The scholarship. The opportunity to be there with Betty, to escape the endless weight of loans, to break whatever curse their fucking name seemed to have tattooed in its letters, in the Serpent he’s thus far avoided on his skin with the warmth of flannel and Betty’s love.

His father’s face goes slack in awe, and soon they fall into a tangle of clapping hugs, of impact and
pounding and strength.

“I’m so proud of you,” he says, and Jughead holds onto the moment a little tighter.

Satisfaction surges through him as he watches the aura radiate off of Betty onstage. She’s every emotion, so good, so involved and intimate with the scenes, and not in a way that makes him nervous or scared. He knows that when she’s onstage she’s using memories of the million times he’s read lines with her and held her closely. There’s this moment when she falls out of character and her eyes alight on him in undisguised pleasure and everything falls into place. He’s read with Archie, too, of course, playing her role in many late night fits of hilarity. Kevin jokes that he’s the understudy, and maybe he was, in their youth, but now he knows his role in their lives.

Everything is just so heartfelt that he finds it to be a blessing school drama departments will never be worthy of. Then again, he may not be worthy of such good things, either. He snickers when Archie blushes to the tips of his ears about having to embrace Betty for a scene, half-heartedly hassles Kevin about discrimination when he gets kicked out for distracting the actors, and carries the eternal flower he gave Betty for Valentine’s Day to every performance and rehearsal just because it brings a smile to her face. Archie, Fred, and even FP tease him about getting his money’s worth out of that particular gift, and he has to agree. Part of him wonders if he should get her real flowers. Ones in a pot. But Alice might shove them in some corner to die without sunshine or praise and Betty would probably sacrifice her favorite reading spot and his frequent point of entry by her window to make sure they thrived. So the eternal flower it is. For now. He winds it through their hands.

After the last show, when the cast party has been abandoned and the milkshakes all been drained, Jughead holds onto Betty a little longer than normal, still feeling the echo of applause in his chest as their hearts align. There are no real words he can say that would do her justice. Voice wet, she rubs his back. “Be careful,” she begs him, squeezing him tight.

“I will,” he promises, kissing her face. There are mementos of him to keep her warm in her bedroom, but he knows she’ll still be glassy-eyed when she climbs under the covers alone with no promise of his silhouette at her window. Although he hesitates to call them codependent, there’s a certain anxiety that comes in sleeping apart now that they stay together so often. His brain, his body, strains to rest without her beside him.

There’s less clutter in the trailer. More books. Boxing gloves, gifted by the Andrews’, along with a secondhand punching bag. Sometimes he and Betty bring DVD’s either borrowed from the library or as a gift from their thrift store shopping. The recommendations toe the line between thoughtful and assertive. He lends his dad things like On the Waterfront whereas her picks are more general, like the latest thing JB’s seen according to her social feed so they’ll have something to talk about with her the next time she accepts his phone call.

Even though Betty’d insisted she could make them something to take home, FP’s got food covered. There are mostly cold cuts in the fridge, but enough other snacks that one could conceivably avoid scurvy or starvation. His dad sits on the far end of the couch, away from the stacked pillow and blanket just in case this night ever came, tapping his knee and talking about the play, the Andrews, the games the young Serpents play, writing, his somewhat legit job. It’s hard, but they get through it. Not the conversation so much as the night. Stiffness arises at the conflict of whether he’s a guest or a resident in the trailer again. Boundaries, if there are any to be had. Jughead’s brought his own
overnight kit just in case, but his dad’s got a spare toothbrush ready to go, offers whatever he wants in the pantry and fridge. It’s weird. A good kind of weird, but a strange one nonetheless.

Jughead stays on the couch listening to his dad’s bed squeak with every adjustment in the other room. The quilt over the window barely blocks out the street light. He’s wide awake, nearly buzzing with an electronic need to be near Betty, near the Andrews, to be home. To go outside and feel the fresh air surround him before climbing into his girlfriend’s window and wrapping himself in the love they’ve built. But him and his dad have their own relationship that’s getting stronger, that needs time. While he’s still alive, still sober. Still…trying.

So Jughead dials Betty’s number and sings quietly, staring at the thread-work illuminated on the quilt above him, trying not to wake his father, assuming he’s not already able to hear everything. The trailer park lullaby, he muses, lips curling into a smile as he thinks of the girl snuggled up in their nest, trying to warm herself without him. Finding ways to make right now be enough. And his is love. It’ll always be love.

FP shifts uneasily in his chair like the whole thing’s been coated with butter and he’s just trying not to go flying. “Do you want me to ask your mom—about her ring?”

It takes Jughead a full two minutes to stop choking on the dollar store cereal long enough to wipe his eyes and ask him if he’s serious. His father and mother are separated but they’re not divorced, as far as he knows. He hasn’t looked up the legal jargon bullshit on that particular topic in a while, figured out if they’re estranged, whatever that means to them.

“I guess it’s possible she pawned it,” FP admits, strangely realistic without being a martyr about it. “Just thought that maybe…if there was anything I could help with, or should know…”

Snorting, Jughead considers the ways the conversation could go, and decides to land on a simple, “She’s the one. That’s nothing any of us didn’t already know.”

For some weirdly glowing, Leave It To Beaver reason, his father’s easy, soft smile and confident hand on his shoulder makes him feel wholesome and happy. Enough to make him wish they had more reasons to be proud of one another, for rising above a level of surviving to start thriving.

For one blessed weekend, they don’t have to be quiet. Part of him is cautious about the whole arrangement, that Betty turned down the opportunity to see her sister, content with a rain checked video chat while her parents make the most of the weekend. He gets the feeling Betty knows she doesn’t belong in that scenario. She doesn’t need a tour of Polly’s life anymore, only to know that she’s relatively in the realm of safe and happy.

It’s not like he can worry much about JB since he knows almost nothing about her day-to-day except her latest likes and dislikes, but Betty keeps him generally appraised of what she can sleuth, and that’s good enough for now until they can swing their next visit. Lately, he’s been putting off their remote gaming sessions because JB’s character spends an awful lot of time trying to flirt with Archie’s, which is about eight different levels of ick for him.

Sleeping in late with his girlfriend is a rare affordability, and he groans any time Betty tries to escape to go to the bathroom, to get water, even breakfast, because this feels so fucking perfect. The ideal domesticity. “Just a little while longer,” he murmurs into her neck, tightening his grip like a vise. Her wispy hair brushes along his cheek as she uses her secret weapon of stroking his hair until he passes
back out, lulled into a false sense of security. When he flinches awake, she’s slipping off the side of the bed, careful to try not to disturb him. “Traitor,” he grumbles, dragging her back.

“Juggie.” Her body splays around his and the cycle repeats itself, his body relaxing, mind loosening and curling around happy, golden, glittery thoughts when she’s in his arms and rocking itself awake in alarm when she’s not. Eventually, after some very productive groping and grinding, he accepts there are other ways to start the morning, only because she’s determined to get breakfast and he likes watching the way his come chafes on her thighs when she walks. He doesn’t think he can truly sleep when she’s gone, so he rolls over a bit until deciding to scroll through his phone to make sure everything’s on silent until further notice.

She reappears with an impish grin smelling like a different kind of heaven. Bacon. Pancakes. Sausages. He’s not sure how she got the good stuff, but it makes his mouth water enough that he almost whines in the hope she’ll let him eat things off of her, suck the flavor off each other’s fingers. When he sees the warped little message she’s cooked up on the tray, he laughs. It’s perfect. So him. So her. So thoughtful yet unnecessary, because he’d follow her to the ends of earth, let alone a dance. He slides the M in PROM? off the plate and lets it flop around before taking a bite. He wonders about the official proposal he’ll need to make someday. If he could piggyback off of this one. If this weekend could last forever in its little bubble of sweet, syrupy, Betty-filled delight.

“Come back to bed,” he says through a mouth full of pancake, eating about half the meal before teasingly waving bacon along her skin, licking its trail. Amidst the giggles and kisses and snacks, he doesn’t think life gets any better than this.

The spare mattress is on its side most of the time to make room for the boxing gear, only rolled out for the most special of occasions when they want to stay up all night. There’s gaming and eating and even studying, but lately Archie’s needed to talk: to Fred, to his therapist, but oddly enough, not Betty, and Jughead thinks they both know why. Lately, the conversation spins around commitment. “Sometimes I’m so sure,” Archie sighs, spinning Vegas’s ball to himself in a toss. “But then other times I think…is this really meant to be? I mean, my parents met in high school and they fell in love but they’re happier apart. And now going to two different colleges…I don’t know. I don’t know if she’ll even want me next year.”

“Veronica doesn’t strike me as someone who’d waste her time investing so much in someone who was for right now,” Jughead tells him honestly, absently spinning the punching bag.

“No. Maybe you’re right,” Archie frowns, rolling over to look at him. “It’s just weird, all this future stuff.”

“Whatever happens, Arch, we’ll be here for you. Betty, too.”

The unease slowly falls from Archie’s movements, and Jughead lets his friend throw a ball again and again as he mulls stuff over in his head. It’s a privilege to have this. A nonjudgmental, generous friend who’s willing to share his life with him for over a decade. One day, Jughead hopes he can feel he’s been just as generous. So for now, he offers Archie time. Time, reassurance, and whatever wisdom he has, and that seems to be enough.

There’s no particular pep in his step for walking across the stage with everyone in else in their grade. He’d skip the ceremony altogether if it weren’t for the photo ops that Fred and Betty are so desperately seeking. Mary kisses his cheek and fawns over Archie, extending a coy hand to
Veronica while asking, “Is this my future daughter-in-law, bestie of my other future daughter-in-law?” which makes Archie tuck into himself with an exaggerated “Moom” as Veronica’s eyebrows climb up her forehead at the blunt, warm nature of Mrs. Andrews. Even Betty bites down on a grin at that one, exchanging a flirty look at Jughead that has him pulling her into a hug. It’s probably not the way any of them imagined her joining the Andrews family when they were kids, but it’s definitely the right one. For both of them.

The Coopers manage polite congratulations. There’s a sick sense of gut pride like when he and Betty won over Reggie Mantle and Josie McCoy for student council when he catches their begrudging respect. Alice is almost nice to him, invites him into photos mostly because she knows Betty will have a brighter smile in them. Posing wears him out, and his smiles fade to nothing but soft touches for Betty. He’s antsy and tired and just wants to go get burgers and milkshakes.

FP ambles around with Jellybean while they wait for him to finish turning in his robes so they can all go to Pop’s. Gladys’s cackle carries, JB crinkling her face in disbelief at photos of their dad in his “glory days.” Old photos with big grins and jerseys and trophies, their family name on a plaque. It’s sort of bizarre watching JB walk around the school she’ll never go to, but maybe should have, in another life.

The empire of Jones…of Cooper-Jones.

“You okay?” Betty asks, smile tilted as her hand instinctively winds into his.

“Yeah, babe. Just…thinking.”

It’s a privilege to know that he’s in his glory days, that with her and this family, he always will be.

Betty wants a signature. Part of him wants to show her the colorful leaves still pressed preciously in between the pages of a book, have her and Archie pin their hair or leave a blood spot on their corresponding ones so he can frame it in the house and declare them as forever. Hell, he’d plant his own blood on this page if it would make her happy. For now, he has ink. Inspiration. It’s so quiet, his thumb against the paper. He almost misses the sound of keys, that mechanical satisfaction of an input and an output instead of this quiet contact. But it’s fitting, this way. Soft and stained, just a little bit smudged, and layered with the DNA of his love for her.

“We’ll all be friends forever, won’t we?” she asks.

Always, he tells her, tucked into her side, words for her ears only. For me and you, it’s always.

This idea scratches behind his brain until it’s a fever, until not even shame can keep him from asking Archie and Betty for blood, for hair, for the leaves, for everything. He knows it’s weird, and they must too, but they dutifully sneak into the garage anyway with its glowing, haunted quality from the tea lights Betty insists on, the same ones she’d bought in a giant pack for his birthday. Makes him feel like they’re granting his wish.

They sit in a circle and prick their fingers on the sharp, shiny switchblade that’s become a warm friend. Archie frowns in obedient concentration, waiting, like it’s a ceremony. It’s almost like the waxy pools of sweat from the candles are rippling, freezing their time, their friendship. Betty’s the one whose blood he worries about. She’s given so much of it already, so much sweat and tears and time. He almost snags the blade away from her, bites her instead. Or maybe he couldn’t draw that
from her at all, just suck and kiss her skin until red marks bloomed on the surface, bruises imprinted deep on her skin. After a trembling moment, she inhales sharply and makes the incision, her eyes going flat in consideration at the bead of blood on her finger. Certainly not the worst wound she’s probably inflicted, but it makes him nauseous nonetheless, light-headed and intense in his desire to fuse their veins together, to give her strength and heal her again.

They all delicately press the little rosebud of their prints on the back of their designated leaves.

“I love you guys,” he confesses into the night, eyes glazed with gratitude. They each grab hands, blood smearing just a little on each other’s palms.

“We love you, too,” they swear, the candlelight flickering warmly on their skin, shadows stretched and merging.

“I want to marry you,” she says, and it might as well vibrate in his bones, a long mmmmm, a yes. More soothing than a massage.

He holds her closer against his ribs, her thighs on either side of his in a sheathe of warmth and love and flesh. A pillow and anchor and the best kind of pressure he wants on him always, grounding him to the earth even as some movie buzzes in the background.

They’ve said this a hundred times, maybe more, in a million different ways, but the sentiment remains the same. Sometimes the response is a kiss on the nose, an I know. Others it’s a deep, passionate kiss, a needy when?, a reciprocated, Yes or I want to marry you, too. Once in a while it’s a pragmatic sigh, one of them stroking the other’s hair while they try to talk themselves out of running away together. He’s not sure how many times he’s buried himself in her neck wishing he could burrow under her skin, not sure what he says now other a muttering of adoration. He’s just happy. Safe.

“Now,” she clarifies, pulling back. He blinks with the steadiness of waking from a dream, the sincere grip of her gaze smoothing the lines of reality, of the tether she has on his face, his chest, his everything. I don’t care about anything else, she pleas. I just want to be with you. Now. Forever.

It’s time his ears are ringing, blood rushing around his veins like it’s not sure where to go, just wanting the quickest path to the altar and to being with her forever.

He kisses her, holds her, might laugh and cry as everything else in the universe falls away until he’s got a plan with her.

It turns out that Fred’s working in the morning, and they know he’s someone who should be there, so they decide to wait until the weekend. That gives them time to plan. Do a real engagement.

In a fit of conflicted optimism, he calls his mother to invite her and JB to the wedding. Once they get past the slightly offensive, “Should I bring a shotgun?” conversation, Gladys mumbles something about it being kinda a far drive for a civil ceremony, it’s not easy to move around plans, and a million other excuses that make him want to slam the phone hard enough to break the receiver. He barely manages to white-knuckle through the conversation long enough to talk to JB about music selections for Archie’s set list. He tells her he understands, that there are always photos and videos, even though both of them know it won’t be the same.

This won’t define his joy. Theirs, either.
Archie hovers uncertainly in the other room, just come back from a run with Vegas. “Did you call Mom?”

“Yeah. She was…” He shrugs, letting the sting roll off his shoulders, even if he needs the extra step of cracking his neck.

“I meant my mom. Ours, kinda.”

Surprised, Jughead looks back at the phone, long past being embarrassed of sharing necessities with his best friend. “Do you think she’d want to come?”

“She loves you, Jug,” Archie says quietly, gaze darting out the window to the Cooper house.

Properly motivated, Jughead takes the chance and dials the number.

Mary is excited before she even hears the news. Apparently, she finds Jughead the charming voice of sarcastic reason chiming in on Archie’s calls. When he tells her the plan, she wants to know all the details. Archie laughs as he squirms under questions of flowers and rings.

“I’ll help you,” she promises. “Don’t worry.”

He’s stunned when she shows up the next morning, big smile on her face, garment bag and suitcase in hand. After a round of greetings, she gets straight to the point and ushers him to the garage. Still stunned that she’d come for him, he follows, not sure why they have to be alone until she pulls out a small black box. Jughead’s heart pounds hard in his ears, and he wonders if this is pure dread or excitement at the idea that she’s showing him the ring Fred once gave.

Mary’s voice is measured, a no-nonsense mom on the loose. “Fred, Archie, and I talked, and we want you to have this. You and Betty.” They both look at the box in her hands, her with fondness, him in alarm. “We know the two of you will show this ring the lifetime of love it deserves.”

Maybe Betty will be similarly speechless in this weighted moment with a tiny little box full of so much possibility.

“But—but what about Archie?” he sputters. There’s no way he can take a piece of their family. Not when they’ve given him so much.

“What about him? There’s still my mother’s ring, if he wants it, but we want this for you.” He stares, unable to form words. “Plus, if I’ve read that Veronica girl right, she’ll probably want to pick out her own diamond.”

Jughead snorts in agreement, surprised he can laugh, let alone breathe. “Thank you,” he whispers, closing his fingers around the black box, squeezing her hand. “For everything. All of you. Thank you. If there’s anyone who’s taught me how to love—”

“It’s Betty,” Mary finishes, cheeky.

It’s not like he can disagree.

Carefully edging the comb through his freshly-cut hair, Jughead wishes it was still Betty’s fingers under warm water. He studies himself in the mirror: the planes of his cheekbones, the hollows under his eyes, wondering if there’s anything he can do to better himself before laying himself into her future memories.
“You doing okay?” Fred asks, awkwardly peeking through the door. Even Vegas must sense the excitement, tail wagging as he looks from man to man for a clue. Archie bounces nervously on his feet, only half distracted by jump roping as he keeps peeking at Betty’s window.

Although his body trembles, Jughead is more than okay. Just for a while, he needs to wear his beanie, calm his racing heart. A good, clean shirt. Suspenders up for a special occasion. The eternal flower seems a little too tongue-in-cheek, so he gathers the arrangement he got at the store earlier and takes a deep breath.

Overwhelmed with excitement, Mary turns away from where she was watching the Cooper house through the window and hugs him, squashing the flowers. “Sorry, I’m just so excited!” she beams, fluffing the buds to perk them back up again. “Now let me take a picture of you with the bouquet. A before and after.”

“You didn’t have to do all this,” he blushes, still surprised she took her vacation days to help him finish his plans and bond with her family.

“Of course I did,” she insists, wiping under her eyes before fussing with his shirt again. “This is a once-in-a-lifetime event for my kids and I’ll be damned if I’m not gonna make the most of it.”

He holds his breath in an attempt not to get emotional, despite this probably being the day for it. “Good luck,” the Andrews family beams at him from the door, crowding around the windows to watch him approach the Cooper house and knock like it’s a first date instead of the thousandth.

Anxiety melts into excitement as soon as his beautiful Betty yanks open the door.

Heart on his sleeve, he offers the flowers, trying not to get distracted by the full blush on Betty’s cheeks, the way her eyelashes kiss the petals more delicately than any butterfly.

“Very thoughtful,” Alice muses, taking the arrangement to be put in a vase. Whatever she says is some distant arrangement of be safe and have fun, Betty already smoothing into the crease of his elbow as he escorts her away.

Mary and Archie have their phones out, recording them as they walk down the street, but thankfully Betty is beaming too much at him to notice. It makes him blush from the attention, from the sincerity.

The date is perfect because it’s with Betty. They sit on the same side of the booth at Pop’s, blushing when the man himself smiles at their tangled fingers, insisting they take a free shake to share. It reminds him, maybe even the world of some wholesome teenage dream come to life. Betty in her fresh little skirt, bending over delicately to take the straw in her lips. She tucks her hair behind her ear while she looks up at Jughead with a tenderness that makes his insides stretch to infinity. He scratches and caresses her bare shoulders, their conversation and silence comfortable even if their fingers tremble a little in anticipation, or maybe from the cold of the shake.

This is coming. They both know it, and it’s amazing and thrilling to the point he feels like they’re flying.

They walk hand-in-hand through Pickens Park, through parts of Fox Forest where they’d laid in the leaves and kissed into oblivion. Nostalgia distracts them into stopping to neck a little, his thumb on her throat to prevent them from swallowing the night into one another, giving his hands something to do other than pull down her dress and palm her breasts in the moonlight. Tonight should be sweeter, more tame than the boiling blood in veins would have him believe.

The twinkling lights beckon them over, a heart just like is carved into the woods of the world,
burning safely amidst flower petals, stone, and wax. He sends a silent prayer, a thank you to the universe, and leads her to the center, stepping over the colorful sprinkled colors that rustle excitedly underfoot. As he tucks his beanie into his back pocket, he subtly sneaks the ring onto his palm, still holding hers with the other.

Her eyes are glowing, plumes of light, big and ready and patient and bright.

“Betty—”

“I do,” she blurts out, gasping in embarrassment when he laughs. “I’m sorry, go ahead.”

It’s good to know that this is really that easy. He knew she’d say yes, but a part of him…an anxious little part of him wondered if she’d reconsider and want to push their wedding past the upcoming weekend.

“Betty.” he repeats, grinning a little indulgently so she knows that he’s not mad. This is their proposal, and he’s glad she’s such a positive part of it. “I want to spend my life with you. Beside you.” She’s already kneeling to join him, nodding him on and making every single part of this as easy for him as she can, as always. Making it good, his words truer and stronger under her encouraging stare. “My best friend, my sweetheart, my president, my partner.” He squeezes her hand, his heart clenching excitedly with it as he says the words he once only dreamed of. “Betty Cooper, will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

For a moment, Betty appears to breathe the words in, eyes heady and happy like she’s just been given a hit of pure emotion. Her hand tightens on his as she regards him with a familiar, if more teary, admiration. “The honor is mine, Jughead. I will. I do. I love you.”

It’s so good. It’s so wonderful and right and pure that he kisses her, forgetting entirely about the ring and just soaking up the moment pressed tight against her lips. They murmur “I love you,” breathless and giggling into their own private night as he slides the ring on her finger. They’ll show it a lifetime’s worth of love. Ten thousand of them, if he has anything to say about it.

Back at the Andrews house, there’s a flurry of more tears, of congratulations. But even amidst all the back-clapping and retelling and laughter, he can’t get the sound of her footfall out of his head, nor her giddy laughter, nor her happy sighs. It’s like a song on repeat drowning out anything that could possibly be construed as bad. At every moment, she finds a way to nestle into him. Her face tucked into his shoulder, fingers intertwined, seating herself as demurely as possible onto his lap. When the party dies down, his thumbs untangle the knots in her arches, watching her head droop down in sleepy satisfaction.

All night, the words pour out of him. Like a bubbling pot of endless coffee going down his throat and scalding as it pours out his fingers. Normally he’d be in a booth at Pop’s, but for some reason sitting on the couch does the trick, the phantom nudge of Betty’s feet pressing at his back and thighs. Slivers of orange and pink light up the sky as his mind finds the clack of keys a natural as blinking, as breathing.

A story, he thinks.

A love story.
There’s not a bachelor party so much as a very short camping trip. Fresh air fills his lungs with peace and clarity. Everything is going exactly the way it should, when it should. Being amidst the shifting wood, the easy green of trees and grass makes him feel like Betty could be just beyond in the forest, that he could be alone and never lonely, the next friendly face just beyond him in the woods. Archie and him pass the time hiking and talking about everything under the sun and Jughead wonders if maybe they should carve their names out here, too.

The Dad Squad arrives. There’s sawdust sprinkled in Fred’s hair and a still-throaty coffee husk to FP’s timbre. Everyone’s a little goofy, and he’s not sure if it’s the fresh air or the fact that this is the first trip they’ve really taken all together. They hike and jibe and embed smoke on their clothes from cooking bacon and steak. At night, they make Archie climb the tree to hang their food, the dads yelling encouragement while Jughead uses the opportunity for acorn target practice. They’ve never done this as as the four of them, not even as kids, and it feels…good. Maybe even better as men, or whatever he’s supposed to be once he’s 18 and getting married.

They share embarrassing stories of high school, mostly harmless ones, like the time their dads got detention for streaking as part of some macho bonding session with the Bulldogs and when Archie ended up getting chased out of the music room by the Pussycats after he asked if he could sing the bridge and Jughead had to hide him in a closet. Their laughter sparks up in the low light of night and he feels a strange sense of brotherhood over generations, the roots twisting and shaking hands. It’s family.

He gets caught trying to text and call Betty. They give him varying degrees of chiding, knowing looks when his voice goes soft and his whole posture melts protectively over his cheap brick of a phone.

“I love you,” he tells her, the sentiment as natural as the birds waking them in the morning. A physical and necessary part of his language.

“I love you too,” she says so tenderly that he knows she’s smiling. Most of their wedding’s already been set with simple details so they can just be. The only hangup is where they’re living until they go to college and he has a feeling he’d rather endure the censure of the Coopers for a few months than try to breathe in the trailer with his dad and his girl…his wife, he wonders, awed. Betty will be his wife. He’s excited to see what she looks like when he comes back. Herself, but brighter. She’ll be at the end of an aisle.

“Fuck, I love you.”

Energy fizzles under his skin with the same consistent buzz of carbonated drinks. He keeps shaking loose, almost like Archie before a performance or a fight. Thankfully, everything is pretty familiar. The only thing he’s really missing to make it easier is his casual wear, but he thinks he can handle that for day, especially because he knows how fond she is of him in formalwear.

It’s silly, but part of him thinks maybe he shouldn’t wear his beanie anymore. Not if Betty likes his hair out and free for her hands. When Jughead mentions it, Archie snorts so hard that clear liquid shoots out his nose. Slamming his back, Archie coughs up the remainder of his laughter until Fred and FP join them, Vegas wagging his tail and trying to figure out if Archie’s clumsiness almost got him again.
“You’re going to cry. I’m calling it now,” Mary ribs eagerly, hurrying back inside.

Heart beating loudly, he moves towards the window, trying to catch a glimpse. “You saw her?”

“She looks happy. She’s always been beautiful, but it’s so good to see you all happy.”

Ecstatic, he agrees.

FP tucks his hands into his trousers, shaking his head up at the courthouse. “Your love really is a miracle, kid. This is the first time I’ve been excited to be here.”

When they get it, FP knows the general direction they’re going, but it’s the sound of Betty running in her wedges that makes him spin, directs his compass. Her smile is blinding and his arms are open and he scoops her up, lifting her feet off the ground while his soul sings that they’re getting married today. Squeezing out her laughter, he doesn’t stop moaning and smiling until they get yelled at in jest.

“Save it for the honeymoon!” Veronica winks, handing Betty the bouquet he’d brought her just a few days ago. Under the Coopers’ valiant care, it’s still thriving. He doesn’t miss the way Veronica proudly links arms with Archie when marching down the aisle, the way Hal leans forward on his thighs like he’s bracing himself, the happy, satisfied, encouraging smiles of everyone else as they evenly distribute themselves through the room without sides of one or another. It’s a miracle he even notices them, really, when the miracle that started this world of love is standing with him.

Betty’s shaking with excitement, happiness pouring down her cheeks, wiped by his hands, by hers. She slides on his ring, snug with promise. He manages not to cry until she says, “I do.” It just…it hits him.


He’s never trusted anyone else with his life and love this way. He has family now, and he probably wouldn’t be here without them. With everything he’s ever wanted. With happiness, hope, a future. A life spent loving and being loved by Betty is the only kind worth living.

“Have you met my brilliant wife?” he asks incessantly, dragging her waist flush against him. His cheeks ache from smiling, the jubilation making his throat bob like it’s dancing along with their friends on the freshly mowed lawn. It’s the only party he’s happy to be toasted at, especially when the chiming of silverware against glasses signals him to pull Betty into a smooch that whether chaste or passionate makes his insides shoot off in confetti.

He’s so happy that he almost doesn’t even remember to really eat, surprised by the plates of food that somehow keep appearing in his hand, most pleased when he gets to sample directly from Betty’s fingers.

Joaquin laughs and shakes his head, turning away to keep talking with Kevin. Listening, actually, since Kevin does most of the talking. But they’re all doing a great job of supporting.

“My passionate husband,” she whispers to him amidst silk sheets they’ve never known, not even on their honeymoon. An end-of-semester present to themselves. The Lodges may have invested in
Egyptian cotton, but he still feels most at home with a fluffy comforter and Betty’s bare thigh draped over his lap. The candles she’s lit drip slowly on the nightstand, caressing her curves in soft, warm light. Her thoughtfulness drives him, makes him hard and strong until he fucks her passionately against the mattress, each thrust accompanied by her little cries for more. No more being quiet.

Her heels dig into the backs of his thighs, climbing him until he’s bottomed out and panting against her. Urgently trying to regain control, his senses on fire, her hands gently pulling at his hair, he whispers filthy encouragement in her ear, just like she wants. Oh, he’d shout them, but this way his breath is hot on her neck, makes her arch up to hear how good she feels, how much he can feel that she wants him, that they fill each other up with come and love.

The slamming, sensual sensation hits her first, him, following, working through the waves of passion in tandem.

As they settle down, sweaty and sated, he plucks her nipple and listens to her aroused little protest. He knows if he keeps up the attention that she’ll want more, maybe his hand. Maybe a toy. A soft palm meets his cheek, brilliant eyes shining at him. She wants him. And it always feels good. So he makes her feel good, too.

More often than not, he’s writing. Experimenting. Betty’s a saint and doesn’t tell anyone about the one time he enters a poetry jam, her eyes shining with affectionate tears as he talks about love. The stuff he writes about sex gets more attention, and it’s actually the first thing he gets agented for. Betty agrees to some very fun research for that project, not unlike what they’d been doing before.

The erotica and romance novels draw some unwanted attention from fans who don’t seem to understand the source and relationship of his inspiration. Thankfully, they don’t have his name, and Betty does, shouting it as she comes around his cock in the name of love, of inspiration.

Even though it’s kind of scary, they both get on the cover of his first nonfiction. It’s about family. Desperation. Triumph. Love. It’s both of them, faces blurred in a quiet, personal embrace. All the proofs are backed up on a hard drive, and on the days they’re both exhausted from work, he sets up a slide show and just watches the way they shine together. Memories from childhood, to high school, their wedding, and beyond.

They deserve to see that every day. To feel it.

Jughead prepares his fingertips on the edge of his keyboard, Archie’s music trinkling in from the open doorway.

Inspired.

Packing feels bittersweet. They’re returning where they grew up, but they’ve grown a lot here, too, out from under the currents of small town life. This place is where he learned what burned hair smells like after Veronica got distracted during a breaking celebrity scandal. Where Archie fiddled on his guitar, staying up late because he was an idiot and said he wanted to try an open relationship since they were in college and barely making it past the weekend before he realized what an idiot he was and had written Veronica two bad songs and one great one to make up for it. He also had to do dishes for a month to atone for the racket he caused for everyone else. Jughead and Betty made pancakes at 3am during study parties. Cringed and laughed through improv shows. Ice skated in the park, wobbling into each other just a part of that fun.
The city’s it’s own character, full of wonderful, awful artists and people with big dreams and possibly even bigger personalities.

There’s character here.

It makes him grateful for where he’s come from, where they’re going.

The next big adventure.

Not sure where to put his hands, Jughead paces and keeps reaching for something almost like an itch. There’s a spark every time he rubs her knee, watching and waiting for little lines to appear.

The wet stick sits on its box, Betty wriggling every once in a while like she’s not sure the test will still work if she pulls up her pants. It’s endearing and adorable and he wishes he could frame this moment before his nerves take a hold of him and he wonders if either or both of them are going to start throwing up again. It’s possible she’s just sick. But so much is possible. He can’t fully account for the warm, squiggly feeling at the thought of a piece of both of them growing deep in her belly. Her whole body a nest, one he’ll tend to and nurture, then cherish whatever child is born from their lifetime of love. He hopes it’ll look like her. He’s still stroking her hair, massaging her neck, lost in the fantasy when Betty gasps, pulling the test forward.

Not looking at the test, he studies her face. Careful reading morphs into shocked, complicated joy, her pupils dilating as she turns to cup his face with one hand. “We’re going to have a baby.”

And just like that, the universe cracks itself open.

_Breathe in, breathe out_, they tell them, his hands protecting Betty’s belly under the disguise of helping guide her diaphragm. Of course she sees right through it, glancing over her shoulder with a smile and covering his hands with her own. The classes are educational, if slow-paced, Betty shifting against him in what he knows is back pain that might not be alleviated until the baby comes. They both do what they can to prepare on their own without the bombardment of Lodge, Andrews, or Cooper resources. Kevin mostly stays out of it, just commenting on Betty’s social media like she’s some local celebrity he knows instead of one of her oldest friends. Weirdly enough, FP seems excited, always asking about how Betty’s doing, volunteering for babysitting duty. Maybe a grandchild would be an uncomplicated, clean slate. Someone to love without any real responsibility.

At home, Jughead types out a few words, thoughtfully glancing over her park plans, the running paths, wondering if everything she touches is always so beautiful. Nurturing. The reassuring tumbler of water draws him to the bathroom in curiosity. Naked and more gorgeous than Venus, Betty stands before him, steam wafting through the room along with the smell of lavender-scented candles.

She’s not sure if he’ll fit, but she wants him, so they squeeze in. The water rises up to her neck, his arms tucked tight against her swollen breasts. “You feel good?” he asks, kissing her neck.

“Yeah,” she sighs wistfully, shifting back against him. Their lungs expand in time, together, the smell of her shampoo comforting against his cheek.

_Breathe in, breathe out._
During Betty’s pregnancy, she eats off his plate, whereas throughout their whole lives, she’d given to him off of hers. It makes him feel good, being able to provide for her. After the baby comes, their friends have a steady rotation of fruit baskets. Betty is patient but exhausted from giving her nutrition giving to their child, and he wants to do more. Something special.

He makes her fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches, the kind she craves after her morning runs. Butter sizzling on the pan makes him feel a little buzzed, like he’s looking at sparklers. The way her face lights up when she sees him, let alone the plate in his hands, makes his spirits soar. It almost feels selfish, supporting her, because it makes him feel so fucking good it’s like a high.

On a night his editor absolutely needs a new chapter, he feels overwhelmed. Their baby fusses as he types with one hand, trying to let Betty catch up on some much-deserved sleep. He calls his dad, leaving a voicemail with the phone cradled between his cheek and shoulder while he tickles squeals out of the baby, hopefully not loud enough to wake their favorite lady.

Jughead’s gotten more good giggles from the baby than words on the page when there’s a knock at their door. Thinking it’s his dad, he answers, stupefied when it’s Alice Cooper outside of their door.

“FP called. He’s an hour and a half away, but...he said you might be able to use some help.”

She tidies up the kitchen, mumbling something about their organization, and makes some kind of casserole with all kinds of healthy ingredients, some of which he doesn’t even recognize. Once it’s in the oven, she cleans, keeping an eye on her grandchild and casually making conversation as if they understand one another on some innate familial level. By the time the food’s ready, the smell wafting deliciously through the house, he feels comfortable enough to wake up Betty.

She tries to snuggle him into the bed with her, and although he’s sorely tempted, he knows Alice will raise an eyebrow if he takes more than five minutes “waking up” his wife. “I have a surprise for you,” he whispers, kissing her neck, helping her up, even though she moans, holding his hand all the way to the kitchen. Her eyes pop wide in surprise, then cloud over with tears.

“Mom?”

Something in his heart clenches at how loving she says the word, knowing their child will address them that way, too. Mom. Dad. Maybe not for a while, but it’ll happen someday. Love and relief and some innate sense of home. Of comfort. If Alice Cooper can inspire it, he knows that they can.

As Betty hugs her mother, he wraps his arms around the both of them, pressing himself against Betty’s back and watching their child beam and happily reach for them, a part of that embrace in every bit of his heart.

Ringing is mostly a background noise announcing an arrival. The chaos of the xylophone followed by the orderly play of scales. The bell at Pop’s, an order up. The oven timer. A new line when he’s on his typewriter. Pets rushing up to greet him at the Andrews’ home or a doorbell encouraging him to let people in.

Tapping, of course, is familiar and grounding. Racing children, computer keys, wedge heels across hardwood floors. It’s a stretch, but he might even consider Veronica’s heels and Archie’s constant drumming part of the rhythm. Family is a symphony that keeps on growing.

It’s all blurred to hush when he hears the lock click open and the rustle of a bag.

Adrenaline kicks into his veins, gravity pulling him towards her. He feels sixteen again, hopelessly in
love with the girl of his dreams, the smell of Pop’s burgers and fries in the air.

“Hey.”

The weight of his greeting has her eyes aglow as if he’s just said you’re beautiful. In a way, he has. I love you. I’m happy to see you. I’m more myself with you than anywhere else.

As she moves towards him, reciprocating the gesture, she’s bombarded by their entourage, the ones who call them Mommy and Daddy and Auntie B, Uncle Jug, the framed wall hanging of the three colored leaves nearly vibrating with their energy. They are exuberant and bouncing and short, so he can reach above all of them and let Betty know how grateful he is to have her rooted in his very heart and soul.

She’s home.

They...they have built a home.

Chapter End Notes

Love them. Love you. Hope to talk to you soon.

“Give the ones you love wings to fly, roots to come back and reasons to stay.” – Dalai Lama

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