Adventures In Babysitting (Repost)

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/21080720.

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category: F/F, F/M
Fandom: Riverdale (TV 2017)
Relationship: Cheryl Blossom/Toni Topaz, Betty Cooper/Jughead Jones, Archie Andrews/Veronica Lodge, Archie Andrews/Betty Cooper/Veronica Lodge/Jughead Jones
Character: Cheryl Blossom, Betty Cooper, Jughead Jones, Archie Andrews, Veronica Lodge, Kevin Keller, Toni Topaz, Alice Cooper (Archie Comics), Hermione Lodge, Gladys Jones, Mary Andrews
Additional Tags: Babysitting, The core four are six year old little shits, Kevin Keller has a strong disliking for children, Supernatural Elements, The Riverdale Mother's are awful, Cheryl and Toni babysit the core 4, Bughead and Choni, Also some varchie thrown in, Cheryl and core 4 fluff because cute
Stats: Published: 2019-10-18 Updated: 2019-11-06 Chapters: 3/? Words: 28075

Adventures In Babysitting (Repost)

by Lauren is a moron

Summary

BABYSITTER NEEDED!!!

We are four single mothers looking for a responsible babysitter to care for our four exceptionally bright six-year-old children! No experience is required, but it is preferable! Please contact Alice Cooper (Cell) on: 678-564-5121, and we'll discuss further. Please bring identification, and there is a no phone rule. We want your attention to be 100% on the safety and well being of the children. We look forward to hearing from you!

or: To prove she's a responsible adult, Cheryl babysits the core 4 who are six year old little shits, but she doesn't realize she's about to be pulled into the strangest babysitting gig of her life. One that will change her life, and theirs forever. And it only gets weirder, when she meets their ex babysitter, Toni Topaz.

Notes

Originally posted: July, 2019.
also one of my faves. I was heartbroken when I lost this one lmao.

Not your average babysitting fic.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The inside of Endless Grounds was cozy and quaint, smelling of different assortments of teas and coffees. What Cheryl loved the most about it – besides the fact that she helped design the interior and the décor – was the fact that it had an area of sofas and armchairs where patrons could sit and relax while enjoying their beverage, as well as quick pick-up area, so if customers were in a hurry, they didn’t have to hang around. It was functional and it was comfortable and it was one of Cheryl’s favourite places to be. It helped that one of her best friends worked behind the counter.

It was behind the counter that she found Kevin Keller, a black apron over his red sweater, his dark green eyes immediately latching onto her when the bell overhead jingled her arrival. The smile that was on his face quickly dropped, and Cheryl was sure it had everything to do in response to the glower on her own face. In Kevin-fashion, already adept at her mood-swings and the constant storm she wrought wherever she went, he was already putting together her favourite beverage, hands moving expertly.

Cheryl wasn’t entirely sure how Kevin Keller of all people had become one of her closest friends. She was the queen of Riverdale high, with her own little group of minions who followed her every move. But that was only at school. They were nowhere to be seen outside of school, so Cheryl had somehow befriended the nerdiest guy in her class, after finding comfort in the small coffee shop opposite Pops. One thing lead to another after he’d managed to spill steamed milk all over her, and instead of freaking out, Cheryl had laughed. She’d laughed so hard that he’d joined in. Which was the start of a wonderful friendship.

Kevin happened to also provide her with free coffee in her times of distress, if his manager wasn’t around. So that was also a plus.

“A triple venti, half-sweet, non-fat, caramel macchiato is on the way,” Kevin said, motioning to a cushioned stool at one side of the counter. In no time at all, her drink was sitting before her. He made himself one too. “Okay, what’s wrong?”

“My hag of a mother,” Cheryl responded, slowly twirling the long straw around in her drink, her bright red nails looking almost like talons.

Before Kevin could question or say anything else, Cheryl slammed down a piece of paper hard enough for the sound to reverberate throughout the shop. Several patrons that were still inside jumped and turned to look at her, but her hard scowl was enough to get them to turn away and mind their own business. Furrowing his brow, Kevin slid the slip of paper out from under Cheryl’s hand and took a look:

BABYSITTER NEEDED!!!

We are four single mothers looking for a responsible babysitter to care for our four exceptionally bright six-year-old children! No experience is required, but it is preferable! Please contact Alice Cooper (Cell) on: 678-564-5121, and we’ll discuss further. Please bring identification, and there is a no phone rule. We want your attention to be 100% be on the safety and well being on the children.

We look forward to hearing from you!

Please, no time wasters. You must have a genuine passion for children.
“Huh,” Kevin hummed, and Cheryl narrowed her hazel eyes at him. That was certainly not the reaction she was expecting from someone who was supposed to be as affronted as she was currently. She took a dainty sip of her drink, cream fraying her upper lip.

“Huh? What do you mean, *huh*?” Cheryl demanded, feeling her anger grow all the more.

Kevin raised his hands in a sign of surrender before pressing his hip against the counter. He was far too calm for someone about to get his head ripped off. “Calm down and uncurl that talon,” Kevin said, eyeing her fists. She hadn’t even realised she was clenching them.

“I’m assuming there is some backstory here. What did your mother do and why do you have this ad?” he scrunched his face up. "Babysitting?" he choked out a laugh. "No offence, this comes from a place of love, truly. But I wouldn't let a little kid near you. You'd probably stuff it in an oven and bake it into a pie."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cheryl demanded, curling her lip.

He rolled his eyes. "Cheryl, you hate kids."

"I do not!" she bit back, and he nodded slowly. "Right. So I'll just ignore the time when you yelled at a group of toddlers for pressing the buttons in the elevator in the museum when we went on a class trip."

"They were annoying me," she defended. "The little shits deserved it."

"You told them they'll never amount to anything."

She glared at him. "Pick your next words carefully, Keller."

The boy sighed and sat back, his gaze going back to the ad. "So go on then. Why do you have a sudden urge to babysit kids?" he peered closer to the paper, his lip curling. "Four of them? Cheryl, do you have a death wish? They're unstoppable in groups."

“Don't you think I know that?” she groaned, taking another haphazard sip of her mocha, It burned her tongue, but she relished in it. "According to that she-witch, I’m an irresponsible, selfish disappointment, who is doing nothing but mooching off of the family fortune,” Cheryl said, feeling her temper increase. She could picture the pinched, uptight look on her mother's face now, could hear the disdain grated at her eardrums. “She took my credit cards."

Kevin gasped. "She didn’t!"

"She did," Cheryl said, nodding solemnly. “Penelope isn’t going to give them back until I ‘show her I’m responsible and accountable to earn the privilege’. I’m a Blossom by blood! I’ve already earned the right!” Her fist banged against the counter once more, causing a few disgruntled murmurs. "I need the new Summer collection, Kev! I need my goddamn Louie Vuitton bags! How the hell am I supposed to get them with no platinum cards?"

Kevin nodded in understanding, his eyes widening. "So this is why you've decided to randomly take up child care." when she caught his eye, he was smirking. "Hey, it can't be that hard, right? My cousin is six, and is admittedly a nightmare," at Cheryl's expression, he cleared his throat, "But Robin is sweet, honestly. When she's not having a breakdown when my aunt refuses to let her watch Pingu, she's actually kinda adorable."

Cheryl narrowed her eyes. "Six year olds have breakdowns?" she whispered, nursing her drink. He nodded, unable to suppress a grin. "Cheryl, six year olds are a whole new species. If they don't get
what they want, they freak out until you either surrender or they fall asleep. They are a force against nature, man's new enemy." when she scoffed, he straightened up.

"Cheryl, they are the apex predators. They sense your weakness and exploit it. When I looked after Robin for a weekend, I had strong urges to throw myself out of my bedroom window. She screamed the entire day." He leaned forward, quirking a brow. "Do you want to guess why she committed first degree murder in my ears?"

"She fell over?"

"Nope, guess again."

"I'm not psychic, Keller!"

The boy didn't lose his smile. Though it was more of a grimace. Clearly, Robin had affected him. "She dropped a Popsicle." he said, with a low whistle. "My cousin screamed for nearly five hours, because she dropped her damn cherry ice pop."

Cheryl swallowed a groan. "Please tell me you're kidding."

Kevin spluttered. "My god, I wish I was." he stabbed the ad with his index. "It's your choice, Cheryl. But I'd advise against it. Six year olds are menaces to society."

After a long look at the ad, Cheryl had made her mind up. She pulled out her phone with a sigh. "Kevin, if watching a couple of snivelling brats means I get my Summer collection, then I'm willing to forfeit my sanity, as well as my weeknights."

The boy hummed, finishing his drink quickly. "Don't say I didn't warn you," he murmured, licking cream from his lips. "And when they inevitably sacrifice you to the pagan gods for a life time supply of Slurpee pops, do not expect me to save your ass."

Cheryl squinted at the number, dialling it quickly and pressing her phone to her ear. Her heart was in her throat. This was her potential first real job, the perfect opportunity to show her mother that she was a responsible adult. She tapped her nails in a frenzied beat on the edge of the counter. The dial tone sounded for a few seconds, before someone picked up. Cheryl straightened up, pasting a smile on her face. A woman answered, sounding out of breath. "This is Dr Cooper of Riverdale University."

"Hi!" Cheryl swallowed hard. Be professional. "My name is Cheryl Blossom, and I'm- uh, I'm calling about the babysitting ad you put in the town's newspaper?"

"Oh, hello there!" Alice Cooper's tone changed exponentially, switching from business woman to soccer mom in seconds flat. She let out a breathy laugh. "My goodness, we weren't expecting someone so soon! How old are you, sweetie?"

Cheryl bit her lip. "I'm seventeen. I'm going into my Senior year in September." By now her heart was trying to catapult out of her chest. Kevin was silent in front of her.

"Right! And is it Riverdale High you go to?"

"Uh- huh!" Cheryl swallowed the urge to say, "Duh!" which wouldn't set a great impression. She bit her tongue.

"Awesome. And what experience do you have with children?" Alice asked. She sounded nice enough, but her tone was strict. The lady wasn't messing about. Cheryl looked at Kevin for help, but
he just shrugged helplessly. "Experience?" she cringed when her voice went up in octaves until it was practically falsetto. "I, uh- I have cousins I look after every weekend," she spat out. But it was the perfect lie, gushing from her mouth like word vomit. "My aunt and uncle work away a lot, so I look after..." she trailed off, glancing at Kevin. "Robin." she continued, raking for another name. Her gaze landed on her coffee, "And Caramel." Kevin's eyes widened, his lips stretching into a mute laugh, and she reached across the counter and shoved him. "My sweet cousins are just absolute delights to care for!" at Alice's sudden silence, she chewed her lip. "Carmel and Robin are the, uh- the favourite part of my weekend. They're like my own little sisters."

"Caramel?" Kevin hissed, his hand over his mouth. Cheryl shot him the dagger eyes. Suddenly she wanted to take back everything she'd just said. As if a grown woman would believe her made up story about her imaginary cousins, "Robin and Caramel".

Kevin, however, looked fairly entertained. He'd grabbed some M&M's and was watching her with a huge grin on his face, depositing each M&M with exaggerated slowness. She had the overwhelming urge to pick up her half empty drink and slosh it in his face.

Unbelievably, Alice fell for it. "Oh, they're original names! It's wonderful that you enjoy looking after your cousins so much, sweetie. You sound like the perfect candidate!" She expressed, and Cheryl couldn't resist a smug smile. Alice paused. "Okay, so I have to tell you this Cheryl, just so you know exactly what's going on. Our children are incredibly intelligent for their age, and are not like other six year olds. They act, shall we say, quite different to other kids their age. Are you okay with that?"

"Uh- yes." Cheryl had already dug herself a huge hole, she might as well keep going until she'd dug her way to China. She wasn't a rocket scientist, far from one. But Alice Cooper sounded like she was sugar-coating the fact that her kids were little shits, and would most likely drive her round the bend. They'd driven their last sitter away. Cheryl hoped to god the poor soul hadn't lost her mind. She tightened her clammy grip on her phone.

"Yes, of course I am!"

"Great! So I suppose I'll give you a little background. I currently reside with my colleagues Mary, Gladys and Hermione, with my six year old daughter Elizabeth and their three kids. We live just on the outskirts of Riverdale, I'll text you the address. We're professors at the University, and we do spend most days working, away from the kids. Until a few days ago, we had a sitter. But due to circumstances out of our control, we had to let her go," Alice sighed. "The children, even if they are mature for their age, they still need round the clock supervision due to a health problem they've had since birth, so all four of them have to be watched like a hawk, do you understand me?"

"Yes Miss Cooper." Cheryl said it like she was in a daze, like the words were being dragged from her tongue before she could snap them back. Alice's tone of voice didn't exactly sound like it was giving her a choice.

"Fantastic! I'm glad you're on board. Now Cheryl, the job will entail looking after them from 6PM to 11PM. Which will include playing with them, cooking them dinner, making sure they're not getting into bother, and of course; giving them their pills at the allocated time," the woman paused. "Do you think you'll be able to do that?"

"Yes." Cheryl squeezed her eyes shut. What was she doing? Was she really subjecting herself to mental torture for the chance to snatch up a Louie Vuitton bag?

Kevin, with a mouthful of M&M's was miming drawing his index across his throat. "Don't do it!" he was mouthing, and she swatted him again. "Wonderful!" Alice said. "In terms of payment, it'll be
five hundred dollars per night. Is that okay"

Cheryl nearly dropped her phone. "Five hundred dollars per night?" she managed to choke out, losing her professional demeanour. Kevin perked up, leaning against the counter. "Wait, seriously?" he hissed. "My aunt paid me twenty dollars! Jesus, are you sure you're not babysitting the president's kids?"

*Zip it!* She mouthed at the boy, who shot her a smirk.

Alice hummed, the line crackling. "Yes. That's what we paid our last sitter. Will that be a problem? We're willing to go higher if need be."

Cheryl nearly punched the air in excitement. If this job worked out she'd have more than enough for her Summer wardrobe.

And she'd throw *every* note in her mother's witchy face, loving every damn second.

"No, that's fine!" she squeaked. "There's no need, that's a-" she was babbling, but she couldn't stop herself. "- the...the perfect amount!"

Kevin's head hit the counter. He was laughing his ass off.

"Okay, that's cool," Alice said. "Cheryl, you must understand that this is an incredibly important job. Our children are our world, and we can't always be there for them, so we need a responsible individual willing to take our place. The price is high, yes. But when you meet them, you'll understand why. They're exceptionally gifted kids."

Cheryl nodded. The words were flying out of her mouth before she could stop them. She decided to ignore the latter of what Alice had said. So these kids were bratty smart asses? Cheryl pursed her lips. Piece of cake. As long as she made it clear that she was in charge, it was easy money. Besides, how brainy could they be? Alice was probably over-exaggerating. They were most likely at advanced reading level, and she thought they were the next Einstein. "Miss Cooper, it would be my pleasure to look after your children."

Another scoff from Kevin. Reaching across the counter and choking him with M&M's was suddenly appealing. Ignoring the boy, Cheryl stared down at her lap, anticipating Alice's next words. "That's good to know, Cheryl. You sound like a lovely girl!" Alice said brightly after a moment. "Is 6PM okay? Like I said, I'll text you our address. We live quite far out, so it might be a good idea to set off as early as you can."

Her chest tightened, a coil of unease unravelling in her gut. "Tonight?"

"Tonight?!" Kevin parroted, with wide eyes.

"Yes, tonight." Alice said. "Will that be a problem?"

"No, no, of course not!" she said quickly. "I'll be there. Thank you for the opportunity!"

"It's a pleasure. I'm positive we've picked the right person. See you at six!"

The call ended, and Cheryl let out a shaky breath before slamming her phone down. "I just agreed to babysit four bratty braniacs."

"Braniacs?" Kevin cocked a brow. "Is that why Alice Cooper is paying you enough money to buy a small apartment?"
Cheryl groaned. "I'm dead." she whispered, her head falling into her hands. "I don't know the first thing about looking after kids! What if they don't like me?"

Kevin rolled his eyes. "Since when have you cared about people liking you? Cheryl, they're six. Just assert your dominance. The worst thing they can do is have a breakdown over a melted Popsicle. And if they do, be strict. Give them another one. And if they still don't stop? Timeout. Sit them down, separating them from the others." the boy folded his arms. "If the timeout doesn't work, I can only suggest one thing."

Cheryl lifted her head, squinting at him. "What's that?"

His lip curled. "Surrender."

Cheryl fidgeted with her phone, turning it off and on again, tapping the screen nervously. "You're not funny, Keller."

"I'm being deadly serious, Cheryl. When Robin realised I was on the edge of tears myself, she stopped crying and fell asleep on my knee. I would have thought it was adorable, but I had a migraine and felt like someone was smashing a brick into the back of my head."

Staring down at her lock-screen, Cheryl chewed her lip. "I can look after four brats," she muttered. "How hard could it be? They're little nerds, they'll probably sit and read or watch cartoons all night," she said. Feeling slightly more confident, she gulped down the rest of her drink and set the cup on the counter. "Refill." she ordered, shooing away patron's who had gathered at the counter, with a glare. This was her crisis, and Kevin Keller and a fuck load of coffee was the only thing keeping her from screaming.

"I'm going to need caffeine, and a lot of it."

Kevin grabbed her cup with a laugh. "I'll make you a Kevin Keller special." - The "Kevin Keller Special" was a chocolate mocha with god knows how many shots of espresso and enough sugar to rot her teeth. It was sickly and smooth, the perfect treat. Cheryl downed her drink and listened to Kevin talk about his date life, or lack there of, her stomach twisting itself into a frenzy of nerves. Kevin was halfway through chatting animatedly about a guy he'd met on Grindr. Cheryl had ended up chewing her nail to a stub by the time her phone flashed with a notification. Kevin stopped talking, following her gaze to her phone's screen. "Did she say she was a Doctor?" Kevin murmured, leaning on his elbow. "My mom works at the University too, maybe she knows her." he was talking to himself, Cheryl realised. "I don't know," she groused, reaching to pick up her phone. "She just said she was a Doctor, Kevin. I didn't ask for her life story."

Kevin said something back, but she wasn't concentrating on exactly what, as her green eyes flickered over the message.

Now: 678-564-5121: Hi sweetie, it's Alice. Are you okay to set off now? We live at 31, Mulberry Street. You can't miss us. Just stop at the gate, and we'll let you in. I'm excited for you to meet the kids! Don't be late!

Kevin peered at the message when she showed him, frowning. "She's eager."

"Too eager." Cheryl muttered. She jumped up and grabbed her bag, shoving her phone in her pocket. "I should go," she said quickly. "If I mysteriously disappear, blame the little shits."

"Will do." Kevin gave her a two fingered salute. "Remember what I said, okay? You're the alpha, and they're your little bitches. If they make you their bitch, you're screwed."
Cheryl scoffed, but she was smiling. "As if, I'm the queen of Riverdale High. My presence turns heads. They'll listen to me." she flashed him a smile, turning to go.

"Hey, Cheryl?" the boy was leaning over the counter, a wicked smile on his lips.

"Yeah?"

"Try not to kill them, okay?"

Her red Corvette pulled up to the supposed address, and Cheryl had to take a moment to make sure her address led her to the right location. The house looked more like a building that was renovated into a home with its tall windows and spotlights. Even though the sun was only setting, the spotlights were on, shining bright lights at all corners. The place was in the middle of nowhere, sitting right next to Sweet Water river.

Rolling down the window, Cheryl leaned out and hit the buzzer. Almost immediately, a camera flickered on and she blinked at a woman peering back at her. She was a small brunette with pinched features and dark eyes. The woman didn’t say anything and she certainly didn’t look like she would anytime soon, which was infuriating. “Umm ... my name is Cheryl Blossom, I talked to someone on the phone. I’m supposed to babysit?”

The woman seemed to perk up some, but she looked to have a permanent scowl on her face. She looked off somewhere to her right. “Alice, the babysitter is here. Could you have picked someone who doesn’t look like an airhead? Damn, she looks like she just walked off the set of Keeping Up With The Kardashians."

“For the love of God, Gladys, the intercom is on,” another voice sounded. The woman with the scowl and another appeared. This one looked and sounded familiar.

“Are you Alice?” Cheryl asked through gritted teeth. The last thing she’d expected was getting insulted two seconds into arriving.

“Yes, sorry about that. Come on through.” A buzzer sounded, the camera turned off, and the gate opened.

Trying to calm her breathing, Cheryl waited until the gates opened all the way before driving through. She hadn’t noticed the high fences when she’d pulled up, and that was in part due to the trees that littered the property. The fencing stood at least nine feet tall, and Cheryl felt a sudden chill sweep through her. The place vaguely reminded her of a prison.

She parked quickly, hopping out of her car and hurrying to a huge mahogany door which didn't look the least bit welcoming. There was an electronic keypad on the front, numbers glaring at her in writhing electric blue. Catching a sight of herself in the reflection in the door, she looked a million dollars. She could totally do this. She was a Blossom, Riverdale High's very own Princess. Cheryl had made sure to make a good impression, tying her long red hair into a ponytail and wearing a blouse.

She considered knocking, but managed to stop herself when there was a clicking noise, and the door swung open.

"Elizabeth, for goodness sake! Must we have this every single time it's time to take your pill?"
The knot in Cheryl's stomach loosened slightly when a tall blonde woman around her own mother's age with a high ponytail bound into view. She wore a floral dress, a baby pink cardigan slung over the top. In her arms was a smaller version of her; a little girl with golden curls held in two pigtails in a matching princess dress. The little girl was straining in her mother's arms, squirming and struggling, a frenzied look in her wide blue eyes. And then Cheryl saw why. Alice was holding a small white pill bottle.

"Elizabeth- stop!" Alice said sternly. But the girl only struggled more, her bottom lip trembling. Alice settled Cheryl with a wide smile. "Cheryl! Thank you so much for coming!" she shifted the girl on her hip. "Sweetie, your new sitter's here! Why don't you say hi?"

"No," the girl said softly. From the tone of her voice, she sounded on the edge of a Robin-style breakdown, like Kevin had described.

Cheryl couldn't resist a giggle, however. The blonde girl was adorable. Alice chuckled. "This little nuisance is my daughter Elizabeth. It's currently pill time, so she's not in the greatest of moods."

Cheryl nodded, smiling. "Hi Elizabeth!" she said brightly, and when she couldn't think of anything to say; "I love your dress! Are you Elsa today?"

Elizabeth didn't smile and nod like she expected the girl to. But she did fix Cheryl with an annoyed look. "Elsa has a blue dress," she said matter-of-factly, and Cheryl swore the little shit rolled her eyes. "This is Pink." Cheryl was sort-of shocked by the girl's words. She understood the kids were smart for their age, but she could almost mistake the little girls' tone for condescending. Elizabeth was looking at her, waiting for her to reply, and she really felt like trying to one-up the girl on her Disney Princess knowledge, because Cheryl had been on the earth far longer than her- but she managed to swallow her poison and shrugged. "Well I love it," she said. "It's very pretty."

"Thanks." the girl said. But she still wasn't smiling. It felt like Elizabeth was studying her, squinting blue eyes burning into her own. Alice cleared her throat. "Okay! Cheryl, why don't you come inside? The other children are in the lounge."

"Let her go."

A small voice made Cheryl jump, and when she looked down, there was a little boy standing on his tiptoes, straining to reach the woman, his small hands fisting the material of Alice's cardigan. He had olive skin and dark brown curls sticking from under a small knitted beanie and wore a Spider-man shirt and shorts. His determined eyes were bright green, glaring up at Alice, who sighed. It sounded like they'd had this interaction before, judging by Alice's eye roll. "Jughead, I'm just giving Elizabeth her pill. You don't have to follow me around."

The boy shook his head, a stray curl falling in his eyes.

"Let her go," he repeated in a squeak, tugging Alice's cardigan harder. "Let Wizzy go."

Alice sent her an apologetic look. "Meet Jughead I guess! He's Gladys's boy. He and Elizabeth are very close." she chuckled, shaking her head at the boy. "Aren't you, Jug?"

Jughead's glare sharpened. "Let Wizzy- Wizza- Ewizza-" the boy curled his lip with frustration, and Cheryl suddenly had the overwhelming urge to pull him into a hug.

Alice cleared her throat. "Jughead is still working on his pronunciation of Elizabeth," she explained, turning her attention to the small boy, her lips stretching into a wide smile. "Sweetie, Elizabeth is fine. I'm just giving her medicine, okay?"
"She doesn't want to." He said softly. And Elizabeth nodded her affirmation, straining to get away. Alice frowned at the children, before her blue eyes hardened. Though neither of them seem fazed. "Alright, let's get Cheryl settled, and then I'll give you your pill." she let Elizabeth down, and once the blonde was free, she grabbed Jughead's hand and the two of them sped off back into the house. Alice watched them go before straightening up.

"Sorry about that. Honestly, it's every single night," she laughed. "You'd think they'd get used to it, right?"

Cheryl nodded. It was all she could do.

"Alright, enough dillydallying. Come on in!"

Cheryl was lead into a huge foyer with a high ceiling and marble flooring. There was a sparkling chandelier hanging above and vibrant blue walls. It was homey, definitely. Thistle House was more of an antique castle, but this place was an interior designer's dream. She couldn't help notice there were no photo's of the kids on the walls, instead there were paintings of brightly coloured fruit. She followed Alice into a ridiculously modern kitchen that was constructed mostly of glass and metal. Compared to her own prehistoric home, Cheryl was in awe. The kitchen was massive; glass counters lining the circumference, an oven, faucet and dish washer built in. Alice wandered over to the refrigerator, pulling it open. Cheryl got a glimpse of fruit and veg stuffed into compartments and multi-packs of water. But there was no sign of anything unhealthy. She inwardly groaned. Hopefully there was candy somewhere. She needed her sugar.

"Every cupboard in the kitchen is child locked," Alice handed her an electronic card. "Use this to get in and out of everything. And please do not feed the kids anything that isn't on the list I left in the lounge. That includes fizzy drinks, candy or chocolate. They may have fruit juice, but only after bed time. If given to them before then, they get hyper and are a nightmare to calm down. Though that's all in the guide. I compiled a step-by-step list of their routine, and if followed correctly, they'll be fine."

As appose to what? The thought struck her. The amount of rules was giving Cheryl a headache but she nodded at the correct times, showing she understood. She smiled her best smile, watching Alice flit around the kitchen like a frenzied butterfly.

"Feel free to use the kitchen as much as you'd like!" the woman got to work and fixed her a lemonade with ice and set it on the granite island sitting in the middle of the room.

Cheryl nodded her thanks and took a sip. The lemonade was refreshing, soothing her parched throat. Alice gave her a quick tour of the kitchen, showing her where everything was. "I've fixed the children some ready-made meals in the refrigerator, so all you need to do is microwave them," Alice explained. "They may act up and ask for pizza, but I've strictly told them that it's a no-no. If they refuse to eat, they do not eat at all."

"Oh." Cheryl nodded politely. She must have looked confused, because Alice fixed her with a steely look. "The kids suffer from an illness that makes them susceptible to disease. That's what the pill was for that I was trying to give my daughter. If they don't take their pills, they'll break out with a rash and their lips will turn blue." Damn, this woman wasn't holding anything back. Cheryl thought. "To prevent putting our kids at risk, since they're allergic to quite of lot of things, we only give them food with no artificial colours or gluten. When they're well behaved they're allowed pizza every year."

Every year?! Cheryl struggled to respond, and Alice nodded. "Home made of course." she finished. Cheryl took another gulp of lemonade to stop herself from questioning Alice. Part of her wondered if
she was an Ant-vaxer. God, she hoped not.

Alice waited for her to finish her drink, and from the look on the woman's face, she figured she should hurry up. Draining the glass, the lemonade stung her throat this time.

Alice glanced at her watch. "Okay, we've got to get going in twenty, so I'll quickly introduce you to Archie and Veronica and then I guess we'll leave you to it!"

The room Cheryl found herself walking into was large, sectioned off by a huge sofa that was positioned in front of an even larger TV. A football game was being played on the screen, and Cheryl took note of a little boy with bright red hair and freckles splashed across his cheeks watching it with rapt attention. Propped up against his side, her attention on a tablet in her lap, was a little girl with raven colored hair. Neither even looked up when Cheryl walked in with Alice, Elizabeth, and Jughead joining them, the latter of whom was still jerking at Alice's jacket, a scowl on his face. He still had hold of Elizabeth's hand, who had the same dark look on her face as she glared at her mother. Cheryl might have questioned it, but the kids lived under a strict regime and had probably never heard of a Popsicle. She'd make it her mission to introduce them.

"Get your feet off the coffee table, Archie. It's glass for God's sake. It'll scuff!" Alice scolded, causing the redheaded boy to jump in surprise, his eyes - brown, from what Cheryl could see - widening as his head swivelled in their direction. "And what did I tell you about football? Baby, you know you're not allowed to watch it." Alice strode forwards and snatched the remote from his lap, pointing it at the TV. The picture changed from a bright green field to what looked like Pingu. Archie whined in protest, before he finally noticed Cheryl, and whatever he looked like he was going to say, he swallowed.

Tugging at his crimson locks before rubbing his eyes, Archie's lip trembled. Cheryl stiffened. Was she that scary looking? Oh god, Kevin was right. These kids were going to eat her alive, and she was total dead meat. Archie didn't spend too much attention on her however. Instead he pouted at Alice.

"I was watching that!"

Alice sighed. She didn't seem to be bothered by the boy's tone of voice, which was almost a growl. "We have a guest, Archie. Meet your new sitter, Cheryl."

The redhead's gaze slid to her. "Hi." he said. Once again, Cheryl detected something in his tone - sarcasm? Before he turned back around, folding his arms across his chest with a huff. The little raven head looked up from her tablet, and sent her a small smile. "Hi!"

Cheryl smiled back. "Hi there! Are you Veronica?"

The girl cocked her head, her lip curling. "Duh." she giggled. Next to her, Archie stopped pouting and joined in with a snort. Cheryl felt her cheeks go crimson. Veronica, amazingly, was enjoying her embarrassment, her green eyes sparkling. The girl seemed to size her up, reminding Cheryl of the way she herself got ready to rip into some poor soul at school. But this was a goddamn six year old. "She's funny," she murmured to Archie.

He nodded with his own smile.

"That's enough, you two." Alice reprimanded. "What have I told you about being rude?"

"Sorry Alice." they chorused, exchanging secret smiles.

Alice left her with the kids, and Cheryl stood there feeling more awkward than ever. Archie went back to watching Pingu, but from the look on his face, he'd completely zoned out. Jughead joined Veronica, trying to grab the tablet off her- and Elizabeth to her surprise, came over to her clutching a
huge book to her chest.

Looking down at the cover, Cheryl pulled her lips into a grin. "Oh, Tangled! I love this film!"

Elizabeth nodded and dropped the book on her lap, before stabbing the cover with her index finger. "Her mommy locked her in a tower." she said softly.

Cheryl nodded. "Yes, but the prince saved her!" she said brightly. She doubted the pop up illustrated book involved Flynn Ryder's literal death. "Look, you've got her hair!"

The girl didn't smile. She only held Cheryl's gaze, her blue eyes piercing.

"Her mommy locked her in a tower." she repeated, with another stab.

Cheryl's smile grew strained. "Yes, but she got her happily ever after didn't she? Hey, look how pretty her hair is!" Cheryl pointed to the princess with the biggest smile she could muster and Elizabeth gave her a long, withering look, before stamping her foot. "Her. Mommy. Locked. Her. In. A. Tower!" she yelled in Cheryl's face, and it took all of her self control not to scream back at the blonde. Elizabeth's eyes were suddenly brimming with tears, and she was stabbing the cover repeatedly. "Her mommy locked her in a tower!"

"I-" Cheryl struggled to speak, staring at the girl's burning eyes. The other kids had noticed Elizabeth's tantrum, and were watching, silently.

"Elizabeth, sweetie, you know Tangled scares you." Alice swept back into the room, pulling the book from the girl's hands. But the blonde didn't cry or scream. She stared hard at the floor, clenching her fists tightly. Cheryl wanted to say something to her, but what would she say? Except she didn't have chance. The other mom's appeared; a woman with short, vibrant red hair and a kind smile, and another who Cheryl knew was Veronica's mother the second she hurried into the room. She had her daughter's silk dark hair cascading down her back. They were introduced as Mary Andrews and Hermione Lodge, both of them also Doctor's. Though something was bugging Cheryl. These women looked- old- ish. They were at least in their late forties. How late had they had their kids?

"Alright, you little shits. Time for your pills." Gladys joined them, while Alice and the others hurried around, getting ready. This time she had the pill bottle. "Line up."

Reluctantly, they did. Gladys made them swallow a small blue capsule before downing a glass of water. When it came to Jughead, he shook his head, and his mother's smile was strained. "Baby," she gripped his shoulders, and the boy winced. "You need to take your pill. You know that. If you don't, you'll get sick. Do you want that?"

Jughead didn't move. Elizabeth hovered near him, her eyes wide. While Archie and Veronica made a huge deal of the pill tasting bad. Cheryl had noticed a pattern. All four weren't the greatest fans of their parents. When Mary wrapped her arms around Archie, he flinched away. She watched Jughead take the pill before drinking the water and opening his mouth wide. Gladys nodded before striding over to Cheryl, dumping the pills in her hands.

"9PM exactly, honey," the woman murmured. "Understand?"

"Yes, of course." Cheryl said, a little breathlessly. Gladys nodded. "Look after my boy, alright?"

She nodded again. The woman was goddamn terrifying.

"Gladys, stop scaring the sitter," Alice came to stand in front of Cheryl. She pulled on a bleached
white lab-coat. "Okay! We'll be back around eleven. Remember, refer to the guide I left you if you're unsure what to do, and have fun!"

Cheryl was pretty sure her cheeks were going to split open from smiling so much. "Yep!" she followed the mom's to the door and watched them leave, before shutting the door behind her and leaning against it with a staggered breath. When there was a soft whimper, Elizabeth was back, peering up at her. Cheryl swallowed a groan and smiled down at her.

"Hey sweetie, what is it?"

The blonde opened her mouth to speak, before seemingly deciding against it, and turning and hurrying back to the others. When Cheryl wandered back into the lounge, Jughead was already grabbing her hand and pulling her to the coffee table where a piece of paper and pile of crayons were. Cheryl bit back a squeak when the boy's fingernails dug into the flesh of her hand.

"Help me draw?" the boy looked up at her, and how could she no say to those eyes? The others were quiet, so she might as well.

She knelt next to the boy. "Of course! What do you want to draw? Maybe an - uh...a dragon?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

"Well, what do you want to draw?"

Jughead didn't answer. She watched him grab a red crayon and begin to write something, scrawling it across the page in huge letters. Cheryl decided to praise him, since he was clearly showing off. With every word he shakily wrote, she sounded it out.

HELP

Cheryl laughed. "I am helping you!" she giggled. But Jughead didn't seem to find the funny side. Instead, he wrote it again. And wow, his writing was pretty damn good for a six year old. Cheryl rolled her eyes. "Juggie, what do you need help with?"

The boy let out a frustrated hiss and jumped up, grabbing the drawing and screwed it up before storming out of the room.

Her heart leapt in her chest, but before she could speak, she noticed the TV had been switched over. Elizabeth was curled up on the sofa with the remote clutched in her small hands, blue eyes glued to the screen. The TV show wasn't a colourful kids show. It wasn't Pingu. In fact, she recognised it. Kevin had been obsessed with it a few years ago. The TV show was Criminal Minds. She could tell from the intro. Hissing out a breath, Cheryl rushed to grab the remote off the blonde.

"Elizabeth, that's not very appropriate!" she managed to choke out. Which was true. The scene the girl was watching was graphic. There was far too much blood. But Elizabeth didn't look scared. If anything, she looked intrigued. Cheryl swiped for the remote, but the girl shook her head, pulling it back. "Mommy let's me watch it." she whispered.

Cheryl rolled her eyes. "Sure." she said. "Come on Elizabeth, just let me turn it over, okay? This is a grown up programme."

But the girl didn't hold up. "Look in the guide," she said. And Cheryl, after hoping the girl magically listened to her through the power of her amazing babysitting skills, she gave up. "I will." she muttered, grabbing the guide from the kitchen. After flipping through pages and pages of allergies that the kids had, Cheryl reached the TV section, heavily underlined with red marker pen.
1. Archie is not allowed to watch football under any circumstances.

2. Elizabeth may watch 2 episodes of Criminal Minds. No more than 2.

3. If Jughead asks to watch a film you do not know the name of, do not put it on. (I.e.: "Rebel without A Cause.")

Cheryl stopped reading. She must be seeing things. But- no. It was written out right in front of her.

Alice Cooper, who let her daughter have pizza every year for a so-called "treat" let her six year old watch a show like Criminal Minds?

In the end, she was powerless to stop Elizabeth watching it. So Cheryl busied herself, making the kids meals. Though there were little things that were starting to get to her. The Tangled book and Criminal Minds stood out, until Cheryl hurried into the lounge and caught Archie, and the unmistakable flash of fire. The boy's eyes were lit up orange in the glow of the flame, and he was staring down at a piece of paper he'd set alight. Cheryl, trying to swallow a scream, managed to put it out. "Where did you get matches?!" she searched the boy, but he just smiled brightly, running out of the room. *The little shit!* Cheryl had to bite back the urge to yell at him. After searching everywhere, she gave up and set the boy where she could watch him. To Cheryl's disdain, he joined in watching Criminal Minds.

Veronica, despite being the brattiest out of them, was quiet. When Cheryl peeked at what the girl was doing on her tablet, she blinked at the screen, confused.

The girl was on the H&M website, scrolling through brightly coloured dresses. She let out a startled laugh, and the girl turned to look at her, green eyes narrowing.

"What?"

"Nothing," Cheryl shook her head. "It's just, Ronnie- wouldn't you rather look at the kids section?"

The girl suddenly looked incredibly sad, and Cheryl regretted her words. Veronica's eyes filled with tears but instead of crying, she turned with a stifled sob, back to her tablet.

"Don't make her cry." Archie's voice startled her, and she looked up to see the boy was looking at her thoughtfully. "If you make her cry, things start shaking."


Neither of them answered, and after searching almost every room on the ground floor, Cheryl finally found him in the downstairs bathroom. "Jug, are you okay?" her stomach turned at sight of the small brunette bent over the faucet. When he didn't reply, she rushed forwards. "What are you-" and then she stopped, her gaze settling on four pills in the faucet. Cheryl held her breath. Shit. The pills they'd been forced to take, had the kids spat them out? "Jug, why did you do that?" she asked softly, her heart in her throat. She felt around in her pocket for the pill bottle, Alice's words echoing in her mind. She'd said the kids would get sick if they didn't take the pill, but Jughead looked fine. The others downstairs, if they'd followed suite, were also okay. So why the hell were the parents so insistent on them taking it?

"Jughead." Cheryl forced her voice to be stern. "Sweetie, you have to take your medicine."
"No," he said, turning around. His green eyes were ablaze with anger, his lip curled.

"No I don't," he spat. His fists were clenched at his sides.

"Why not?" Cheryl flinched when the boy jerked his head slightly, and the door slammed shut behind her. **Wind.** She told herself. It was the wind. "Because..." the boy chewed his lip. "They stop me from being big."

"What?" Before she could question him further, there was a scream from downstairs. But weirdly, it felt- closer. As if the girl was right next to her, screaming into her ear at the same time.

Elizabeth.

"Jug, stay there." Cheryl managed to get out, before rushing downstairs. She knew she should have turned off that damn show. But when she skidded into the lounge, the girl was still sitting there watching TV. The blonde turned to look at her with questioning eyes, and maybe a little irritated because Cheryl had interrupted Criminal Minds. After double checking things were okay, Cheryl rushed back to Jughead.

"Jug!" When she tried to pull open the door, it was locked, and a grunt sounded from the other side. A much older grunt.

"Don't- don't come in!" The voice was unmistakably a teenage boy, and her veins flooded with ice. "Hey!" Cheryl pounded on the mahogany. "Who the hell are you?" her voice was shaking. "I'm calling the cops." but she didn't move. The little boy was still in there with the stranger, and if the boy was kidnapped or goddamn killed, it was on her ass. Plus she was pretty sure Gladys Jones would skin her alive.

"Jughead, honey, are you okay? Who's in there with you?"

*An older brother she didn't know about, perhaps? Maybe a cousin?*

Finally, the door slid open and Cheryl bound in, ready to attack some creep who had their hands on little Jughead. But instead her eyes found a tall boy with olive skin, tousled brown hair and wide green eyes. The same beanie nestling over curls. There was nobody else.

But it was a much older face than she was expecting, like someone her own age. The boy wore the same Spider-Man shirt and shorts. His teeth were gritted, and when she managed to find her voice, he cut her off with a frustrated hiss. He jerked his head violently, but this time the door stayed ajar. A slow trickle of blood seeped from his nose, and he swiped it away. Cheryl swallowed hard. "You've got ten seconds to explain yourself before I call the police," she whispered. Her eyes were frantic, searching for the six year old. But her gaze kept landing on the older boy in the exact clothes the little kid had been wearing. Her head swam. "Tell me who the hell you are, or I swear to god-

The boy cocked his head. "Isn't it obvious?" he stepped forward and pulled something out of his pocket, unravelling it.

Her chest tightened. Jughead's drawing. The boy's eyes were hard.

"Why didn't you listen to my goddamn drawing?!"
Chapter 2

2 Years Earlier.

Living the life of a lab rat; day 5110.

“Just move the soda can and you can go to school,” Gladys Jones said, leaning towards her fourteen year old son, bright green eyes wide with anticipation, her elbows quivering with excitement where they were resting on her knees. She glanced at her watch, her eyebrows pushing together. "Oh dear. You're going to miss first period."

Jughead curled his lip.

It was his favourite class too. Creative writing with Mr Henderson. In that class, he could embrace his normality. The boy who he was without - without...

"I'm waiting," Gladys murmured, snapping him out of it. "Do your thing, Jug."

Jughead opened his mouth to snarl back at her, but what was the point? Sighing maybe a little too dramatically than what was probably intended, Jughead turned his attention to the soda can. It wasn’t even the type of soda that he liked, which didn’t make the situation better. Frowning, he tried to focus, putting all of his energy toward the can.

It was sort of like a give and take, where he manipulated energy and, in return, the energy used his. But it was different this time, like trudging through mud. It was more struggle, the balance off, and Jughead found himself frowning all the more, confusion clouding his mind before he felt a sharp pain in his temples. His attention snapped when he felt something drip onto his hand, and Jughead blinked and looked down, surprised to see red. Slowly, he lifted his hand and pressed it to his nose. He felt his breath hitch when it came away red. Shit. He reached out for a tissue and dabbed a ribbon of crimson away, stifling a soft moan. It- hurt. It really fucking hurt. But he couldn't admit that, because his mother thought they were making progress. When it was the exact opposite. She thought the pain had stopped months ago. Hell, she thought he could still move the soda can like when he was a kid. When in reality, he couldn't. Every session he had managed to tip it onto its side, and then discreetly kick the table to make it fly across the wood. That had been enough so far, to fool his mother that he was still special. Sometimes if the pain wasn't as intense- a pulsing agony stretching around the back of his skull when he tried pushing his boundaries- he could move the object a few inches. Which was enough to make Gladys happy. But it was getting harder and harder to keep up the act.

His powers now, if he could even call them that, were nothing compared to when he was younger. Jughead Jones had been a force to be reckoned with when he was smaller, able to create a cyclone, a storm above his head with every object in the room swirling around him at his beck and command. All he had to do was raise an arm. But as he'd grown older the cyclone had turned into a blustery wind, then collapsed into a breeze that barely blew his thick raven fringe from his pale green eyes. And then...nothing. Unless of course he forced it. Which was a bad idea. He was pretty sure that whatever he’d had, the ability to move objects with his mind with a jerk of his head or his hand- it was dwindling with every day that he aged. He could almost feel it seeping from him like a physical thing, along with the blood that soaked his hands when he pushed too far.

"Jughead?" Gladys frowned at him. "Sweetie, are you in pain?"

The pain felt like his head had been shoved in a metal clamp. Jughead blinked back tears, choking
back a sob. "I'm fine," he managed to sputter, dabbing gingerly at his bloody nose with the tissue. The splatters of vivid crimson tainting the white turned his stomach. If he kept doing this, if he kept forcing his ability, what would happen? Would the bleeding get worse? He wasn't completely clued up on his condition, but Jughead was fairly sure it worked like elastic. If pulled too far, it would snap. He had overheard the parents say the word, "Haemorrhage" a lot. When he'd gathered the courage to look it up, Jughead had only managed to read the definition popping up on the Google search page above a plethora of results, before quickly exiting out of the page, his heart jumping into his throat.

noun: haemorrhage

1. an escape of blood from a ruptured blood vessel.

All he could think about was his brain which was a muscle in itself. And every day he was exercising it to kick-start his powers, to no avail. The more he put pressure on it, coercing it to kick into his full ability, he was only putting himself at a bigger risk. Would his brain end up rupturing? Swelling up like a giant grape and bursting. He could see it now. One day he'd just collapse, and blood would slide out from every orifice, a vein of red spreading from his limp body. Whatever power he'd had coming with it. The thing inside him which was writhing in his veins would die with him.

And maybe that was for the best.

As scary as it was as to think such things, sometimes that's what he wished would happen. Maybe something drastic needed to happen to him so his mom could realise what she was doing wasn't healthy. But it was wishful thinking of course. If he did haemorrhage, the chances of living through it were slim. Jughead didn't want to die. But he also didn't want to spend the next years of his teenage life trying to convince his mother he was special, continuing to slowly kill himself for a power that wasn't there anymore.

And for what? For his mother to be proud? Letting out a shaky breath and glaring at the back of the soda can, Jughead had made his mind up. He wasn't risking his life for some dumb super power that he didn't even need. He was on the cusp of fifteen years old with early college plans already. His only friends were the kids of the scientists working alongside his mom and the gift she had given him, insisting it was a blessing was instead a curse. As soon as he turned eighteen he was getting as far away from her as possible since it had became painfully obvious over the years that Gladys Jones cared more about his ability than him. Which had been painful at first, of course it had. When he'd first began bleeding, she had insisted he try harder. "Ignore the pain, sweetie," she'd murmured, when he thought his head was going to explode. "It's a barrier you need to get through! And once you do, you'll be powerful again. Do you understand me?"

He didn't. As much as he tried to understand why his mom would happily see him in agony, tears streaming down his face as he tore at his hair in clear panic, his mind a whirlwind of; "I'm going to die" while his breaths pulsed in sync with the shocks of pain rattling in his skull. She'd rather watch him with greedy eyes and a scowl on her lips to witness him propelling the inanimate object across the room? He couldn't. He did however, understand that Gladys Jones was a power hungry maniac, determined to push him to the brink of death, to the edge of a goddamn brain haemorrhage, to get his powers back.

"Why did you stop?" Gladys demanded, slamming her fist down on the table. The action had Jughead jolting in his seat, a chill zipping down his spine when more spots of red speckled the smooth mahogany of the desk. Though it wasn't just the table that shook violently, swaying him in his seat. Jughead flinched when the whole trailer trembled under the weight of his mother's strength.
The bookshelf holding all of his favourite books quaked, sending Stephen King's Carrie tumbling to the floor. Jughead stared hard at the book and brought up a shaky hand to swipe strands of his raven hair from his eyes. Resemblance wise, Jughead was the spitting image of his mother, harbouring her thick dark hair, bright green eyes and dark demeanour. They sat opposite each other, both dressed head to toe in black, brandishing the same olive skin. Jughead wiped his perspired forehead, letting out a shaky breath. He might look like his mother, but he was nothing like her. Where greed flared in her eyes, his only held warmth, coiled with fear and pain. It was so hard to keep her gaze. She was like a snake, ready to snap at a moments notice. Jughead swallowed hard, focusing on the can once again. He could feel blood crusting his nostril and cringed, swiping it quickly with the back of his hand.

Move. He glared at the can, narrowing his eyes. Just fucking move!

"Hey!" Jughead blinked when Gladys snapped her fingers in front of his rapidly paling face. "Honey, are you going to tell me why you stopped?" her tone was sultry and sweet, but there were hints of desperation, a frightening gleam in her eye that made him shrink back into his seat. The soda can hadn't moved, even when the trailer had shuddered like a small earthquake. It stayed stubbornly still, and he felt a swell of anger building inside of him. She'd done that on purpose. Just to prove a fucking point. Opening his mouth to speak with his own scowl, he decided against it. Because like him, Jughead's mother harbourcd her own ability. Whether it was Supernatural or not, he wasn't sure. And it was that power- which was what glued him to his seat, preventing him from jumping up and trying to make a run for it. Because he never knew when his mother was going to snap.

When he took far too long to answer, Gladys narrowed her eyes. "Are you in pain?"

"No." Jughead said it too quickly, and when she leaned back in her seat with a sigh, he knew he was in for it and shakily got to his feet, praying his legs didn't give way. He felt dizzy, and the pain was becoming unbearable. "It's just a small headache mom, I'm okay." he whispered, grabbing for his bag at his feet. "Anyway, I should get to school, I- I don't want to be late." unable to stop the quivering in his voice, Jughead managed to force his lips into a reassuring smile. Because she had that expression again, the one that scared him to death. He hated how small his voice was, as if he was a child again, scared of the shadows under his bed. Jughead swallowed. "Is...is that okay mom?"

The silence was unbearable. After several seconds, his mother spoke through gritted teeth. "Sit your ass back on that chair, boy."

"I'm sorry, mom." the words were flying from his mouth before he could help it, and Jughead was once again falling under his mother's spell, forcing the truth from his lips with one look. "I can't do it, I don't-"

"Stop." Gladys growled. "Stop crying like a little bitch, and don't you fucking dare say what I think you're going to say, young man."

"I don't have powers anymore, mom." He whimpered, wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket. He couldn't look her in the eye, because when he did, she'd snap. Gladys would snap, and he'd bear the brunt of it. "I'm sorry, mom! I'm sorry, I tried-" senseless apologies were gagging his mouth, even if he didn't want to say them, they came out in a pathetic rush of hitched breath and more tears. His whole life Jughead had tried to make her proud, and even now, when he hated his mother with every ounce of his being, he still wanted her to understand. To be a goddamn mother for once in her measly life.

"You tried?" Her eyes flashed. "You've been faking having powers all this time, and you're trying to tell me you tried?!" she thumped the table again, but this time the trailer stayed still. The can of soda fell on its side before rolling off the desk and landing with a dull thud on the carpet. "Who was it?"
her eyes were wild, lips twisted. "Mary's son hasn't made a spark in months. It was him wasn't it?"
she was screaming now, and Jughead was glued to the chair, tears streaming down his cheeks. There
was only one person who could bring him this low, to this state of a quivering mess.

His own mother.

"No, that's not-" Jughead shook his head rapidly, his stomach twisting. Archie had known for a
while that he no longer had powers. Jughead hadn't seen him since he'd broke the news to Mary
Andrews. Though Archie had been a lot more put together than him. He had looked his mother
directly in her eyes and said, "I don't have powers anymore."

That had been weeks ago. According to Mary, her son had contracted the flu. But Jughead knew
better. He knew his friend was stuck in Alice's lab being prodded and poked like a lab rat, trying to
ignite whatever had died inside of Archie too. And he knew they'd never stop until the redhead had
his full potential back.

They'd risk killing him if it meant seeing his brown eyes flicker with the unmistakable glow of fire
enveloping his pupils. Jughead couldn't remember a lot from when he was little. But one thing stood
out in his memory; Archie's eyes. Burning flickers of orange that appeared when he was angry or
upset, before a small inferno began to dance across his small fingers, licking up and down his arms,
leaving his skin unscathed. It had been almost mesmerising watching flickers of orange and writhing
blue creeping its way up and down his arms, as if Archie was coaxing it with his gaze. Jughead had
made sure to keep his distance when they were kids. Because Archie had been terrifying, especially
when he couldn't control it. Jughead remembered the boy had stayed locked up for at least three
years, because every time they gave him a chance, he nearly burned the lab down with a simple
touch. But now they were in their teen years, just like Jughead, Archie's power was non-existent.
The boy could barely ignite his fingers now.

Gladys was simmering. "Did that little brat put nasty ideas in your head?"

"No, it wasn't Archie!" Jughead managed to choke out. "Mom, it's me! I can't do what I could,
okay? I haven't been able to for a while, and I swear on my life!" he ended up gasping out, his heart
slamming into his rib cage. "Can you not understand, mom?" Jughead gestured to his bloody nose.
"This is killing me! I - I feel tired all the time, my head hurts and every time you make me try and
push over that fucking soda can-"

"Language, baby."

Jughead gritted his teeth. "Every time you make me try and use my power that's barely even there
anymore, my head feels like it's about to explode, and I-" he held his breath before exhaling shakily.
"I need you, mom. I'm scared, I don't know what's happening to me and I need you, okay?" he
pleaded. "I need you to be my mom, and you don't have to be perfect. You don't have to aim to get
the mom of the year award. You just need to- stop caring about my powers, and more about me.
Just- just until I figure stuff out."

There was a pause, before the fire dispersed in his mother's expression. "I see."

His eyes lit up slightly, a flicker of hope flaring inside of him. "Really?" Jughead nearly dropped his
bag. He nearly ran into his mother's arms and buried his head in her chest, falling into her, because
he was so fucking scared, and if she understood- if she stopped this, and actually started being his
mother-

"I think it's your age." she said softly, cutting off his thoughts abruptly.
When Jughead looked up through fraying lashes, his mother was frowning at him, her head cocked slightly.

"What?"

"Your age." Gladys repeated in a hum. "I hypothesise that your power is weakening because you're growing older."

"Right." he whispered. "So, what you're saying is that I'm outgrowing it?"

Gladys smirked. "It appears so." His mother murmured. "Juggie, sweetie, this is what happened to dear Archie, and don't worry- we're fixing him. But we thought he was an anomaly, baby. We thought that it was only him who had lost his powers."

Suddenly unable to ignore the coil of unease unravelling in his gut, Jughead moaned softly, pawing the back of his head, his fingers following the pain striking across the back of his neck and sizzling down his spine. It was like a disease that had been forced into him, that was killing him slowly but surely, obliterating every cell, rupturing every organ. Until he'd succumbed to it. His mother's words were like static in his ears. "There is a way to bring your powers back, Jughead. But it will take a while."

"What?" Jughead gingerly pressed his temples, biting back a squeak when a slash of pain rocked his skull. He jerked his hand away. "No, mom, I don't want my powers anymore." He gritted his teeth, but the look in his mother's eyes scared him. It made him want to turn and run. Forget Archie. Forget Betty and Veronica. He'd run for his life, until he was sure he was safe. But instead he stayed still, paralysed. "You're not touching me again," he said softly. He held up his hand, twisted it in a clockwise motion, and then threw his arms up. Nothing happened. Unlike when he was a kid, and everything in his vicinity that wasn't glued to the floor lost touch with gravity. "See?" he spat. "Nothing."

Gladys nodded. She seemed far too calm. And everything he was saying didn't seem to be registering in her mind. He didn't know why he bothered. "Okay, then you'll miss school for the foreseeable future, and we'll take you to the lab and see if we can work some magic, like we did with Mary's son," her lips curled into a knowing smile and Jughead's mouth went dry. "He's responded fantastically to the procedure. It was only a little one, don't worry. I believe Archie's power has been restored to its former glory."

Suddenly, Jughead couldn't breathe. His cheeks burned. "What did you do to him?"

Gladys didn't lose her smile. "It's amazing what technology can do these days, Juggie. We truly are living in the Golden age."

The lab was where his nightmares resided. He could almost feel himself strapped to a steel table, shivering as his naked back slid up and down the surface, his body squirming, struggling, straining against coils of metal restricting his ankles and wrists as the blinding yellow light above seared his eyes. Alice Cooper's voice flitted in his ear, always cheerful, hiding the true monster working with his mother. "Relax, Jughead, it's okay! We're just doing a few tests to make sure you're nice and healthy."

But Alice lied. She was doing the tests to make sure the curse still lived on inside him.

For a moment, he didn't move. His chest was heaving. This was it. His chance to just fucking run. He almost cried. Because the pain was too much, and his nose was bleeding again. He could feel it dripping, could taste it on the corners of his lips. He didn't wipe it away. He wasn't going back to the
lab. He wasn't going to subject himself to more tests, or to this procedure they had forced Archie to go through with against his will. A whine began to build in his throat, threatening to turn into a fully fledged scream. Jughead quivered, holding himself. He wasn't doing this anymore. No. The word was so simple, yet it wouldn't slip through his lips. No. No. No. No. He chanted it in his head, staring at his mother, who smiled back. He'd bled out in front of her, told the witch he was in agony with his head, that continuing to try and coax his power was going to kill him. But she didn't care. He clenched his own fist. No, he wasn't doing it.

He wasn't doing it.

"No," he said softly. For a second, he thought he was imagining it. But the word was real, hitting the sound barrier, and the second the word came out of his mouth, he felt stronger and more confident. Then Jughead spat out the word like venom on his tongue. Because he was through with being tested on. He was through being mommy's little lab rat. Because he wasn't a kid anymore. Gladys Jones was stuck in the past, thinking he was a six year old telekinetic. And he most certainly wasn't going to risk killing himself to get Gladys her desired results. As much as he'd tried to deny it over the years, Jughead was nothing but a test subject. Tightening his grip on his backpack, Jughead glared at his mother. "I'm done." he said, and it felt- good. It felt like a weight had been lifted off his chest. She startled him with a laugh that rattled in his ears.

"Excuse me?" Gladys pursed her lips, her fingernails tapping out a rapid beat on the desk. Jughead noticed, and his blood ran cold. He took a wary step back, stumbling slightly. But she already had him enraptured by her evil eyes, a sharp smile stretching her mouth apart. "Dear boy, what on earth do you think you're "done" with, Hm?"

Gritting his teeth, Jughead sniffled. It was so fucking hard not to cry, when he felt like someone was pummelling the back of his head with a piece of dry wall. When he took a step forwards, he swayed slightly, the world spinning with him. "I'm done with this, mom." he whispered. "Okay? I'm not your fucking lab rat anymore," his breath hitched when Gladys's hands flexed, before curling into a fist. "And the first thing I'm doing when I get back from school, is coming to get Archie." he said, surprised at his tone. How calm he sounded, when he felt like he was on the verge of a fully blown panic attack.

He folded his arms to maintain the facade that he wasn't terrified out of his wits. "Then Betty and Veronica. And we're going away, mom. Where you won't find us."

There were a lot of things that Jughead was expecting his mother to do -- laugh at him, shove him back down into the chair and scream into his face, throw her still-curled fist straight into the wall, breaking through the drywood. Gladys Jones was exceptionally strong and powerful, which was one of the many reasons Jughead was so afraid of her, but what he wasn’t expecting her to do was smile. Granted, it wasn’t a kind smile. No, it was something that had him shuddering, the strap of his backpack sliding down his arm, but this time, he didn’t do anything to fix it. There was something extraordinarily terrifying about the way she was staring at him now, something that had his heart racing and that pulsating sensation to increase in momentum, causing blurriness to his vision. Migraine, Jughead found himself surmising. That’s what it was, brought on by extraneous pressure and stress, brought on by his mother’s constant pushing, and his inability to do what she wanted of him.

“You’re going away with Archie, Veronica, and Betty, and you’re going somewhere we can’t ever find you,” Gladys repeated. Surprisingly, her fist uncurled, her body relaxing in a way that had Jughead trusting it even less. His mother wasn’t a relaxed person. She was uptight and forceful and demanding and she would never do this. “I doubt that’ll happen at all, but I’ll play along. Where exactly are you going to do? Where are you going to go? You’re a fourteen year old boy with no
money and no job experience. You think people won’t ask questions? And what exactly are you going to tell them? Nothing they’ll believe, I can tell you that right now.”

It was almost like the air was being sucked out of the room, slowly. Jughead opened and closed his mouth -- and then opened and closed it again, trying to think of something to say, trying to think of a refute, a comeback that would make sense, anything to get that self-satisfied smirk off her face, because she knew she was right, and she knew that Jughead knew that she was right, and that was what hurt the most. No-one would believe him. No-one. He was just a kid, still in school. People would ask questions and there wasn’t a soul out there that would take what he would say seriously. He’d just be another brat making a tantrum, causing drama, vying for attention. And Gladys would prey on that, would use that to keep him there. The room began to rock gently, and the backpack fell entirely from Jughead’s shoulder, falling to the ground at his feet. His hand shot out and he grasped the wall, trying to centre himself.

“I’ll go to dad,” he whimpered out, voice strained and low, and it was partly due to desperation, partly due to fear, partly due to the pain that was wracking through his head, radiating down his neck and spine, causing him to almost curl in pain, to double over, like that would somehow reduce the pressure. Gladys raised a brow and cocked her head, as though waiting for him to go on. “Dad would never allow this, he wouldn’t let you do this to me--”

“Dad works with me, kiddo,” Gladys interjected, sounding far too chipper than her expression showed. It looked like she was slowly beginning to lose patience, her leg bouncing once more, her fist opening and closing, knuckles popping. “Sorry to burst that bubble of yours.”

He needed to calm down, he knew that. The pressure it took to cry was causing his nose to bleed once more, droplets sliding down, and Jughead angrily wiped it away, uncaring that it smeared across his face. He ran a hand through his hair and gripped the thick strands, the action causing another shooting pain to ricochet around his head, and it was enough to have Jughead gasping out, the sob ripping through him. His limbs were shaking and his heart was pounding and all he wanted to do was drop to the ground and cry like the child he looked like, because he couldn’t do this. He couldn’t. It hurt too much and it was killing him.

“Why are you doing this to me?” he demanded, ignoring how pathetic he sounded, ignoring how pathetic he probably looked. His shoulders sagged and he couldn’t help but lean against the wall. It was added support, and since he would never get that from Gladys, the least he could do was take it from the wall. “You’re my mom. You’re supposed to take care of me. Why are you hurting me?”

“Hurting you?” Gladys scoffed, bringing herself to her feet. Jughead couldn’t help but shrink back, his shoulders immediately curling in on themselves. Not that she cared. Or noticed the effect she had on him. “I’m trying to make you strong. I’m trying to--”

“You’re hurting me. All you’ve done is hurt me.” Jughead had no idea where that came from, where this sudden bout of strength came from, but he knew it wouldn’t last. It never did. Like his life, it was practically draining from his pores.

“Let’s not be dramatic, Jughead. The hurt you’re referring to, you brought on yourself,” Gladys retorted, shaking her head at him like he was being ridiculous. His mouth dropped open in shock, the tears once more welling in his green eyes -- eyes that were mirrors of her own. She thought …

“No,” he whispered out, blinking to himself, gaze dropping to the floor of the trailer. No, he couldn’t … “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t. I’m not, I can’t.”

He was stumbling forward before he could process what he was doing, barely dodging the backpack that he’d dropped on the floor as he made his way to the door. Maybe fresh air would help, maybe it
wouldn’t. But any environment that didn’t have Gladys Jones in it was good enough for him.

“Hey, Jug?” his mother’s voice called, and maybe it was the fear or the conditioned reaction to see what his mother wanted, but Jughead knew the second he turned around that it was a mistake.

And he was simply too slow to process the fist that was flying towards him until it was too late, and it connected. His entire world lit up as the pain encompassed him, causing his entire body to ignite, like it had been electrocuted before everything sizzled out into nothing. And then there was only darkness.

Images flickered in and out of his mind in odd intervals – leaving the trailer, trees flying by, stark metal. He could hear voices, but he didn’t necessarily know where they were coming from or who they belonged to. It felt like he was in an in-between state between wake and unconsciousness, but it felt more than that. His vision was muddled and he knew he was in pain, knew that he was experiencing a lot of distress if the voices around him were anything to go by, but he couldn’t exactly feel the pain. But Jughead did know was that he was laying on his back. He couldn’t move his wrists. He could barely keep his eyes open. Everything had a sterile smell to it. He wasn’t comfortable, didn’t feel safe, but those were just things he knew. He couldn’t truly feel them. Not really.

"Mom?" was the first thing that came out of his mouth, followed by a childish whimper slipping through his lips. He felt- light. Strange. Like his blood was filled with buzzing bees, buzz buzz buzzing. At that thought, Jughead flinched. His fight or flight kicked in and he pulled at the restraints, letting out a cry. He hated how pathetic he sounded, like he truly was the little kid his mother thought he was. Opening his eyes, Jughead was greeted to a familiar light shining down on him, bathing him in almost heavenly light. It was the kind of brightness that sears into your retinas making you close them for fear of going blind; a brightness that would make fresh snow look grey and dull. It was a brightness to rival the sun itself. Jughead strained his eyes, squinting through pulsing prisms before his gaze flitted around Alice Cooper's laboratory, and his heart dropped. Everything seemed so much- bigger. Like he had been shrunk to the size of a mouse. Everything seemed to tower over him, a lot bigger than he remembered.

He spotted Alice’s whirlwind of blonde hair as she jumped from station to station, a clipboard pressed to her chest. She was taller somehow too. Jughead could barely follow her with his eyes, he was too weak. Rolling his head from side to side, his hair falling in his eyes and scraping underneath him on the rough surface, he stared up at the glistening silver ceiling, trying so hard not to cry. Anger seared through him, and if he still had his powers, he might have been able to free himself. But he didn't.

Jughead gritted his teeth. He was a disappointment, with no powers. No abilities. And the thought that struck him was agony, like a lightning bolt striking up his spine.

His mother had brought him here against his will, after knocking him out. His crazy fucking mom, who he just wanted to love him, and give him a normal life outside of Alice Cooper's mad scientist laboratory, had forced him here. Tears brimmed in Jughead's eyes, and yet he still called her out for her, because there was nobody else to shout for. "Mommy?" Jughead swallowed hard, letting out a breath. A strange wave of something hit him- fear. But it was no fear he'd ever felt before, at least not recently. It was the type that pulled at his heart and ripped into his gut. It was fear of the unknown, of the dark. The type he hadn't felt in a long, time time. Not since the so-called shadows on his walls and the boogeyman under his bed when he was a kid. "What's-" the word got stuck in his throat, choked by a strangled sob which wracked his aching chest. It was a sob he couldn't help, a cry
threatening to tear from his lips without logical thought.

Archie. The thought struck his mind, but only for a second. Whatever they'd given him was flooding through him, turning his thoughts to candyfloss. Jughead struggled, exhaling from his nose. "Mrs Cooper?" the squeak that came from his mouth wasn't his own, and he wasn't sure if it was the relaxants he'd been fed, or something entirely else. There were questions buzzing around his mind, relentless. But the first thing that choked from his lips, other than Betty's Cooper's crazy mother's name, was; "Arch."

"Hm?" Alice cocked her head, her blue eyes zeroing in on him. His vision was still a blur, but he could just about make out the woman's lips stretching into a bright smile. Crazy bitch, he thought. Alice was looking at him like he was a million dollar lottery ticket, which was crazy, because he was a fourteen year old kid strapped to a metal bed. What was she- oh god, why was she smiling like that? It was so unnerving. Though something was- wrong. Betty's mother was never really nice to him, only doing so when she needed him to follow her instructions and, "stop being a little brat" so it was unnerving that her voice was so sweet, like sugar, only the kind that rotted his teeth. Alice's tone was like nails on a chalkboard. "Oh, Jughead, you're awake!"

All he could get out was, "Y-yes!"

"Sorry, what were you trying to say?" Alice turned to him, a glint in her eye that he couldn't see. She knew he was awake, surely. She was playing with him, like his own mother. Jughead licked his incredibly dry lips. His squeaky voice was apparently here to stay. "Ar..." it suddenly hit him that he couldn't say the boy's name, no matter how hard he tried. His best friend's name was in his mind in clarity, and he could reach it, but the word felt weird on his tongue, like he had to swivel it around a few times before choking it out. "Ar...chee," he murmured softly, growing increasingly frustrated. "I need you to...to tell me where...where Ar-chee is," he gasped. "R-right now."

"Try that again, Jughead." Alice said. "Sound out your words."

"I don't... need...sound...out!" he spat out, mortified by how broken the sentence was. His chest heaved, that same pain that had pulsed in the back of his head earlier, returning with vengeance. "I-pain," he whispered. "Alice, I I-pain. I'm pain."

No, no, no! That's not what he wanted to say! But the words were flying out of his mouth before he could bite them back. Alice hummed. "Yes, baby, that's a side effect I'm afraid. You'll be in pain for a little while, since your body is slowly regressing, as is your mind. It took us three days, but we're fairly sure you're okay now. From the sound of your voice, and your physical height, you're currently at a more manageable age, but we need you at six. It was just a matter of breaking down your cells and modifying them. Thank god we collected blood samples as you were growing up!" she chuckled. "But all of what I'm saying must be so confusing for you. Think of it like we've waved a magic wand and rapidly decreased your age," she said. Alice must have seen his facial expression, because she almost looked sympathetic. "Don't worry, Juggie. The pain will fade."

What? What the hell was she talking about? Three days? He wanted to cry again, and it was hard to stop it. Normally he would be able to suppress a cry or a scream, but this time they came involuntarily. He'd been in the lab for three days? What about school, what about his promise of running away? Jughead struggled, but the questions he so badly wanted to ask, were stuck. They were completely unreachable, and he was sure if he somehow managed to grasp them, he wouldn't be able to pronounce half of the words.

Alice hurried over, and her gloved hand was suddenly gingerly touching his forehead, and then running down his arms, which were - Oh. There were pointy things in them. Sharp pointy things that were stuck in his skin, and they hurt. When he tried to pull back his arm, he felt the- the - the pointy
thing dig into his skin. Jughead swallowed a gasp. It hurt. It hurt so bad, and he needed— he needed... though the thought dispersed as quickly as it had come. There were so many new emotions inside of him, battling for dominance, but all he could think about were the pointy things in his arms.

No, they weren't called pointy things. What— what were they? And why couldn't he see his arms properly? When Jughead squinted, he could make out his olive arms pressed to his sides, wrists shackled with metal. But he only saw some of his arm. Where was the rest of it? He moved them experimentally, but they were still strapped down harshly.

Alice adjusted the pointy things below his elbow, and he whimpered. The woman leaned in, strands of her golden hair tickling his cheeks. He suddenly had the sudden overwhelming urge to laugh, a spontaneous bubble of hysterics climbing its way up his throat. But he wasn't sure why. This wasn't funny. None of this was even remotely funny, so why did he want to laugh?

"Jughead, can I ask you a question?"

Despite everything, he nodded.

"What's your favourite TV show?"

Easy. He scowled at her. Twin Peaks. It would always be his favourite. He opened his mouth to say it, but again— the words were lost. He only managed, "Twin." which he said with far too much emphasis. Alice shook her head. "No, sweetie, you like to watch Pingu," she said softly. "Remember? Your mom told me it's your favourite show."

Jughead shook his head. Her words were confusing, but he could barely understand her. "Twin." he said again. The word "Peaks" was lost to him, but he was just about satisfied to be able to spit out half of the title. Twin Peaks. He said it in his mind, chanting it like a mantra. But the more he said it, the more— entangled it got. Suddenly both words began to crumble, but he held onto the shattered pieces with all of his willpower. Twin Peaks. His favourite TV show was- Twin Peaks. Twin Peaks. Twin Peaks.

Alice's expression darkened. She leaned back, folding her arms.

"Twin Peaks?"

He nodded, and Alice's lip curled. "I see." she cupped her chin. "Tell me, Jughead, what grade are you in?"

He had to think about that one. "I'm—" his lips mouthed the words, but he couldn't directly say them. He was a Freshman. Eighth Grade. Just about to enter his Sophomore year. But he couldn't say that. "Fresh." he said softly. Then; "Eight. I'm Fresh."

"You're a Freshman?" Alice shook her head. "Oh no, sweetie, I think you're mistaken!" she chuckled. "Jughead, you're in Kindergarten, but you're home schooled." her eyes burned with determination, and she squeaked when she dug her fingernails into the skin of his wrist. "Remember?"

He stared at her blankly for a moment, wishing she'd go away, wishing she'd stop asking such difficult questions, and saying scary things. His bottom lip trembled.

"Am I sick?" He mumbled.

"You're not warm," Alice hummed. She cocked her head. "I estimate you're slowly reaching six, but you've still got a while to go. It took Archie and Betty nearly a week, and you've only been here for
a couple of days. You're doing so, so well, darling."

What?! That's what he wanted to shriek, but all that rushed from his mouth was some sort of spider
tongue that made his cheeks burn. The woman's words set off alarm bells, but when he tried to think
about them- to go over them in his mind, he was quickly distracted by a fly buzzing above him.
Jughead stared at it through half lidded eyes, before turning to look at Alice once more. "Ar- Arch-
ee," he whimpered. The rest of what he said was barely coherent, and he wanted to scream. He
suddenly wanted to scream and cry, and bang his fists on the metal bed holding him captive. "Teh-
tell muh where- is!"

Alice, however, clearly understood him, and chuckled. "Don't worry about Archie, sweetie. It's
yourself you need to worry about."

"Is...he...kay?" He managed to get out, using all of his mental strength, which shouldn't be
happening. For one singular moment, his mind managed to break through the disorienting fog it had
been choking in. What was she - talking about? He wasn't a kindergartener! He shouldn't be
struggling with basic words! Even though the truth was right in front of him, and part of him, the
older part of him, understood Alice's explanation, this new part of him cried out for answers, for
attention. Because he needed it. He needed to know where Archie and the others were, and his- and
his mommy. Where was his mommy?

Alice nodded happily. "Archie is fine, dear. He's just resting."

"Where?"

"You'll see him soon enough," she said. "Now, Jughead, do you want to see your mommy? You did
call out for her, after all."

He wasn't sure why he did. Were the drugs really screwing him up that much? He'd just mentally
cried out for her, but then retracted the thought, like it wasn't even his. He started to nod for some
reason, some unknown force waking up inside of him. Yes. He wanted his mother, it almost hurt.
Clenching his fists, he shook away the toxic thoughts.

"Yes," he whimpered, managing to catch a hold of himself. Even if it was for the shortest moment,
when he didn't feel like his brain was bleeding through his ears, like the logical part of it that spoke
fluently, wrote and read, was being obliterated, taking away everything he had. Everything he was.
Something- was wrong with him.

Something was very wrong with him.

"What... did you do....to me?" He took his time spacing out the words, sounding them out on his
tongue. They were mixed up for some reason, alphabet soup tangled in his mind, and the back of his
throat. Every second that went by it seemed like his vocabulary was dispersing, being drained away
from him. But his vocab was his best attribute. He had a smart mouth, and that's what made him who
he was- Jughead Jones. He didn't need powers, because he was going to be a writer. Because he
knew how to speak properly. But every time he tried to say something, it felt like he was running his
mouth and mind through thick molasses. It was a chore. "I feel weird," he admitted. "What did you
do?"

"I told you, sweetie." She was more firm, her gloved fingers continuing to check him over, despite
him squirming. "Get-" Jughead spat at her, pulling a face. "Get off me!"

But she only smiled in delight. "That's the kind of behaviour we're expecting now, Juggie. You're
doing really well, sweetheart."
"I don't want to be here." He said softly, tears once again trailing down his cheeks, salting his lips. "I want my-" he blinked rapidly, trying to bite back the urge to say it, but it was impossible not to. It felt like something was growing inside of him, a second mind, shadowing his own. It told him to cry, to scream and bang his fists down on the bed. It told him he wanted food, and candy. He wanted a drink. He was thirsty. But most of all, it told him he wanted someone so badly- the woman who had abused him his whole life. But he needed her. He needed to hug her, to press his face into her chest so she'd hold him and tell him everything was going to be okay. "I want my mom."

"Gladys is busy, Jughead."

A wave of irritation came over him, and he ground his teeth. He wanted his mom. He wanted his mom, now. Or he was going to scream. Jughead tried to lunge from his restraints, a sob choking his throat. His eyes were wide and baffled, glaring up at Alice with such intensity, the woman took a small step back. "I said I want my mom!"

Alice stroked his arm. "She's coming, Jughead. I promise."

His voice was so small, so weak. "Then I can...go home?"

"Of course sweetie, everything's going to be okay," her voice was kind, but he knew it lied. It always lied. "You've responded well to the treatment, so we're just keeping you here under observation."

Jughead swallowed a cry. What was- what was happening to him?

It felt like only seconds had gone by, but it could have been hours. While he was lodged between slumber and wakefulness, held down so he was completely numb and responsive, a prisoner in his own mind by whatever was coursing through his veins. People's voices screamed in his ears, but it was never quite enough to pull him back to reality. His father. At one point FP Jones had been trying to undo the restraints, trying to pull him off the bed. But he couldn't move or speak, couldn't cry out for his dad.

"You monster!" He was yelling. "What did you do to him? What the fuck did you do to our son?"

And then his mother, "Oh zip it, FP! It's for the best!"

Then another voice. A soft, sweet one, both out loud, and rooted inside his head. Betty Cooper. The girl who could talk into his mind when they were kids. Though as they'd grown up, her ability wavered until it was just senseless static in his skull. And then she stopped all together. The last time she'd spoke into his head, it had been a joke, and they'd been twelve years old, the two of them sitting in one of Alice's lectures. He couldn't remember what Betty had said, but it had made him laugh. It had made him less scared than he was. But then her powers stopped working, and it was only when she was touching the temples of a person, when she could force her thoughts into their mind. But like him, and like Archie, it hurt her.

Betty was begging her mother to stop, asking what had happened to him and Archie and Ronnie, but little by little, her voice collapsed into a squeaky yell in his head, until it was no longer static. It was as clear as day, so loud, so intrusive, slamming into his skull.

Jug!

Jug, please- please help me! I'm scared, I don't know what's happening- I don't- I don't understand-

She was crying out for him, and he couldn't cry back.
He didn't know how.

Suddenly his mother was there, looming over him. Jughead wasn't sure if he'd woken up, because he felt weird. Really weird. Maybe he was still asleep. Dreaming. Because Gladys Jones was standing over him, and like Alice Cooper, she was huge. Like a giant. His hands were no longer bound down, and she was holding a water bottle, casually drinking from it. When he spoke, all he could get out was, "Mommy." in a breathy whimper. Even when he didn't want to say it. But it was like his lips were working on their own. Gladys nodded and smiled. "Hey, Jug," she said. "Do you want to try having a go with your power?"

But...he didn't have a power. Jughead opened his mouth to protest, but from the look in his mother's eyes, he had no choice. "Okay." he said softly, raising his arm- which was- Oh. It was so small. His fingers were so tiny. He stared at them for a moment, wiggling them. He was so busy marvelling at his arms and fingers, and then his small torso when he looked down- he barely noticed when the water bottle shot across the laboratory before crashing into the wall. Jughead held his breath. The world around him was so big, and he was so- so incredibly small. What had happened to him? Why was he like this? Gladys had a bright smile on her face, which made the foreign part of him, the piece of him he didn't understand- relax. At the corner of his eye, he spotted familiar golden curls hanging over stainless steel. His heart dropped. Betty. Her cries in his mind had been real.

But she wasn't supposed to be able to use her powers, like him. How could they have them back now? When he tried to ask that exact question, all he managed to get out was, "No." it was pathetic and small, just how he felt. How he looked. So, so small.

"Well done, sweetie." Gladys said, drawing his attention back to her. "You have your power back. Isn't that great?"

He frowned at her, wanting to scream in her face. No, it wasn't great! He didn't like his power, he didn't want his power! Betty had been taken too, and was no doubt getting the same "Treatment" as him. Jughead glared at the woman, imagining her catapulting across the room, like the water bottle. Even when the other half of him wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around her. But before he could truly unleash hell, the sound of the doors opening made him jump, instinctively jumping up into his mother's arms.

Mary Andrews strode into the room, and like Alice- like his own mother- she too was way bigger than normal. The woman was hand in hand with a small redhead boy, maybe around fix or six. He was pale, and his brown eyes were half lidded. Jughead stared at the boy, and something was screaming inside of him, clenching his chest. The small boy turned to look at him, waves of red curls falling in eyes that were suddenly wide. And then the boy's lip was trembling, and it was almost contagious, because Jughead suddenly wanted to cry too. Though he wasn't sure why. This boy was a complete stranger to him.

Jughead scrunched up his brows and looked back at his mother curiously, unsure exactly what he was seeing or who the boy with the red hair was. There was something about him, though. Why would he say his name if they were strangers? And why would he look close to tears. Gladys ran a hand down his back and Jughead felt his body tensing, but he didn’t pull away, too unsure, too unaware of all the details to do something so risky as that. Not only that, but he was tired. His eyes felt heavy and his head felt weird, and he felt so small. It was a strange array of emotions.

“Are you going to say hello?” Gladys asked, nudging his back. She shared a look with Mary and Alice before turning his gaze back down to Jughead.

He turned back to the redhead boy and felt that pull again. The boy let out a huff that ruffled his wavy red curls, and cocked his head. It had him feeling lost and apprehensive. Swallowing, Jughead
slowly shook his head. “But I don’t know him.”

The air in the room suddenly became tense before the redheaded boy seemed to explode, recognition flashing in his expression, along with panic. “Jug!” he shouted, throwing himself forward with a desperation that had Jughead pressing himself against Gladys, his eyes wide and fearful before Mary seemed to get a better hold of him. And when the boy realised he wasn’t going anywhere else, he burst, thick tears falling down his face.

"Juggie!" the boy's voice was a startled squeak, and when he tried to lunge forwards again, his mother held him back. He let out a whine of protest. "But, mommy, it's Jug!"

Mary tightened her grip on the boy's arm. "I know, sweetie. But he's not feeling very well, okay? He needs to rest."

"But he's-"

"Yes, I know." Mary murmured. "It takes time, honey."

"And Betty?" he sounded on the edge of tears, tugging and pulling relentlessly on his mother's arm. "Her too?"

"It was necessary."

"Ronnie?" The boy was crying now, swiping at his eyes with the sleeve of his sweater. Mary shook her head. "Not yet. Only when we're absolutely sure."

The little boy's expression darkened. "Did you hurt them too?" With a frightened squeak he tried to bound forwards again, but was yanked back like elastic, stumbling. Jughead frowned at the boy. There was something about him. The mocha eyes that stared back with fear and panic, the freckles splashed over his cheeks, and the slight curl on his lip.

Archie.

Something snapped inside of him, and before Jughead could stop himself, he was bounding off the table, and when his feet hit the floor, the looming world around him spun, and he staggered clumsily. He could see his reflection suddenly, in every surface; a terrified looking boy with wide green eyes, and floppy brown hair. But the boy was younger - so much younger. Jughead bit his lip so hard he tasted blood. He grabbed at his hair, and so did the little boy. He let out a sharp cry. No. No, this couldn't-

He couldn't-

There were voices all around him, frantic and worried, there was even some screaming involved, but they all blurred together, just like the faces around him. Suddenly his legs gave out, but he never hit the floor. Jughead found himself being hoisted up and placed back onto the table. Gladys' hands were on his shoulders, saying something, but then he felt a hand grab a hold of his own. It was the redheaded boy again, the one with the wide brown eyes that were peering at him with such fear, pain. Archie. This was Archie, but what did he mean to him? Jughead didn't know quite just yet, especially in his regressing mind, but the tears trekking down his cheeks was enough to confirm that maybe he did mean something to him.

He didn't have the chance to say anything - not that he knew what to say, or even how to go about doing so - because he found himself being forced back, and the second his head hit the pillow, he fell.
And the world fell with him.
Chapter 3

There was an obvious explanation for what she was going through. There had to be. She fell and hit her head on the floor. Currently, she was in a daze, completely concussed out of her mind, as her brain tried to work out what was going on. Obviously she’d seen this guy before – this tall boy with dark curls and brilliant blue eyes – and that’s why her brain was manufacturing him now. Or maybe she had something and was on death’s doorstep?

This kid was … well, there wasn’t a good explanation for that one as to why the boy was there. Maybe she was just sleeping and he was a part of her dream, though why she was dreaming up something so completely confusing was behind her, but then again, Cheryl was a complex being, so maybe not?

“Why you not saying something?” the boy asked, before furrowing his brow. He blinked a few times before clearing his throat, a shaky hand coming up and pressing firmly on the counter, like he needed the balance. Cheryl stared at it numbly, despite the fact that her mind was taking her into a million different directions. “Why aren’t you saying something?” he said, seeming more satisfied with the results this go around.

“What do you want me to say?” Cheryl asked softly, even though she wanted to scream it out. And honestly, she was surprised she hadn’t. Her heart was pounding against her chest, threatening to beat right out of her rib-cage, but she wasn’t shrieking? She sounded calm, even though her hands were shaking nearly as badly as the boy’s as she wrapped them around her arms. “This … it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well then, let’s go talk to the others.” When the boy – he was a teenager, not a boy – took a step forward, Cheryl immediately stumbled back, her hands pressing against the framing of the door, blocking the way out. Until she knew what the hell was going on, there was no way she was letting him out of this room. Then again, it didn’t look like she’d have much problem stopping him. This supposed Jughead took two steps before he hunched forward, hands curling around his middle. In the span of just a moment, his entire face paled a shade, the drawing in his hand falling steadily to the floor. He snatched it back up quickly. Cheryl stared at it, the crayoned message suddenly meaning so much more. A cry for help by a teenager trapped in a child’s body. She swallowed burning bile in her throat.

"Ow." Jughead squeezed his eyes shut, his lip curling. "Fuck."

“Watch your mouth!” Cheryl snapped on instinct, running a hand through her red hair. Though her scowl disappeared when the boy's eyes grew wide, his bottom lip trembling. The reaction looked so out of place on a grown teenaged boy, but somehow- she could truly believe that he was a little kid. Especially when he shook his head stubbornly when she reached out for the drawing, to get a proper look at it. From this angle, where all she could see of the boy of his dark hair, it … Jesus, it almost looked like the boy she was looking after. And she even found herself moving forward, her hands outstretched as though she was getting ready to take him into her arms, and reassure him, but she stopped short when he straightened slowly. There was a small trail of blood seeping down his nose, which caused her stomach to coil before he swiped it away, frowning down at it before looking back up at her. The intensity of his gaze frightened Cheryl.

"Ow.\" Jughead squeezed his eyes shut, his lip curling. "Fuck."

“Watch your mouth!” Cheryl snapped on instinct, running a hand through her red hair. Though her scowl disappeared when the boy's eyes grew wide, his bottom lip trembling. The reaction looked so out of place on a grown teenaged boy, but somehow- she could truly believe that he was a little kid. Especially when he shook his head stubbornly when she reached out for the drawing, to get a proper look at it. From this angle, where all she could see of the boy of his dark hair, it … Jesus, it almost looked like the boy she was looking after. And she even found herself moving forward, her hands outstretched as though she was getting ready to take him into her arms, and reassure him, but she stopped short when he straightened slowly. There was a small trail of blood seeping down his nose, which caused her stomach to coil before he swiped it away, frowning down at it before looking back up at her. The intensity of his gaze frightened Cheryl.

"You need to help us," he whispered. His eyes were glistening with tears, and there was a maturity she couldn't ignore, quickly being overshadowed by the kid inside him, seemingly pushing for dominance. "I - I know this sounds - sounds crazy, but I'm not a kid, Cherry. I'm - oh god, I'm not a kid. I'm not a kid." He gripped the bathtub behind him for a sense of stability, getting bloody
handprints all over the sparkling porcelain. Miss Cooper was going to kill her. But that was the least of her worries right now, especially now she'd found out the crazy bitch had been force feeding a teenage boy some creepy ass meds, which somehow transformed him into a child. As if the boy could read her thoughts, his lip curled slightly, into what might have been the smallest of smiles before he shook his head, struggling to right himself. "I'm not a k- kid, Shirley," he whimpered. It was the second time he'd gotten her name wrong, but she couldn't bring herself to yell at him. Cheryl noticed his legs were wobbling. Jughead's words turned into a whispered mantra as he clutched the drawing to his chest like his life goddamn depended on it.

"It's Cheryl," she ended up saying softly, before her fists clenched by her sides. God, was she really buying into his? "Look, whatever freaky ass black magic shit this is -" she drifted off when the boy's expression changed exponentially, blue eyes widening almost comically. He looked like he was about to cry again, and Cheryl bit back a groan. Jesus Christ, he'd cried more as a teenager than when he was a snivelling six-year-old brat.

"Where – where are they?" Jughead demanded, his voice tinged with hesitation and pain. Almost like it was a struggle to even speak. And just as Cheryl opened her mouth to ask who he was talking about, he added, "Archie and Ronnie and Wizzy – Wizzy – fuck. Lwizzy. Uh, I mean Blizzy. Fizzy." After struggling through different alternates of the girl's name, looking like he was fighting back a cry, he finally managed to spit out, "Blondie, I mean."

Grimacing, Jughead swiped at his nose again. The amount of blood on his hand glistening crimson under the bathroom lights made Cheryl feel nauseous.

He inhaled deeply. "Archie, Wonnie, and -"

"Don't," Cheryl finally cut him off with a frustrated hiss, her hand flying out to stop him continuing. "Don't try and say her name again, your incessant babbling will give me a goddamn migraine." She folded her arms, her expression, despite everything, softening slightly. "You mean Elizabeth, right? The six-year-old?"

He shook his head, wincing. "She's like me, Sherry." Jughead's words were slurring, and if Cheryl didn't know better, she'd think the boy was two seconds from collapsing. Though this was crazy - completely insane! How could a six-year-old boy suddenly become a grown teenager? She was sceptical, sure. But it was sickeningly clear that she really was talking to the adorable, and yet tremendously irritating little kid she'd been looking after all evening. Cheryl nodded slowly. "Right, she said a little breathlessly. "So, your nose." She pulled a face. "Is that why you look like you're haemorrhaging from the inside?"

"Sort of," he murmured, his words slurring again. "I can't use my powers when I'm grown up, and when I try to, my body doesn't like it." He pouted. "I start bleeding, and it's -" He swiped at his nose and lip, smearing crimson across his face. "It's scary."

Cheryl blinked. "Powers?" she repeated in a scoff. "Look, I might be able to believe this reverse Benjamin Button bullshit, even if it's goddamn crazy. But magical powers?" Leaning into the door, she folded her arms. "How stupid do you think I am?"

"It's true," he hissed through gritted teeth, before swallowing a sob. The boy took slow steps towards her. I can't prove it r - right now, because if I do my brain - I'm scared it'll explode." Jughead surprised her by mimicking it with his hands. "If I use my powers as a grown up, I could go BAM!" She jumped at his voice. Jughead wrapped his arms around himself. "If you don't help us, it's going to get - it's - it's going to get worse."

Cheryl's head was spinning. "So wait, say I believed that you had … hypothetical super powers."
She rolled her eyes. "Can you use them when you're little you?"

"Uh-huh." He nodded. "Earlier when the door slammed? That was my powers."

"And the others -" He cut her off.

"Yes, they're like me."

"Right." Cheryl found herself in a temporary daze, staring at the boy, wondering if she truly was dreaming. Jughead was right, he had slammed the door earlier. Her first logical explanation had been the wind. When in actuality, it was some kind of fucked up supernatural force from this tyke turned teenager. The boy reminded her of someone from TV, the name of the show curled at the back of her mind, but at that moment, it was unreachable. She snapped out if quickly, exhaling. Because if she freaked out now, Jughead might freak out, too. She eyed him. He might look like a sixteen-year-old boy, but after what she'd told him, Cheryl was convinced he wasn't quite his real age in his head.

She cocked a brow. "How long have you been like this?" The words were slipping from her lips before she could stop them. Cheryl expected him to start crying again, triggered by the obvious trauma, but he just shrugged, sniffling.

"Three years."

Her stomach flipped over. "Three years? You've been forced to be a kid for three damn years?" Cheryl quickly realised her yell wasn't helping the situation at all. Jughead's eyes widened before brimming with tears at her tone. "No, no, I'm not shouting at you," She forced a smile, but her heart was in her throat. "Jug, just tell me everything, okay?" Taking a deep breath, she swallowed down the urge to vomit. "It's okay."

After hesitating, he nodded. "When I was wittle - I mean little, I had powers. I could move things with my mind, Archie could make fire, and Veronica had a scary scream that made earthquakes." He glanced nervously at her to see if she was following, and Cheryl nodded for him to continue. He did, stumbling over his words, once again; "We were powerful when we were kids, but when we grew older ..." Jughead trailed off, his voice becoming a sharp squeak. "They started to fade, and we got weaker. I used to be able to create hurricanes with my mind, and force any object or person into my control, but by fourteen, I could barely blow a can over." He laughed a little, but Cheryl could tell it was genuinely painful to go back. Jughead plonked down on the edge of the bathtub, his head of chocolate curls bowed, shaking hands curled into fists in his lap.

"I told my mommy -" He cleared his throat. "I mean my mom. I told my mom that I didn't have powers anymore, and she got really angry, and knocked me out -"

Cheryl stiffened. "She knocked you out?"

"Yeah. My mom's strong. Really strong. She punched me in the face, because according to her, I was asking too many questions about Archie and Elizabeth, and where they were - what exactly Alice Cooper was doing to them. And because I lost my powers, I -" He sucked in a breath. "I woke up tied down, and I - I couldn't move. I felt weird, like I was - I don't know, like my body was weightless, and everything around me was so much bigger than I remembered. Alice Cooper was there, and she - she told me to stay calm, but I couldn't. I felt like my mind was slipping away, Cheryl."

When Jughead looked up at her, part of her splintered into pieces. There was no more scepticism pulling at her heart, tearing into her. This kid's story was real, and it was killing him to tell it. She could already tell where things were going, and hell, Cheryl didn't cry. She was a Blossom for god's
sake, people cried to her, or because of her. But here she was, blinking back tears, and trying really hard to stay afloat. She couldn't lose herself in this kid's story, but it was impossible not to. Cheryl could almost feel his pain and terror, the anger and confusion at his mom, as well as the fear of the inevitability of losing his mind and body. "I screamed," Jughead said softly. "I screamed … but nobody - nobody could hear me. I was trapped in my own mind, and I could feel myself deteriorating. Like - basic words and equations, and books just fell away, like being sucked down a plug hole."

Jughead scrubbed at his eyes, swiping at them. "Anyway, when I was almost - mom called it "regressed" I could barely even remember my name. Archie came in, but he wasn't Archie. At least not the Archie I knew. He was so young, like five or six, and he had this look in his eye. He knew what had happened to me, and he tried to get to me, tried to cry out my name. But at that - at p - point, I didn't know who the hell he was. I passed out again, and then I woke up in the living room on the sofa, and this kids program was on, and I found myself invested in it. The others were there, but we were too afraid to speak. We knew what had happened to us, and despite having - y'know - the mind's of six-year-olds, as well as bodies, we were still us, Cheryl." Jughead snorted. "And I still think I'd prefer it if they went all the way. At least then I wouldn't know I was trapped, I wouldn't cringe at the stuff that came out of my mouth, even when it felt fine. It was like being half kid, and half teenager. Because somewhere along the line, they hadn't managed to fully revert our minds to children. They kept replaying the process, even going far as surgery. But we kept our minds." He curled his lip. "Sometimes I swear mom was looking at me, and even if I had my powers, she knew I hated her. Deep down she knew I was still me, I still had my thoughts, despite sometimes spewing kiddie speak I couldn't control. And she wants to kill me." He tightened his fists. "She wants to kill what's left of me, so she has an obedient little kid she can control and keep for the rest of her life."

Cheryl let go of the breath she'd been holding. "Holy shit." It was all she could say. Maybe it was a little insensitive, but what else was there? How could she truly express empathy for this boy, who was literally living a nightmare? She didn't even know this kind of technology existed. Especially in the hands of small-town college professors like Alice and Gladys. "And you've been stuck as like, a little brat, ever since?"

Jughead narrowed his eyes. "Can you stop calling me a little brat?"

"Sorry. I can't get used to - y'know, The whole growing up thing."

He nodded. "As for your question, more or less, I guess?" Jughead's vocabulary was confusing her. One second he was stumbling and struggling to string basic sentences together, and then he was talking like he was giving some kind of academic presentation.

"They fed us pills every day which made sure we stayed in the same mental and physical state. I thought I'd turn back, but the pills stop the process. We've never been able to bypass them, because when we refused to take them, they didn't feed us. Or they'd put us in solitary, strapping us down in the lab. That was until-" he let out a breath. "Until tonight." Jughead pulled a face. "Well, there was a few weeks ago, when we managed to show our old babysitter, but she got taken away quickly, and …"

"Wait, wait, wait," Cheryl interrupted him. "Your last babysitter knew?"

Jughead opened his mouth to answer, before moaning softly, rubbing his nose gingerly. "My nose hurts." He frowned at her. "Is it bleeding again?"

"No." Cheryl grimaced. "But you're going to have to clean yourself up, you've managed to make a complete mess of yourself."
Jughead shook his head. "Everything hurts," he whimpered. So Cheryl ended up running tissue paper under the faucet and scrubbing at his face herself. Jughead kept pulling away, scowling. But she maintained her grip on his shoulder, while her other hand scoured dried blood encrusting his nostrils. When she was done, Jughead stumbled away, nearly losing his balance again. "I could do it myself," he muttered, and she nodded, rolling her eyes a little. "Of course." Though she knew he couldn't. He could barely even stand up straight. Regarding the boy in front of her, Cheryl's heart squeezed just that little bit more. He needed help, and if what he was saying was true, she had to get them out as soon as possible, before Alice Cooper and the parents from hell came back.

"Okay, listen to me very carefully." She grabbed the boy's shoulders and he in turn frowned at her, green eyes going wide. "I'm going to get you out of here, okay? You just need to tell me how the hell I do that, because this house is a goddamn fortress." Gently grabbing the boy's wrist so he didn't actually collapse, Cheryl pulled the door open and yelped out in surprise, jumping back when she came face to face with a boy who was at least a head taller than her with red hair that was splayed over his forehead. His cheeks were adorned with freckles and he had warm brown eyes that were wide with worry and apprehension.

Archie. The name was on her lips, and she opened her mouth to address him, but she found she couldn't say it. She could only stare at the boy, dumbfounded, because …no way was this Archie. It couldn't possibly be. The sweater he'd been wearing looked so small, so out of place on broad shoulders and bulging muscles. Archie was huge. He was goddamn huge, and Cheryl had a hard time differentiating the six-year-old and the sixteen-year-old. It was almost … funny. Cheryl felt like laughing. Because if she didn't, she'd certainly start crying. Little Archie Andrews, who was now not so little at all, cocked his head. His expression hadn't changed. Which was crazy. He was a teenager, and yet, like Jughead, he facial expressions still bore that of a little kid. It made her stomach twist in an emotion she couldn't yet identify.

"Cheryl," the boy said, as dismissive as his little self. His voice was a squeak like Jughead. And despite everything, she found herself giving a small smile, because while Archie wasn't stuttering as much as Jughead, his voice remained prepubescent. "What?" Archie's lip curled in annoyance when he caught sight of her faint grin. "Okay, I know my voice is squeaky, it takes a while for it to go back to normal." His cheeks went crimson. "Stop staring at me like that!" he grumbled, wrapping his arms around himself and ducking his head of crimson curls, the action looking so wrong on someone so big.

Cheryl cocked a brow. Archie wasn't a little kid anymore, so technically she could speak to him like she'd talk to her minions, or any poor soul at school. But there was something about his huge brown eyes, that expression screaming pain and discomfort and fear, hidden by anger. Jughead had told her that he had been the first to be regressed, or whatever that meant. To be turned into a fucking kid. And Cheryl couldn't imagine what it was like to wake up after three years - yourself again. The boy was hurting, like Jughead. She exhaled softly. All the insults on her tongue fizzled out, and she forced a smile. "Sorry, Archie." It was only then did she notice the piece of half burned paper scrunched up in his hand. Archie caught her eye and pouted, scrunching it up and dumping it in the trash near the door.

"I don't remember what I was doing with it."

She nodded shakily, remembering Jughead's words; "Archie can make fires."

Suddenly what had happened earlier made a lot more sense. he hadn't had matches, and couldn't find any, after searching thoroughly. And yet she'd caught him waving a burnt bit of paper, his eyes illuminated by flame, flickering orange and red. She never questioned it, never wondered how that was even possible. And now it did. She bit her lip. Did that mean she was looking after a fire starter
without even knowing? And whatever the hell Jughead was, some kind of weird human hurricane, or whatever he’d said. "That's comforting," she said weakly, and the boy scowled. Cheryl almost expected him to burst into a writhing inferno.

"I'm not an ashist."

She couldn't take the boy seriously with that squeaky voice. "Do you mean you're not an arsonist?"

"That's what I said!"

Jughead cleared his throat. He was still leaning into the faucet for balance, and every time he tried to straighten up, the poor kid looked seconds from succumbing to whatever his psycho mother had done to him. His face was scrunched up, lips twisted with pain. "Don't mind Archie. He just turned b - back. So he'll b - be a bit loopy for a while."

"Loopy?"

"Yeah." Jughead broke out into a grin. "I'm just b - better at hiding it."

Cheryl did her best to smile, but she felt like she was going to vomit. "So how exactly do we get you guys out of here? Your parents don't really strike me as people who'll just let you go, just like that."

She winced. "After what you told me."

Archie shook his head. "Nuh-uh," he said. "They have a huggee fence outside that stops us escaping." He pulled up the cuff of his sweater, showing her a bright red mark on his wrist. "Mom gave me that the last time we tried."

"She hurt you?" Cheryl choked out.

The boy nodded. "They have alarms," he said matter-of-factly.

Jughead hummed. "And sprinklers."

Cheryl gaped. "Sprinklers?"

Both boys exchanged a glance, Jughead exhaling softly. "Don't ask."

The boy winced, before standing up properly, his hands slipping from the faucet. She had half a mind to help him, but when she started forwards, he shook his head. "I - I'm fine, we should go downstairs, and we'll tell you every - everything w - we know."

After getting a basic briefing on what was going on, both boys pulled her down to the kitchen, where she found two fully grown girls. Elizabeth and Veronica. They looked just like their mothers. Elizabeth greeted her as soon as she stepped over the threshold, grabbing her arm and pulling her to the table. The blonde looked startlingly different. Long blonde curls cascaded down her back and dangled in wide blue eyes, the princess dress she'd been wearing had unsurprisingly not grown with her. It was glued to her, baby pink frills looking so out of place on a teenage girl. But the dress, even if it looked like it was suffocating the blonde, showed off an almost perfect figure, while glitter danced across her cheeks, pale pink lipstick smudged uneven on her lips. It took a moment for Cheryl to realize the girl must have been playing dress up before she turned back. The kids must have spit out their tablets individually, without her noticing.

The smart little shits.

Elizabeth fixed her with a small smile. Ironically, the girl did look like Rapunzel. "I told you my
mom locked me in a tower." Her eyes turned accusing, her lips twisting into a scowl. "But you didn't listen. You thought I was telling lies."

Cheryl took a breath. "No, Elizabeth, I had no idea -"

"Betty." The girl huffed.

"What?"

"My name is Betty, not Elizabeth." The blonde gripped at her dress, scrunching her hands into fists. "I hate that name."

"Got it. Your name is Betty," Cheryl said softly. God, she was going to collapse. She felt dizzy, her thoughts a confusing hurricane. She rubbed gingerly at her temples.

"Okay, fuck, let me goddamn process this for a second."

All four kids stood in front of her. The grown up versions. It was like Elizabeth had pulled out a real fucking fairy wand, and cast a spell. Jughead stood awkwardly, rubbing his eyes, his other hand grasping onto Elizabeth, who was covered in glitter, looking like a human Barbie doll. Next to her stood Archie who was hand in hand with a tall raven-head, who Cheryl might have mistaken for a River Vixen if she was oblivious of their situation. The girl had shimmering olive skin and obsidian hair reminding her of an Egyptian goddess. Cheryl lost her breath. She wouldn't freak out, fuck, she wouldn't! But it was hard. Every time she saw them transformed, her sanity slipped further. She was staring at Veronica Lodge. The same six-year-old who had been curled up on the sofa an hour ago, giggling at Pingu on the TV, while sneaking glances at her tablet.

She too wore the same clothes as her kid self; a pale grey shirt and jeans that, like Elizabeth, were glued to her. The girl was clutching onto Archie, childlike eyes on Cheryl, narrowed, almost suspiciously. Cheryl had no doubts the girl had lost her bratty attitude. She was still holding her tablet in her other hand. Cheryl shook her head, blinking rapidly, before snapping her fingers. "Kevin." she said breathlessly, before lurching forwards. All four kids stumbled back, holding onto each other, each of them suddenly looking terrified. She mentally cursed herself. "Sorry, I didn't - God, never mind." She pointed to Veronica's tablet. "Does that have internet access?"

Veronica pulled a face, clutching the tablet to her chest, her eyes welling with tears. "But it's mine."

Cheryl bit back a retort, remembering Jughead's words. They weren't themselves. They probably wouldn't be back to total normal for a while, so right now, even if they looked like teenagers, she had to keep her patience with them. She forced a smile, straightening up. "Sweetie, your mom took my phone. It's the only way I can get help."

Veronica shook her head. "It's mine!"

"Ronnie." Cheryl chewed her lip. "I just want to use it to message my friend, and then I promise I'll get you guys out of this hell-hole, okay?"

The raven-head shook her head stubbornly. "I'll do it."

Gritting her teeth now, Cheryl tried to grab for it. "I don't think you're in the right state -"

"No!" the girl screamed, yanking the tablet back. "I said I'll do it. What's your Facebook account?"

Opening her mouth to argue, Cheryl caught Jughead's smirk. He grabbed a seat at the dining table, Veronica diving into the one next to him, still clutching the tablet like her life depended on it. Archie
and Betty flitted around the kitchen like moths to a flame, pulling at child-locked cupboards.

"Just let h - her do it, you don't w - want to get Ronnie angry. Besides, we're teens with regressed minds, n- not imbeciles."

Cheryl groaned. She sat down, resisting the urge to bang her head on the table. "I can't believe I'm trusting a six-year-old with my Facebook details."

"We're sixteen!" Veronica and Jughead shot back, in perfect harmony, with the exact amount of exasperation and irritation. They reminded her of the twins from The Shining. Cheryl couldn't help it, rolling her eyes. Kevin was right. Kids were bad enough. But teenagers with the minds of six-year-olds, were a goddamn nightmare. "You don't act like it!"

The girl's lip bottom lip wobbled, and Jughead face planted the table with a groan. Cheryl sighed. The only way to win the war between kids, was to give up.

"My email is Cheryl Bombshell@gmail.com, and my password is Crimson Queen all in capitals."

Veronica's face lit up, and she nodded, her fingers tapping the screen. Cheryl was so focused on the raven-head successfully getting into her Facebook account, she barely noticed Betty looming over her. The blonde stuck out her hand.

"What?" Cheryl frowned at the girl, who wiggled her palm. "The key to the treat cabinet," she said. "My mom keeps all the candy and treats hidden from us."

"You're kidding right?"

Betty shook her head, her blue eyes growing turbulent. "I've eaten nothing but processed food for three years, Cheryl. I'm not joking."

"Right. Of course." She reached into her jeans and pulled out the key-card, but before she could give it to the girl, Archie plonked down next to Jughead, struggling to pull the cap off a bottle of Jack Daniel's. Before she could hesitate, she threw the key at the blonde, and jumped up, snatching the alcohol off of the boy, who whined in protest.

"Hey!" He tried to grab for it, but she made her way over to the refrigerator, pulling out a can of Coke, popping the lid and placing it in front of him. Archie's eyes widened.

"I'm sixteen! Why can't I have a John David's?"

She scoffed. "When you can pronounce the name, Archie. Then you have the drink."

The boy's eyes flashed. "It's not my fault I was turned into a kid!"

Cheryl glared at him, Kevin's words echoing in her mind; "Remember what I said, okay? You're the alpha, and they're your little bitches. If they make you their bitch, you're screwed." The boy looked ready to fall into a Robin style breakdown. And he would take no prisoners. Cheryl had never seen a teenage boy pull a tantrum, but she was pretty sure she was about to see one, if she didn't defuse the situation without backing down.

She pulled her best fake smile. "Archie, sweetie, listen to me, and listen straight. You were six years old five minutes ago, and I don't care if your brain has been reduced to mashed potatoes. Drink the Coke and shut it. I'm not treating you like a teenager until you act like one." Cheryl slid the can over to the boy. "Do you understand me?"
She half expected the boy to burn her from the inside out, considering what he and the others were capable of. But then she remembered the kids weren't as powerful, or lacked powers all together when they were grown up. Archie shrugged with another huff and took the Coke.

"Fine." he took a sip and let out a breath of relief. He grinned, before downing the whole can and burping loudly. Which set the girl's into fits of childish giggles. To Cheryl's surprise, Archie knocked the can on the floor before peering up at her, a teasing smile on his lips. Again, it looked so out of place on a teenage boy, but at the same time... it fit. His mixture of facial expressions perfectly depicted a child and a teenager battling it out for dominance of the boy's mind.

"Am I acting my age now?"

"Archie!" Veronica sniggered. Betty shook her head disapprovingly, a smile on her face and Jughead, being the little shit he was, chuckled into the marble table-top.

Cheryl leaned across the table until she was eye level with the boy. "Surely you know that’s exactly what a bratty kid would do," she murmured. "Don't test me, Archie. Because, believe it or not, I'm at the end of my tether. I've seen some crazy stuff tonight. Thing's I'd rather not believe, and to be honest with you, I only came here so I could get the new Louie Vuitton collection. The only thing that's keeping me here is my morals, and the last thing I need is you being a little shit, alright?"

Jughead, still with his head faced down on the table, whistled, snorting. "She - she got you there, Arch." he looked up with a rare smile, and Cheryl's heart melted a little. Archie backed down and leaned back, folding his arms. "Fine."

Betty, after raiding the treat cabinet, happily took the seat next to Jughead, with an armful of candy, half a Snickers bar hanging out of her mouth. She shared out the candy between the four of them, smiling brightly as she went. It hit Cheryl how hungry they must be, after living on a strict diet of basically nothing. Jughead took most of it, along with Archie, fighting over the last Reese's peanut butter cup. Veronica nibbled on a red vine, her gaze on her tablet. "Who am I messaging again?"

"Kevin Keller." Betty said through a mouthful of chocolate. She'd ended up smearing it all over her lips, and Cheryl had half a mind to grab a napkin and scrub at the girl's mouth. She gaped at Betty. "How can you possibly..."

"Super powers." the blonde said, in a "Duh!" tone.

"Ah, right. Super powers. Got it. And, out of curiosity, what exactly can you do?"

"Blow up people's brains." She waited for the girl to giggle, but Betty's expression remained neutral, as she tore open what must have been her third Snickers bar.

Cheryl opened her mouth to respond, but she was once again taken aback by how insane this whole situation was: six-year-olds turned into sixteen-year-olds, said sixteen-year-olds having powers, but also having a hard time converting back to the mentality of their supposed age. She watched Betty throw a Snickers at Archie, only for the boy to propel one back at her, hitting her in the face. She cried out, lunging over the table to grab at his candy, but he was gathering them up quickly, seeing her ruthless game.

It was a mess and Cheryl had half a mind to reach for the Jack Daniels Archie had a few moments ago and take a few swigs of it, because surely she had to be dreaming, concussed - something!

"Cheryl, what do I message Kevin?" Veronica whined. "I'm trying to play Subway Surfers."

Cheryl gritted her teeth. Once again, she found herself snapping. "Will Subway Surfers help you get
away from your psycho mom?"

Veronica hesitated. "No ..." she mumbled. "What am I texting?"

She had to think about that. Cheryl ran her hand through her hair. "Uh, okay. Just tell him this address, and to get here pronto."

The girl nodded, typing the message. He must have responded, because after a moment, she squinted at the screen. "He's replied. He asks if you're okay, and a yellow face, another yellow face, another yellow face, another yellow face."

Jughead leaned over the girl. "He's sent a lot of yellow faces."

Emojis. Cheryl groaned. Surely even teenagers with regressed minds knew what emojis were. She was pretty sure Kevin's cousin knew of them. "Tell him I'm fine, I just need his help."

She nodded, tapping the message out. "Kevin said okay, but you owe him. And ... oh, he sent yellow faces again." Veronica bent over her tablet, squinting. "Kevin also asks if you're planning on ..." she trailed off. "Why is he asking if you're kidnapping us?"

Jughead, thankfully, jumped in. "We're supposed to be six, Ronnie. What else is he going to think?" He nudged the girl playfully, and she giggled.

"Jug?" Betty handed him her last candy bar, her blue eyes sparkling. Cheryl caught something between them, but her head hurt too much to process it. They had been little kids holding hands a few hours ago, and now Betty looked like she wanted to wrap her arms around him. Jughead took the candy bar with a smile and leaned his head on her shoulder.

Cheryl pulled a face. "Stop flirting, it's weird." Shaking her head, she straightened in her seat. "Right, okay, we need to figure out a way to get you guys out, without setting off any alarms. Your parents don't get back for another two hours, so we should be good." She let out a breath. "Is there anywhere I can take you?"

"Our dads," Jughead said automatically. "Alice and our moms moved us here, hiding us away from them. They'll be looking for us."

Cheryl pulled a face at that, another load of questions causing her head to expand even more. It seemed that no matter how many answers she got, the questions continued to pile up. Where were the dads? Why did they not know about this? Or did they and were pushed out of the way when the mothers got too invested in the crazy science experiment that they were performing on their children? Nevertheless, no matter how desperately she wanted to know what was going on, Cheryl simply pressed her lips together and nodded her head.

Priorities first: Get the kids out, ask questions later.

"Do you know where they are?" Cheryl asked, putting her hands on the table, wringing them together. She wasn’t naturally a nervous, anxious person. Normally, she was the one causing the nervousness and anxiety, but now ... now the tables had certainly turned on her.

Instead of four teenagers giving her locations, she was met with silence. Archie looked down at the table, his shoulders drooping while Veronica’s gaze stared pointedly at the tablet, unblinking, unseeing. Betty and Jughead turned and looked at each other, a silent exchange happening between the two of them before Jughead gave a small nod and looked down. When Betty turned and locked eyes with Cheryl, she felt her chest tightening all the more, because Betty looked far older than what she was. And wasn’t that an insane thought, because less than an hour ago, she was babysitting six-
year-olds! To see this girl now looking far older than her sixteen-year-old self … Cheryl took a steadying breath, her fingernails digging into the palms of her hands.

“We don’t know where they’re at. When our mothers took us away, they made it so our fathers couldn’t find us. We don’t know why exactly, but yeah …” Betty pressed her lips together, shrugging helplessly. “We don’t know.”

“We can put out feelers -” Jughead furrowed his brow and stifled a frustrated sigh. “We can put out feelers - fuck- feelers. We can put out feelers to see if we can snuff them out, but as of right now, we don’t know where t - they are.”

She didn’t know whether to chastise Jughead for cursing again or reach over and clench his hands in sympathy. These kids had been through so much and all she wanted to do was take them as far away from here as she possibly could, because they didn’t deserve this. So much had been taken away from them - and for what? Again, the questions circled throughout her mind, but all she could come up with was greed. Selfish, selfish greed from women who should not have had kids. But then Jughead, Betty, Archie, and Veronica would be there and … Christ, she was caring for them. It was a surprising feeling.

Shaking the anger and sympathy out of her mind, Cheryl turned her attention back to Veronica. Faint noises could be heard from that tablet she kept close, and she couldn’t help but give the raven haired girl an unimpressed look - not that she took notice in it, completely absorbed as she was. “Having fun with Subway Surfers?” she deadpanned.

Veronica nodded with a smile. "I'm on level eight," she said proudly.

"That's great, Ronnie. Truly wonderful that you're excelling at a kids game." Cheryl motioned for her to give up the tablet. "I don't suppose I can borrow it for a few minutes? I'd feel better if I talked to Kevin myself."

The raven-head's expression darkened. "No." She grabbed the tablet and stuffed it in her lap.

Cheryl opened her mouth to start yelling in frustration, when a sudden sharp knock at the door crushed the words in her throat. The four of them jumped up in sync with identical looks of terror on their faces. Jughead grabbed Archie and Betty's arms, dragging them close to him, and Veronica hugged her tablet to her chest. Cheryl stood up, her heart beginning to stampede. She eyed the kids hopefully, her breath in her throat.

It was once again an interesting sensation that filled her. At the four kids - teenagers, now - reaction, a feeling of protectiveness took over her body. The unease that they were feeling siphoned right through her, and Cheryl tried to project a positive one in response, to calm the sudden apprehension that settled over the four of them. Veronica’s knuckles were white with tightly she was holding onto her tablet, and Archie looked like he was torn between diving under the table and hiding there or wrapping his arms around his siblings. Jughead and Betty were merely sitting there - Betty in an attempt to remain strong, but Jughead looked frozen, like if he moved, he’d be noticed. Their reactions had Cheryl furious, because there was a reason they acted in fear, but she couldn’t focus on that.

Taking a few steps toward the end of the kitchen, Cheryl asked, "I … uh, I don't suppose you guys ordered pizza?" She turned and raised her brows at the four of them, relaxing her shoulders, trying to project how calm she felt. Maybe they’d sense it and relax some, too.

Jughead shook his head slowly and turned to the blonde. "Betty, can you see who it is?"
The girl squeezed her eyes shut, her expression crumpling. But the look of concentration that crossed over her face was quickly overshadowed with pain. "I can't tell ... it ... oh God, it hurts my head," she whimpered.

Cheryl didn't have to ask what the girl was doing. She bit her lip. "Stay here," she said calmly. "I'll see who is it, alright?"

"Maybe it's Kevin?" Veronica squeaked.

Jughead shoved her. "Yeah, if he was The Fwash!"

"It's not Kevin," Cheryl said softly. "He lives at least half an hour away. I'll be back in a sec, okay?"

Archie's eyes widened. "Don't leave us!"

"I'm not. Just stay here. If I don't come back, run upstairs and wait for Kevin." Cheryl didn't know what she was saying. That was absolutely the worst thing she could ever say, especially when Veronica gave a soft whine of protest, her face buried in Archie's shoulder when he reached for her. She gritted her teeth. "I'm not going anywhere, Alright? Stay here. I mean it."

Jughead nodded, running a hand up and down Betty's back as the blonde rubbed at her temples. Cheryl could see a bit of red trailing down her nose, and while she desperately wanted to move closer to her and tend to her like she had with Jughead, she knew that she needed to focus on the immediate problem at hand - like who the hell was there. When she turned to hurry to the door, there was the unmistakable sound of shuffling footsteps behind her. Instead of chastising them for not listening to her at all, Cheryl ignored them and headed to the door. Maybe it would be better if they did follow her. If she was about to be attacked by some unknown psycho, maybe their super powers might come in handy.

That was if they could use them. Jughead had made it clear that trying to use their abilities hurt them.

The door was a fancy slab of mechanical metal, controlled with a key card. So there was no way Cheryl could see who it was. Holding her breath, she grabbed the handle and pulled it open, a cool breeze blowing her hair behind her, blinking rapidly in the porch light. There was a teenage girl standing on the doorstep, who looked like she'd just stepped out of a damn dumpster. Though admittedly, whatever she was wearing, she was rocking: a tye dye shirt tucked into a leather skirt, a leather jacket thrown over the top, and fishnet tights covering legs for days, topped with Doc Martens.

Cheryl raised her brow, taking the girl in. She was tall with olive skin and pink hair tied into pigtails, stray strands hanging in brown eyes. At first glance the girl looked friendly, but looking closer, Cheryl could tell her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "Hi there! My name is Toni Topaz, I'm friends of Alice Cooper?"

Cheryl stiffened. If this girl was a friend of Alice, then she knew about the experiments, and the kids, who weren't actually kids. They were teenagers trapped in a damn prison by their psycho mothers. Cheryl blocked the door and folded her arms, her lips curling.

"So? They're in bed."

Whoever this girl was, didn't look fazed at her tone. The girl's smile widened, and alarm bells started going off in Cheryl's mind. Nobody smiled like that, unless they had a damn gun to their head. It was the type of grin plastered on Kevin's face when he was dealing with a rude customer. "You must be Cheryl, the new babysitter! I'm just stopping by to check on the kids."
Cheryl felt her eyes narrowing, especially when the girl in front of her started shifting from foot to foot, her eyes darting over Cheryl’s shoulder, as though trying to get a peek inside the house. "Yeah, I got that. And like I said," she leaned forwards, daring the girl to question her, but Toni’s smile didn’t waver in the slightest, "they're in bed, alright? The little darlings are all snug in bed, so there's really no point."

Toni shrugged. "That's fine! Alice sent me to see how they are, that's all. So if you just let me in ..." She trailed off when Cheryl blocked her. She expected Toni to stumble back, like kids did at school. Nobody dared approach her unless they were a friend, or she'd called them over. This girl was brave. She didn't move a muscle. And didn’t that just cause Cheryl to twitch in frustration all over again.

"What was your name again?" Cheryl smiled sweetly. "Toni? Take a hint, okay? The kids are asleep, and I'm not supposed to answer the door to strangers."

"I'm not a stranger, though." The girl folded her arms across her chest, scuffing her shoes on the step. "I used to babysit them."

Cheryl's chest tightened, her gut twisting. "You used to babysit them?" she choked out. Toni's words had taken her off guard, but before she could further question her, she heard a small gasp from somewhere behind her, and only then did Cheryl remember that the teenagers had followed her to the door and were hiding off to the side.

Before she could stop the girl, Toni was pushing her way through the door, all pretence of smiles and pleasantness gone, her dark eyes hardening, before she stopped abruptly when her gaze landed on the four kids, who were standing a foot away. Jughead stood in front of them, his palms out, blood coating his upper lip. But nothing was happening. Betty wrapped her arms around him, pulling him back.

Toni looked horrified, her mouth gaped open. She spun to face Cheryl so fast, her hair whipped across her face, hitting her cheek, but she didn’t seem to notice. "You switched them back?!” she shrieked, her chest heaving in shock and panic and outrage. Honestly, Cheryl felt like she had no right to feel and act the way she was, because she was the one who knew about this and hadn't done anything to stop it from happening. "Do you know what you've done?" At the girl's words, the four kids staggered back clumsily, Betty and Archie murmuring softly to Jughead. Archie sent her a helpless look, and the strange motherly instinct she had over them got stronger.

"First off, hag, you're scaring them," Cheryl spat. "Secondly! News flash, trailer trash, they switched themselves back." She narrowed her eyes, easily putting herself directly in front of Jughead, Archie, Betty, and Veronica. If Toni was going to try anything, she’d have to get through her first, and with how Cheryl was feeling, that would take a lot. "Sorry, but since when have you known that the Little Rascals are in fact the goddamn Breakfast Club?"

The girl sucked in a breath. "It's ... it's complicated." Her eyes turned accusing. "All you had to do was watch them! How did you manage to screw that up?"

Cheryl glanced at the kids, sending them a reassuring look, which in itself was a feat, seeing as how furious she was becoming, before glaring at Toni. "How the hell was I supposed to know I'd be babysitting sixteen year olds, huh? Alice didn't specify that in my interview, and while we're on the subject, what part do you play in this?"

Toni shook her head. "That doesn't matter. Look, I'm sorry they dragged you into this, I'll take it from here." She slid her hands in her pockets, pulling something out. Cheryl shivered, slithers of ice skittering up and down her spine. A needle. From behind her, she heard Archie gasping and Betty whimpering, small panicked sounds that slammed into Cheryl’s chest. No. No. But Toni wasn't
smiling like the mothers. Instead, her eyes were sad, her lips pressed into a thin line. "You need to listen to me, okay?" the girl murmured. "I was in your position, Cheryl. They told me what was going on, and I tried to help them. But Alice got to me. She told me about the experiments, their powers, everything. And I was given a choice: I could either join them and help, or they took my brothers and regressed them, too."

Cheryl felt sick, bile steadily rising up her throat. Toni continued. "I'm not doing this, because I'm sick and enjoy tormenting them. I'm doing this, because I don't have a choice. If I did, if I could send my brothers far away, I'd take my chances and try and free them, believe me. Because what Alice Cooper is doing is sick. But I can't, Cheryl." Toni’s voice broke slightly. "I can't risk them doing whatever they did to their own kids, to my brothers."

And Cheryl got it … kind of? Maybe not, because she’d never been forced into a situation like that. She opened her mouth to say something before her body suddenly stiffened, tension causing her back to go rigid, because what would Alice and the other mothers do to her if they came home and their children were teenagers? Cheryl knew too much now, was a liability to them. Would they allow two babysitters to walk around with the knowledge of what they were doing to their children? What would be her price of silence? What would they do to ensure she kept her mouth shut and turn a blind eye on what was going on?

But when she turned around and took in what she saw - Archie and Veronica clinging to one another, their faces buried in each other’s shoulders, Betty and Jughead tightly holding hands, the former’s face pale, while the latter’s chest was rising and falling in fear - Cheryl already knew her answer. When she’d suddenly developed a conscience, she couldn’t even begin to say - maybe somewhere in a bathroom downstairs when messy raven hair spilled a terrifying secret - but she couldn’t allow this to continue. She couldn’t allow whatever this was to go any further. Those four kids had lost so much. They were victims of their mothers’ greed, had lost years and years of development, time when they could have been making friends, growing into personalities, joining clubs. And Cheryl could see it. Archie looked like he was made to be a football player and Ronnie looked like she was made to wear a River Vixens uniform. And Jughead and Betty … well, they looked like they’d get themselves into a whole lot of mischief.

There was no way of knowing unless they had a chance to live, though. And they were living here, not under the watchful eye of their mothers, not when they were forced into the bodies of six-year-olds.

“I’m sorry you were put into that difficult situation,” Cheryl said slowly, her eyes locked on the four kids that were huddled together, their eyes widened in fear. “I’m sorry that you were forced to choose.” Sucking in a deep breath, her shoulders straightened and her eyes locking with Toni’s. “But you’re not touching these kids.”

Toni had the audacity to put a hand on her hip while the other pinched the bridge of her nose, as though she had the right to look frustrated and annoyed with what was happening. Cheryl narrowed her eyes, but before she could say anything, Toni’s dark eyes were once again locked on her. “So what exactly?”

Cheryl blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t act dumb, you heard what I said,” Toni snapped, throwing her hands up in the air, twisting around and pacing back and forth. “What exactly are you going to do with them?”

And it was the way she said them, as though what Toni was talking about was more of a physical possession than four human beings who were being held against their will and forced to be children, all for the sake of power. Cheryl was merely a few hours into this new world, but even she felt a
wave of utter fury at how little this bitch seemed to care about the teenagers. Sure, she got that Toni was worried about her own family, but was she truly going to pretend as though she wasn’t aware of what was going on to innocents?

“I’m going to have to ask you to reword what you just said. They are children. Even an idiot with a bad dye job can see that they have absolutely no say in what’s going on with their lives.” She’d hoped for some reaction, some flicker of humanity behind those dark eyes, but all Cheryl saw was Toni scoffing and turning around, her hand messing with her shirt - or at least that’s what it looked like. Because fashion was what was important in this moment. “You can help me get them out of here. I … you’re right, I have no idea what I’m going to do with them, but honestly? Anything at this point is better than what they’re currently dealing with.”

“Okay. Let’s play with this little analogy. You’re able to get them out of this house and away from their mothers - then what? You are aware of the fact that there is a chip in their arms, right? They build a fucking fortress for a reason, Cheryl. Do you really think you’re going to be able to go anywhere where they won’t be able to find them?”

Well. That hadn’t been what Cheryl was expecting to hear. She opened her mouth to reply once more, because of course she was going to refute everything Toni said, but then two things happened simultaneously. One: Toni’s words finally process and registered with her brain, allowing her to actually understand exactly what the girl had just said. And then her brain completely crashed, because no. That thought had never occurred to her, that their mothers would put an actual chip in their children - like dogs - to ensure they never lost them. But before she could demand more answers - Two: Archie’s high-pitched squeal caught her attention, and Cheryl’s head spun around, her heart in her chest at the sound he’s just made.

“What?” she sputtered, stuck between wanting to scream at him for scaring the shit out of her and torn between wanting to rush over to him and make sure he was all right.

Before she could do either, Archie’s hand shot out, his finger pointing frantically at Toni. “She has a phone!”

Cheryl’s head whipped back around, her red hair hitting the side of her face as she balked at Toni, who was slipping her phone back into her pocket. “WHAT DID YOU DO?” she shrieked, causing Jughead to flinch at the loud tone. To her credit - if only - Toni looked upset.

“I’m sorry, but I told you - I have two brothers I need to look out for.”

Toni looked like she wanted to say more, had even opened her mouth to do so, but then she happened to glance over Cheryl’s shoulder and just - froze. It was as though her entire body iced over, her muscles becoming rigid. Even her eyes didn’t waver, dead locked on -

“Betty?” Cheryl asked, following Toni’s gaze. Betty had stepped forward a few paces, though she still had her hand tightly wound around Jughead’s, who seemed equally as tense as Toni. She found herself captivated by how wide Betty’s eyes had become, the lilypad green in her eyes all the more prominent as she stared directly at Toni. Cheryl’s chest began to rise and fall, her heart pounding against her rib-cage, because this must be what the girl could do. Betty’s face was creased, pain writhing in her expression. Archie grabbed Cheryl’s hand, squeezing it tightly, his eyes on the blonde. "It doesn't last long," he murmured, turning to look at her. "The longest Betty has had someone under her control is five minutes."

"Betty, you know it hurts." Jughead murmured. But the girl shook her head softly, her gaze stuck to the olive skinned girl. "Let me do this."
“It’s okay, Toni,” Betty said, her voice taking on a soothing tone. “Take your phone out and hand it to Cheryl. You want to help us, remember? You want to get us out of here and far, far away, right?”

Cheryl stared. She expected the girl to shake her head, snapping out of it. But the needle slipped from her grasp, her pupils growing larger by the second. "Yeah." Her voice took on an almost sweet melody, as if she was singing. "Yes, I want to help you."

"Great." Betty nodded. But the blonde was shaking, the first traces of crimson beginning to blossom under her left nostril. Jughead pulled the girl back. "Betty, stop."

The girl nodded after a moment, letting out a strangled breath. She wiped her bloody nose. "Toni, can you get us out of here?"

Toni, still still staring into the distance, nodded. "Of course." Her voice was like wind-chimes, and Cheryl found herself enveloped in it. Even if the girl was in a trance, even if she was under the blonde's spell- Cheryl felt enraptured by it. She recovered quickly, grabbing a bag and as much essentials as possible. "Okay, grab a bag, and uh- fill it with everything you need, alright? I'm taking you to your dad's."

Once she figured out where their dad's lived.

Jughead cornered her when Cheryl was shoving boxes of cereal bars in a rucksack. "What about the trackers?" he asked, holding out an olive arm. "They'll just follow us."

Cheryl shrugged. "We'll remove them." she said stiffly. Even when the thought of cutting into them made her skin crawl. Jughead seemed to have the same thought. His lip curled with disgust, and she felt the overwhelming urge to reassure him. "Jug..." she placed her hands on his shoulders, and the boy frowned, cocking his head. "What?"

Babysitter of the year, she thought smugly. "Everything's going to be okay," Cheryl murmured. "Okay? As long as you little weirdo's stick with me, everything."

The latter half of what she was about to say was cut off, when it began to- rain. And it took a few seconds for Cheryl to register that it was raining inside. She was startled by the wave of water that suddenly soaked her, all the breath knocked out of her. But whatever was cascading from the ceiling wasn't rain. It was tinged blue, with a strange smell that set her heart into a frenzy. Jughead shrieked, stumbling back, his eyes growing wide, hair plastered over his eyes. "The sprinklers!"

Judging from the boy's look of fright, it finally clicked in Cheryl's slow thought process. "You're kidding." she spluttered, spinning to Toni, who was standing in the doorway- still stiff and unresponsive. "Hey, zombie Barbie! What's soaking us?"

Toni was quick to respond, it was almost annoying. "Miss Cooper has a fail safe in case her children try to escape. The sprinklers are filled with Chlorium Sulphate- the pill used to control regression."

Cheryl spluttered. "Gross! You mean I'm covered in the freaky reverse Benjamin Button juices?!!" she grabbed Jughead and Toni, dragging them out of the kitchen, and rounded up the others. It didn't take long for them to get out of the house, what with the sprinklers going off in every room. They were all soaked, Cheryl and Toni included. "Wait, so- will this happen to us too? This freaky regression thing?" she gasped out. Toni had followed orders swiftly, alternating between helping Betty and Archie walk, since the two of them had weakened. Cheryl had hold of Jughead's hand, but the boy kept stumbling, falling over himself. He was deathly silent, gasping every time he tripped. The boy didn't need to spell it out. They were going to turn into kids again, and she couldn't stop it.
"No." Toni replied, walking faster. "The solution only reacts with the kids molecules, because they have already been regressed. Without the pills, they will keep regressing from children to teens. It won't do anything to us..." the girl trailed off. "I think."

Cheryl gaped at her. She didn't care if Toni was under some weird voodoo spell, she grabbed her arm, digging her fingernails in. "You THINK?!"

Maybe she might have said something else, interrogated the hypnotized girl further. But suddenly headlights were blaring in her eyes, and her heart skipped. But then she recognized Kevin's dad's car rolling up to them. Thank fuck for Mr Keller and his seven seater. It suddenly hit her how strange this must look. The lot of them were soaked, with Archie, Jughead, Veronica and Betty clutching each other, shivering. Kevin stuck his head out of the window, already grinning, eyes sparkling. "Sup, Adventures in Babysitting!" Before his smile seemed to fall, his eyes widening almost comically.

"Wait..." The boy let out a disbelieving laugh. Cheryl wanted to strangle him. His gaze flitted over each kid, taking in the members of The Sad Breakfast Club- a name she'd pegged them. They were pale, expression's contorted with agony. Betty in her Princess dress and bloody nose, and the others in clothes far too small for them. Veronica clutching her tablet. They looked crazy. Insane. Like they'd just escaped a mental asylum. Jughead elbowed her sharply. But she was too busy trying to conjure up an explanation. Except there was none, and her throat was dry. "These are the kids you've been looking after?"

"Kevin-" He cut her off.

"You're babysitting teenagers?"

"No! I mean, yes. I guess? But it's more than that if you just listen to me-"

"Well, yeah! You said they were six," the boy gaped at Archie. "He literally looks twenty two." his eyebrows furrowed, taking in the state of them. "Did you try and drown them?" He glanced at Toni. "Are you her accomplice?"

To Cheryl's relief, Toni didn't reply.

"Kevin-"

"I can't get over this. I'll never get over this. Your big babysitting gig is looking after the cast of Gossip girl? What, are their parents that over-protective?"

"We need to to go." Jughead gritted out. "Cheryl, we need to go now."

Betty stumbled forwards, swaying slightly. "Lemme..." she panted. "I can help." Before Cheryl could attempt to stop her, the blonde was leaning towards the boy and reaching out, pressing her fingers to his temples. Her bottom lip was trembling, blood pooling from her nose. Jughead lunged to grab her, but Archie pulled him back, wrapping his arms around the boy's waist. "Let..." the redhead was breathless. "Let her do this."

"But it hurts her!" Jughead cried. At the corner of her eye, Cheryl caught Toni blinking rapidly, life beginning to return to her expression. She grabbed her arm tightly. When Toni turned to scowl at her, brown eyes narrowed in fury, she tightened her grip. "I know you're scared for your brother's, but we need your help. Okay?"

Toni scoffed. "You're going to get us killed." But she didn't wrench away. Cheryl tried to ignore the girl, and focused on Betty.
"Don't ask questions," the blonde said softly, and Kevin's face slackened, his green eyes zeroing in on her. Cheryl felt a shiver fly down her spine. This girl could control and manipulate anyone she wanted. And right now, Betty had the mind of a six-year-old girl. She couldn't imagine how dangerous she was. "Open the doors, let us in, and drive."

End Notes

Let me know you're still reading if you'd like more! I'll gradually post chapter's if you guys are still tuning in <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!