She moved to New York to find herself, but as the saying goes: wherever you go, there you are.
Having someone wonder where you are when you don’t come home at night is a very old human need. - Margaret Mead

“I can't believe you moved in with some random guy from Craigslist.”

Betty lays the yellow sweater flat on her bed and folds the arms in one at a time. She gives her laptop a look, and through it, her friend back home on Skype. “Kev, it's a big city. Everyone finds their roommates on Craigslist, for the most part.” She begins to fold the sweater up from the hem in fours, the way she'd been taught from the book about Japanese organization her mother had forced her to read over the summer. “And shh. He’s home, you know. I don't want to be rude.”

“When he murders you I’m going to feel vindicated,” Kevin declares.

“Thanks, Kev. Helpful.” Betty sets the precisely folded sweater aside, to be laid in her dresser drawers later. She glances at the partially open door; through it, she can only hear the sound of her new roommate typing away on his laptop.

Betty has to admit that Kevin might have a bit of a point. After all, this is probably the biggest risk she's taken in years: moving to New York City, where she knows absolutely nobody, to complete grad school (journalism) at NYU. Part of the move was to escape her overbearing mother, who had hovered over her through all of primary and secondary school, and even through her undergrad at a smaller college not far from the small town Betty had grown up in. The other part of the move was genuinely for the program (NYU was an excellent school) with still another part due to Betty's desire to see what she was really made of. A move to a gigantic city like New York seemed like a perfect fit.

She'd somehow managed to luck into a bedroom in a fairly cheap apartment in Brooklyn, subletting from the current renter whose former roommate had recently moved in with his girlfriend. She'd come to see the place, met her soon-to-be roommate (he was a bit sullen and sarcastic, she thought, but nice and non-threatening enough), and two days later she was moving in with her three suitcases of clothes and a lightly used bedroom set that she'd also found on Craigslist.

She folds another sweater and then slips the pile inside her drawer edgewise. “So do you miss me yet, Kev?”
“Obviously, Betty. Though Joaquin has been keeping me busy. Did I tell you he got a motorcycle? Seriously. He's a walking cliché. And I am so here for it.”

Betty smiles at her friend through the computer, ensuring her face is in the view of the camera. “I’m glad. I’m really happy for you,” she says earnestly.

“Thanks, Betty.” Kevin is beaming through the screen. “Look, I gotta go. Joaquin is coming to get me soon.”

“Okay. Talk to you soon. Have fun! Say hi to Joaquin for me.” Betty waves at the camera. Then, with a smile, Kevin is gone. She stands for a moment, staring at the grey stock silhouette left in Kevin’s absence, before closing the laptop and setting it on the small desk in the corner that the room’s previous occupant had left behind.

Betty moves on from sweaters to dresses, hanging up one of the few she owned in the small closet. The lack of space was new for her; in Riverdale, the homes were spacious and closets were big. City life was definitely different. She’d left a lot of her clothing in boxes at her parents’ house in Riverdale, bringing only what she thought she’d actually wear. It had turned out to be a good call: even with the reduced wardrobe, she was definitely going to have to get creative to fit all of her things in the bedroom.

It was probably a good thing she’d only brought a few of her books with her.

Betty hangs up her last dress in her closet. She lifts her hair off her neck, pulling it into a ponytail, and decides to get a glass of water to tide her through the rest of her unpacking. She dusts her hands off on her old gym shorts and walks barefoot into the small living room.

Her roommate is sitting on the couch, legs outstretched on the coffee table, fingers typing away at the computer on his lap. He’s wearing a slightly wrinkled t-shirt with an S on it, ripped jeans, and a grey beanie on his head. He had a strange name, Jughead, that Betty was pretty sure was a nickname. He hadn't been forthcoming with his actual name, and she wasn’t going to press him on it.

He looks up as she enters, his neutral facial expression not changing. Betty smiles brightly at him. “Hi!”

He regards her with what seems to be vague amusement. “Hi,” he responds, his tone dry.
“What are you working on?” Betty asks conversationally.

Jughead’s fingers fly across the keys. “It's prep work for a class. I'm getting my MFA at the New School in nonfiction writing.”

Betty sits on the edge of one of the chairs. “Really? Starting this semester?”

“Yep.”

“Wow!” She clasps her hands together. “I'm getting my Masters too, starting next week. Journalism, at NYU. News and Documentary. I had no idea you were in school, I thought you were just-”.

“Some delinquent?” Jughead finishes, looking at her with a raised eyebrow. “Is that my vibe?”

Betty shakes her head fervently, her fingers trembling suddenly, itching to curl into her palms. “No no no, sorry, I didn't mean - I just didn't think you were in school. You said you worked at the library.”

The dark haired boy looks at her again, this time with a slight frown, as though he was trying to read her. He abandons the attempt fairly quickly and looks back at his screen. “Relax, Betty. I'm not offended. It's sort of the vibe I'm going for. Broody hipster white boy is kind of a played stereotype in Brooklyn, so I'm introducing some '80s rebel aspects to differentiate myself.”

Betty bites her lower lip to keep from smiling, still unsure about whether it was okay to laugh.

Jughead closes his laptop and sets it on the coffee table. “And I do work at the library. The New York Public Library is huge - it's actually pretty complicated, restocking, etc. The hours work for me. I also am in school, though.” He stands up, grabbing a denim jacket from the couch cushion beside him. “Anyway, I'm going out to meet a friend. Happy unpacking.”

Betty watches him walk swiftly to the doorway, push his feet into boots, and then disappear through the door. It closes with a heavy click, and then it's just Betty, her half-packed clothes, and the lonely big city.
She goes back to her bedroom, water long forgotten, and puts a favourite old movie of hers - *Casablanca* - on her laptop. It plays softly in the background as she unloads the remainder of her clothes. Jughead seemed okay, albeit not particularly friendly or welcoming. Still, she didn't get a murdery vibe from him, and aloof was better than dead. She'd take it for now.

It takes Betty another half an hour to finish unpacking her clothes. She then sets her makeup bag in the bathroom drawer Jughead had informed her was hers, along with her hairbrush, tampons, and other miscellaneous toiletries. By the time that's done, she's fairly hungry, but a quick inspection of the fridge proves fruitless. There's hardly any food in it. Jughead seems like he's in decent shape; Betty assumes he must cook *something*, but whatever it is, there isn't any of it left for her.

Betty considers her options for a moment. The logical choice is to order in. She's tired, it's already fairly late for dinner time, and Rick hasn't seen Ilsa off at the air strip yet. It's easiest. The city is big, she doesn't have a great handle on the subway yet, and she doesn't know anyone here if she gets lost.

*Or…*

Betty grabs her purse and cell phone. She's an adult. Moreover, she's a *Cooper*. New York will not best her. She locks the apartment door and heads down to the street. Following Google’s directions, Betty takes the subway one stop over. She manages somehow to screw up swiping her metro card twice and gets cussed out by an impatient woman behind her, but the woman is gone before Betty can apologize and explain that she's new in town.

Apparently, the city didn't care.

Betty locates a market a few blocks down from the stop and gets enough groceries for a few meals. She's forgotten to bring reusable bags so she gets several smaller plastic ones and looks like an asshole on the train back. Betty trips on the stairs up from the line once she reaches her stop, but she manages to save herself by thrusting her elbow out to block the fall. It hurts like a bitch and is scraped and bleeding, but the eggs in her bag are safe, so she counts it as a win.

(She really needs one of those right now.)

Jughead still isn't back when she gets home. Betty makes herself a sandwich, too frustrated at this point to put any more effort into this day, then has a shower. The water stings her elbow, but Betty is used to the sensation of water in open cuts, and it's almost comforting.
She goes to bed early, sad and homesick, her mind swirling with second thoughts and her heart full of regret. New York, where dreams were made.

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The next morning, Betty wakes up to gentle sunlight streaming through her small window. For one brief moment she's in her bed in Riverdale, warm and comfortable. In the next she's back in reality: a small apartment in Brooklyn, in a city she's unfamiliar with, where she knows nobody and nobody knows her. The smallest prickle of tears burns behind Betty's eyes, but she shuts them tightly. Not another day, she decided. She's not going to let a little homesickness and loneliness get her down.

That's never been her way, after all.

So she gets out of bed and pulls on her running shorts, sports bra, t-shirt and shoes. She grabs her phone and earbuds, puts the apartment key in the hidden zipper of her shorts, and heads out for a run.

Cities are different early in the morning, Betty observes. What had been kind of sketchy and dirty last night on her impromptu grocery trip was now airy and damp. She runs down to the bridge and then into DUMBO, marvelling at all of the expensive buildings with gorgeous views of the Manhattan skyline. Betty stops long enough to take a picture of the bustling island, no doubt already awake and busy even at 6:15 in the morning on a Sunday.

On the way back she passes through a couple of smaller parks. New York is such a concrete jungle; Betty is glad the city has found ways to introduce green spaces. There are other runners out as well, and a few nod at her as they pass each other on the sidewalk.

(Early morning runners are a tribe, no matter where, Betty knows.)

Betty reaches her building eventually, and stops to look up at it before entering. It's old and not that nice, but it's not dirty or infested with anything, and for now she'll take it. She does the stairs instead of the elevator, still feeling a bit of pent-up energy, so by the time she gets to the 15th floor she's got sweat practically pouring off of her.

Jughead is still asleep but appears to be home. Betty takes a shower, hoping the creaky pipes don't
annoy him too much, then pulls on shorts and a tank top. She wraps her wet hair into a bun, pins it up, and heads to the kitchen to brew coffee.

Betty spends a couple of minutes trying not to be judgmental, but judging by the state of the kitchen, it's obvious that two guys had been living here for a while. It's a little dirty, and Betty cannot cook in a dirty kitchen. She finds some cleaning supplies and sets to work, and before she knows it she's dusted the living room and cleaned the bathroom as well.

By this point, it's nearly 9:45, and Betty is starved. She plops a slice of bread in the toaster and is chopping mushrooms for use in an omelet when her roommate’s bedroom door swings open.

“Good morning!” Betty chirps with a smile.

Jughead barely glances over at her before shuffling into the bathroom, acknowledging her with a small grunt. Betty shrugs to herself and goes back to her mushrooms, preoccupying herself with making sure all the pieces are of equal size.

The toilet flushes, the taps run, and a few seconds later Jughead leaves the bathroom. He comes into the kitchen and leans against the counter, bleary-eyed. Betty looks over at him.

“I'm making an omelet for myself. Would you like one? Toast, too.”

Jughead rubs his eyes. His beanie is on his head despite the pajama pants and t-shirt he wears, and Betty finds herself wondering briefly if he sleeps in it before he says, vaguely confused, “There aren't any eggs.”


Jughead rubs his eyes. He seems to be moving slowly; he's obviously not a morning person. “Uh, sure. I can just pick up food for myself too though.”

“No, don't be silly. I'm already making one, what's another?” Betty grabs a second bowl and a few more mushrooms. She's already made enough bacon for two, figuring that even if there was some left over, somebody would eat it, so a little more onion and pepper was really all she needed to double the omelet.
A few minutes later her toast pops, and Betty serves that piece to Jughead with his omelet. He sits on the couch with his plate and a cup of black coffee. Betty joins him a few minutes later, and is pleased to see him wolfing the food down.

“Does it taste okay?” Betty asks him, cutting a piece of hers.

Jughead nods, his mouth full. He chews and swallows before answering, so at least Betty knows he’s not a total Neanderthal. “It’s delicious, Betty. Seriously. I’ve had omelets at overrated breakfast places on the Lower East Side that don’t taste this good.”

Betty blushes. “I’m sure you’re exaggerating, but thank you. I love cooking, especially experimenting and tweaking recipes. My friend Kev says I leave a trail of whole pies instead of breadcrumbs.” She cuts another piece of her omelet and chews it slowly. The seasoning really was bringing something out in the bacon, she supposed. She glances up briefly and is surprised to see him looking at her, the faint hints of a smile turning the corners of his mouth. “What?” she asks, self-consciously touching her face for hints of stray omelet.

“Nothing. Just - that is a remarkable coincidence,” Jughead comments casually. “Because I love eating.”

Betty chuckles, and a light goes on in her brain. The oldest adage, still true: the way to a man’s heart, and all that. She assumes it applies similarly for a platonic acquaintance that she happens to cohabitate with, and smiles widely. Finally, maybe - she’d found someone to call if something goes wrong, someone to put on an emergency contact list. At the very least, someone to notice if she goes missing. He was right here; she just needed to befriend him, and here it was - her way in.

“Well then, Jughead,” Betty begins, piercing another piece of omelet with her fork, “this may just work out.”
Is there anyone home in this house made of stone?

Anyone inside know my name?

I've been around for a half of a hundred days,

Never saw a door shut so tight

There are millions of books on countless shelves, extending through various rooms and running alongside hundreds of tables, carrels, and chairs. The building itself is a landmark, an infamous architectural wonder, but for Jughead it's the knowledge inside that's truly spectacular. The New York Public Library: his fairy tale land. The place where light illuminates the dark corners of unread pages, where dragons are slain, heroes are forged and dreams come true. He treasures every moment he spends here, even when they’re behind the scenes dealing with the somewhat less glamorous machinery and software that actually keeps the library functioning.

That said, some days Jughead is pretty glad to leave.

Today is one of those days. It had been a long shift, spent hunting for a book requested through interlibrary loans that hadn't been returned properly the first time. He'd finally found it, but it had taken hours, and he was beyond frustrated as a result. So, backpack over his shoulder, Jughead treads down the stone steps with a sense of relief in his chest. He pulls his cell phone out of his pocket and sends a quick text to Archie.

Just leaving work, be there in thirty. Jughead plugs Archie's new address into Google and confirms that the directions he'd already calculated for himself were correct. He slips onto the D train at Bryant Park and stands at the back of a car, playing Words with Friends against a random stranger whose profile only says “Germany”. A few people get on at the next stop, and as one brushes by Jughead his arm is bumped. He accidentally submits the word, dropping points, and Germany gets a leg up on him.

“Shit,” he mumbles to himself, mind already swirling with potential triple word scores once his letter bank repopulates.
Eventually, the train screeches to a halt at 145th Street. Jughead slips out, fingers still working on his Scrabble comeback, and turns right at a Starbucks. He walks for about five minutes and then stops, looking up at a newish building with lots of windows. It's too fancy to suit Archie, his best friend of basically all 23 of his years. His father owns a small construction company, and Jughead has always associated his friend with rebar, guitars, and cheap hamburgers - not so much pearls and marble bathrooms. Archie seems really happy, so Jughead would never point out the disparity; but still, Archie is basically his brother, and he can certainly think it if he wants.

Jughead is let up by a polite but cautious doorman. He takes a clean, well-lit elevator ride to a large, airy apartment twenty floors up. The elevators are pearly white and just look rich; it's a far cry from the Upper East Side, of course, but still much nicer than Jughead ever plans on being able to afford. The hallways on the 20th floor is a crystal blue colour, giving it a vaguely icy effect - which, knowing the other occupant of Archie’s new apartment, was maybe sort of fitting. The door to the apartment itself is solid and heavy, lightly stinging Jughead’s knuckles when he knocks on it.

It swings open to reveal Veronica Lodge, the girl that Archie started dating a year prior and his new cohabitant. They’d met at a fairly seedy bar in Hell’s Kitchen that Archie frequented, but Jughead knew the moment she’d emerged from Archie’s room the following morning that she was not from that neighbourhood. He’d been right: she had turned out to be the daughter of a wealthy businessman with more than enough family money to spare, the kind of girl who wore pearls unironically and was accustomed to her every need being catered to. She and Jughead were from diametrically opposed worlds - she’d probably never even seen a trailer park - but to his surprise they got along well enough. They were never going to be best friends, but she seemed to genuinely love Archie, and since Archie was one of the only people in the world that Jughead truly cared about he had decided to make an effort.

“Jughead!” she greets, standing to the side. “Come on in.”

“Thanks.” He steps in, taking his shoes off. “Where's Archie?” he asks, taking in the apartment all over again. It's open and - surprise - white, with wood accents treated in a moderate, natural shade. It's not the first time Jughead has been here, of course, but every time he feels all over again like he's entering the foyer of a modernized museum.

His redheaded friend comes around the corner. “Hey Juggie. How was work?”

“Riveting.” Jughead slides his backpack off and drops it on the floor near the kitchen island. “Were the paintings on the walls here the last time I was over?”

“They’re new!” Veronica exclaims, clearly pleased that somebody has noticed. “We finally got
around to decorating a bit more. Do you like them?”

Jughead stares at one. They’re all somewhat early-20th century. He recognizes a Picasso print and a Matisse, so he figures his initial guess is in the right ballpark. He’s mildly surprised that Veronica’s father hadn’t bought them the originals and wants to make a comment about it, but he catches Archie’s eye and decides to be polite. “They suit the room,” he says, and it’s not a lie.

“I think so too!” Veronica turns to the kitchen and reaches for a glass with one manicured hand. “Do you want a drink?”

“Uh, sure. Water’s fine.” Jughead plops down in a chair, slinging one of his legs over the arm. “Arch, I didn’t know you lived in a museum,” he mutters to his friend, who smiles somewhat ruefully.

“Whatever makes Veronica happy,” Archie shrugs. “You know I don’t care about any of that decoration stuff.”

Jughead nods, drumming his fingers on his knee. “Yeah, that makes two of us. Hence how beautiful our apartment always was.” He sits up slightly and accepts the water glass Veronica hands him. “Thanks.”

“Oh yes, your apartment,” Veronica says dramatically, sitting down next to Archie. “It was - quaint. If not a bit dusty.”

“Nice save.” Jughead eyes her, and she smiles teasingly. “I’ll have you know my apartment is now the most pristine private home in Brooklyn. Betty cleans it every day, I swear.”

“Right!” Veronica clasps her hands together excitedly. “It’s been what - two weeks now? How’s it going? Is she nice? Are you guys getting along?”

Jughead dips his index finger in his water and slides it around the rim of the glass, briefly closing his eyes against the dulled ringing sound it creates. So even their water glasses are actual crystal, he thinks to himself, of course. This was not a world he was comfortable in. He makes eye contact with Archie, who is leaning slightly forward, also awaiting his response. “She’s fine,” he says.

“That’s it?” Archie asks. “Come on, dude. There’s gotta be more.”
Jughead sighs. “I don’t know! She’s nice. She’s clearly riding some sort of optimism wave because she is always happy. So we’re two peas in a pod,” he jokes sarcastically. “She’s clean, though, and she cooks all the time, so she’s already better than Archie.”

“Hey!”

“Just sayin’, you never made me homemade cinnamon rolls.”

Archie cocks his head to the side. “Would you have wanted me to?”

“Knowing your aptitude in the kitchen? No. I don’t even trust you with frozen pizzas.”

Veronica places her hand on Archie’s forearm. “Not for long,” she informs Jughead with a wide smile. “Archie and I are taking a Mexican cooking class on Tuesdays!”

Jughead looks at his friend, fighting back a snort. That sounded like the absolute last thing that Archie would want to do. He raises an eyebrow and Archie shrugs slightly as if to say, what can I do? Jughead takes a drink of water and looks at Archie again, amused. “I fully expect you to provide tacos next time I’m here.”

“What, Betty doesn’t make you tacos?” Archie teases.

“I’m sure she could if I asked, but she’s my roommate, not my personal chef.”

Although, Jughead thinks to himself, he has been eating quite well since she moved in. Overall, it’s actually going not badly, in his opinion. Betty seems nice enough - maybe too nice, he sometimes thinks. He understands that he is at the very end of the spectrum in terms of hiding one’s emotions (which is to say, not doing it at all), but nobody can be that happy all the time. She seems to be excited about everything, optimistic and outgoing, and is the sort of person that gets up before dawn to run with the sunrise. Jughead is the kind of person that uses the sun rising as a cue for when to go to bed. They’re not exactly similar, but it seems to be working well enough so far so he can’t complain, even if a small part of him thinks she might actually be a serial killer on the run.

“How old is she?” Veronica asks. “Is she from New York?”
“Our age, I think.” Jughead shrugs. “I don’t know that much about her.”

Veronica frowns at him. “She’s been living with you for two weeks and you don’t know where she’s from?”

Archie looks at her. “Jughead doesn’t really pry on that sort of detail.”

Veronica raises both eyebrows at her boyfriend. “Asking somebody that you share an apartment with if they’re originally from the city you live in is not *prying*, Archie, oh my god. It’s polite conversation.” She rounds on Jughead. “Please tell me you’re at least trying to make an effort. What if she thinks you’re an asshole?”

“I don’t care if she does,” he replies. Jughead had learned early in life that being a nice kid didn’t mean nearly as much as the fact that he was the son of a gang member from the bad side of town. Politeness was for the children of upstanding citizens like Archie. He didn’t go out of his way to be rude, but Jughead had long been painfully aware of what people thought of him. He could see it in their eyes as they looked at him. So if they were going to judge him anyway, then he was at least going to say what he thought (or if the situation called for it, nothing at all).

Veronica sighs heavily and looks at Archie, who stares back at her blankly. Jughead grins at him. He may be a lone wolf, constantly at war with himself over the need for human interaction, but even he could admit to himself the large role that Archie played in his life. He was more than just a friend; he was a brother, the only family Jughead truly had. It was the sort of friendship that was really only possible to build through a sheer mass of time spent with someone - and they’d had plenty of time, almost two decades of it.

“I want to meet her,” Veronica declares. “We should all do something! Friday?”

“Uhh…” Jughead hesitates, looking to Archie for help. His friend smiles back in agreement with Veronica. *Useless,* he thinks. “I don’t know Betty’s schedule. But that probably works?”

Veronica’s fingers are already tapping away on her phone. “You’re in my calendar. Ask her when you get home and let Archie know if that doesn’t work. We’ll come to you. I’m curious to see what that apartment looks like clean.”

“Good, I don’t have ten hours to make the trek up here,” Jughead jokes. “Do you think you guys
can move even further away?”

Archie laughs. “I know, it’s far. Sorry. And sorry for moving out, again. I know I put you in a shitty spot.”

Jughead moves his leg to the ground and finishes his water. “Come on, Arch, who am I to stand in the way of true love?” he says dryly, watching Veronica squeeze Archie’s arm happily. “I’m nothing if not a hopeless romantic.”

“I definitely get that vibe from you,” Veronica agrees, and Jughead shares a smile with her. She’s growing on him.

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An hour later, Jughead finally reaches his apartment building. He steps off the elevator and his senses are immediately invaded by the smell of something delicious. His stomach growls and he crosses his fingers in his jacket pocket, hoping it’s coming from his apartment. When he unlocks the door and pushes it open, his wishes come true.

Betty is standing in the kitchen with a giant knife, carving a giant hunk of meat. She glances over when he enters and smiles at him. “Hi, perfect timing!” she says cheerfully. “Are you around to eat?”

Jughead drops his backpack on the floor and kicks it out of the way next to his shoes. “Yeah. What are you making?” He steps closer and peers over the counter.

“Roast beef tenderloin in a wine sauce, lemon potatoes, and asparagus. The asparagus needs another couple of minutes. I didn’t know if you’d be home so I wasn’t sure if I should make it, but I figured roast beef is always good in sandwiches and stuff the next day anyway. I hope you’ll like it.”

Jughead nods, not sure how to tell her that he likes all food, so really she doesn’t need to try this hard. He turns, about to go sit down in the living room when he remembers Archie and Veronica and stops. “Hey, are you around on Friday?”

Betty places the carved tenderloin on a serving plate that he’s never seen before in his life. “I’ll have to check my social calendar, it’s really been bursting at the seams lately,” she informs him,
and he’s not sure if she’s kidding. He must be making a face, trying to figure it out, because then she laughs in her soft voice and adds, “I’m definitely not busy. Why?”

“My friend - the one who used to live here - and his girlfriend are going to come over, so you should stick around.”

“Okay,” she says simply, smiling warmly at him. She opens the oven and withdraws a pan of asparagus. Jughead watches Betty serve slices of roast beef onto two plates. She adds potatoes from another roaster and finally a few spears of asparagus, then hands Jughead the plates. “Can you please bring these out to the coffee table?”

Jughead turns and walks into the living room, wordlessly obeying. He sets her plate next to his and moves to the side on the sofa so they can both eat off of the low table. Betty brings two glasses of water and cutlery with her when she comes, sitting beside him.

He digs in, amazed that his shitty oven could produce something as delicious as this. He finishes the beef in record time and is about to inhale the potatoes and asparagus when notices Betty watching him with amusement.

Jughead swallows the bite he’s chewing. “It’s really good,” he says, assuming she’s waiting for feedback.

“What? Oh, thanks.” Betty waves off the compliment. “Sorry, I didn't mean to stare. I - you just ate that really fast.”

“I’m a miracle of modern medicine,” Jughead replies, spearing a piece of asparagus with his fork. “They're studying me and everything.”

“Wow.” Betty smiles, carefully cutting her roast beef.

Jughead glances over and meets her gaze accidentally. There’s a twinkle in her eye that he’s intrigued by, a little spark in the corner of the sea green. She’s still smiling politely, but her lower lip draws between her teeth ever-so-slightly and her cheeks begin to redden. When her eyelashes give a nervous flutter, Jughead realizes that she's uncomfortable because he's staring, and he immediately diverts his eyes to his plate.

“I'm glad you like the beef,” Betty continues conversationally. “I was worried it would be dry, I
didn't have as much time after class ended as I thought.”

He recognizes what she's doing because Archie's mom used to do it sometimes when he'd come over for dinner, skinny and starving, and devour his serving in the time it took everyone else to eat only a small portion. He would be embarrassed after, and she'd immediately probe Archie with questions about school or something hyper-normal. It was the overly polite carry-on-anyway move, a way of diverting attention from someone who didn't want it. Except in this case, he'd been the one to stare at Betty, and here she was trying to make him feel okay about it.

She’s a genuinely good person, Jughead suddenly realizes: thoughtful and polite out of nature rather than habit, kind to everyone, and generous not because it's the right thing to do but because she actually wants to. Or, the kind of person he could never be, and thus has great respect for. They're a rare breed, in his experience. Fuck. And here he is, being - well, himself - and as much as he doesn't want to give Veronica credit, he is sort of an asshole naturally.

So he finishes the rest of dinner and then attempts to smile at her. “Hey Betty, are you from New York originally?”

She looks at him and seems surprised at the question, but doesn't miss a beat. “No, I'm from a small town near Albany. You?”

“Moved here when I was 13, but I grew up upstate.” He leaves out the part where he had to move to Newark a year later when his dad got arrested (again) because Archie’s dad had moved them out there after his divorce and nobody could find his mom. His life story was a long and depressing one, and nobody needed to hear it.

“Wow, that must have been crazy. I find the city intimidating now, I can't imagine how I would've found it ten years ago.” Betty grabs Jughead's empty plate with hers and stands up to take them to the kitchen. She grabs her water glass in her other hand on the way. “So you're an old pro at the subway, then.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Jughead puts his feet up on the coffee table and grabs the TV remote. He flips it on and is about to ask her if she wants to watch something when he hears a crash from the kitchen, followed by a quiet yelp. He immediately sits up. “Betty, you okay?”

She doesn't answer right away, so he swings his legs over to the floor and stands up, striding over to the kitchen quickly. A glass has fallen on the ground and shattered. There are dozens of pieces scattered across the floor, and among them, kneeling, is Betty.
“I'll get a broom,” he says automatically, turning to the tiny storage closet by the door. He grabs it off the nail it's hanging on and returns to the kitchen. Betty has grabbed the garbage can from under the sink and set it next to her.

“I'm sorry,” she says quickly, looking up at him when he approaches. “I didn't mean - it just slipped--” She begins to gather the pieces with her hands, starting with the larger ones, and dumps them in the garbage. “I'll replace it, I'm so sorry,” she says again, her voice unsteady.

Jughead shakes his head. “It's fine, Betty, they're shitty old cups. Hey, don't use your hands, you'll--” His voice trails off, because at that moment she looks at him, and he's taken aback. There are tears welled in her eyes, but they haven't yet fallen, and she almost looks scared. It seems like an overreaction to a simple accident, and Jughead is a mix of concerned and confused.

(Clearly, something isn't totally right.)

Jughead approaches her slowly, leaning the broom against the counter. “Hey.” He's surprised at how soft his own voice is. “Betty. I don't care about the cup.” He crouches down, mindful of the glass on the floor, and is alarmed to see that her hands are bleeding. “Jesus. Betty, you're hurt.”

Her eyes, wet and wide, dart to her palms. She immediately closes her hands into fists. “Shit,” Betty mumbles, standing up. “I'll wash them off and be right back to clean this up.”

“I can do it,” he says, but he barely gets the words out before she's skipped past him and rushed to the bathroom. Jughead stares after her for a moment, frowning, then takes the broom and quickly sweeps the remaining glass into the dustbin. Once it's clear, he runs his trusty imitation Swiffer Wetjet over the linoleum to catch any fine pieces he may have missed in the sweep.

He's putting it back in the closet when Betty returns, hands bandaged and face slightly red. She stands in the entranceway to the kitchen and looks at Jughead. “I'm sorry, I know I freaked out there,” she apologizes. “It caught me off guard.”

Jughead closes the door and turns to her, folding his arms. “It's fine,” he replies. “Like I said, it's a shitty old glass anyway.” He peers at her. “Are you okay?”

Betty nods quickly, the smile back on her face. She tiptoes over the wet linoleum to the sink, where she begins to wash the plates she'd left. “Yes. Like I said, just surprised myself, is all.” Her tone is friendly but has an edge of finality to it, like she doesn't want to speak any more about it.
Something about that answer doesn't sit well with him, but she doesn't owe him any explanations. So Jughead just nods at her, unfolding his arms, and offers, “I can wash the dishes, Betty. You cooked.”

“I don’t mind,” she says to the sink. Her back is turned away from him, shoulders trembling ever-so-slightly, and this time it's Jughead who feels like a door was closed on him.

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Chapter End Notes

I very much appreciate all the feedback. Obviously, this is AU, so I've taken liberties with some of the facts, and to as minimal an extent as possible, some characteristics of the main characters.

Hope you enjoyed.
“Maybe that’s why people have friends at all. Not because they like them so much but because they don’t make them feel so much worse.” - Joe Meno, How the Hula Girl Sings

Betty is exhausted.

She slips onto the train, lugging her backpack over one shoulder, and breathes a sigh of relief when she sees that it isn’t that crowded. She sits in an open seat and sets her backpack on her lap. It has been an incredibly long day; she’d had a couple of classes and then spent the rest of the day filming on the street for an introductory documentary short she and her assigned partner from her program had to complete by the end of the following week. Unfortunately for her, that assigned partner’s long-distance girlfriend had plans to come visit him in a few days, so he had asked Betty if they could push through and finish production by the end of today. Always agreeable, Betty had said yes, which was why she was dragging herself home a full three hours later than she’d expected to be there.

The time was still reasonable - 8:30 - but she felt horrible about being late, given that Jughead had told her his friends were coming over. Clearly, they were coming to see him, not her, but she still felt rude arriving in the middle of whatever they were doing.

Betty digs her cell phone out of her pocket. She’d texted her roommate earlier to let him know she was going to be late, receiving a simple okay in response. She replies to it now (Hey, I’m just on the train, be home in about fifteen minutes) and then closes her eyes briefly, wondering if micronaps were truly a thing and if so, how she could become adept at them. She makes a mental note to google it later, sure that the answer must be out there somewhere in the wilds of the internet, and leans her head against the dirty window until her phone vibrates again.

Cool, we’re just playing some card games in the living room, Jughead has replied. So they’re still at the apartment. She grimaces, hoping nobody will be upset that she’s interrupting, then stops herself. You live there too, Betty reminds herself. She’s read a few think-pieces (some of questionable quality, she admits) recently about women and apologies as an instinctive reaction, and it had been a bit of a rude awakening. Because that was her, right there in the mediocre prose: always apologizing, always deferring to everyone else’s wants and needs and ignoring her own. She’s self-aware enough to know that these behaviours are largely the product of an overbearing mother with high expectations, both for academic performance and for the way that her daughter should look, think, behave. Betty will always be a believer in being good to people, but perhaps one doesn’t need to be better to others than they are to themselves to be a good person.
Of course, Betty knows that one long read from the *Atlantic* won’t magically make her a strong, independent #girlboss, but it had been a gentle prod on her shoulder nonetheless.

So when she gets off the train and walk the few minutes to her building, she vows not to smile apologetically at Jughead and his friends. Instead, as a great rebellious stand, she smiles normally at them.

(Clearly, she’ll be taking baby steps.)

“Hi!” Betty greets with a wave, setting her backpack down and closing the apartment door. She slides the deadbolt closed and slips her shoes off, tightening her ponytail as she approaches the living room.

Seated on the couch is a beautiful Latina woman in a gorgeous navy dress and a string of pearls. Beside her, one arm slung around the back of the couch, is a good-looking redheaded man in a baseball tee and worn jeans. Jughead is sitting in the armchair, one knee awkwardly bent so his foot is resting on the seat. All three have half-full pint glasses, and a growler of beer from one of the local breweries sits to the side of the coffee table. Betty recognizes the white and black cards in their hands as Cards Against Humanity, a game she’d played at Kevin’s earlier in the summer. She’d found it both totally inappropriate and completely hilarious, and hadn’t been aware that Jughead owned it.

“You must be Betty,” the woman says, standing up and brushing off the skirt of her dress. She extends her hand. “I’m Veronica Lodge, and this is Archie Andrews.”

“Betty Cooper,” she replies, shaking both of their hands. “I’ve heard good things about you guys.”

Archie raises an eyebrow at her and then looks at Jughead. “Really?” Jughead just shrugs, and Archie looks back at Betty.

She grimaces awkwardly. “I mean - mostly that you used to live here, and then moved in with Veronica.”

“Both true!” Veronica chirps, sitting back down and adjusting her dress. “Please, come join us. I am dying to get to know you; Jughead has mostly just said that you’re a good cook and you’re
cleaner than Archie. Now that I live with Archie, though, I have to say that’s sort of a low bar.”

Betty laughs and moves to sit on the floor, but pauses when Jughead suddenly pushes his foot down onto the ground and sits up. “Betty, sit here,” he offers.

“It’s okay, I’m good with the floor!” she says with a smile to her roommate, sitting cross-legged in front of the coffee table. “I’ve been standing all day with a heavy camera on my shoulder, so anything works at this point.” She glances over at Jughead, who is regarding her with a strange, somewhat piercing gaze. He's been doing it all week, and Betty knows why.

“Do you want a beer? The growler’s got enough left for a pint,” Jughead offers. He stands up, not waiting for her response, and disappears into the kitchen for a second. He returns with an empty glass and sets it in front of her.

“Thank you,” Betty says softly, smiling at him. She reaches for the growler and pours the remaining beer into her newly procured cup. It's just shy of a full pint and that's okay with Betty; she's not really much of a drinker anyway. Alcohol isn't incompatible with her prescriptions, but she's fairly hesitant on the combination anyway. Nursing a drink slowly has always seemed like a safe compromise.

When she sets the glass down on the table, she notices Veronica watching her. “Jughead said you moved here for grad school. What are you taking?” the dark-haired girl asks, folding her hand under her chin and smiling at Betty.

Betty shuffles herself closer to Veronica to answer her question. She keeps asking follow-up questions, which Betty appreciates; sometimes, it’s nice to speak about what she knows, and she can definitely answer cursory questions about herself and her school. It eventually somehow devolves into Veronica’s rundown of what she's heard of as being the best yoga and barre places in Brooklyn, and Betty pays close attention. She’s always been interested in barre, as the muscle targeting and flexibility earned through the workout would likely help her increase both her speed and endurance for running, and has been considering it. Veronica gives her a top-five of the main differences between barre and an actual ballet class, which Betty had also thought of trying.

Before Betty knows it, the guys have gotten bored with their conversation and abandoned any attempts to play more Cards Against Humanity. At some point in her conversation with Veronica she had moved to the sofa and Archie to the floor, where he and Jughead both currently sit, X-Box controllers in hand.

Veronica sees her looking and waves her hand at them dismissively. “They’d do this for hours. In fact, they probably will,” she informs Betty. “Apparently you never outgrow video games.”
“I heard that,” Archie comments over his shoulder, not tearing his eyes away from the screen.

“Good, Archiekins, you were meant to.” Veronica smiles sweetly at him, then turns back to Betty. “Betty, are you busy this Sunday? Want to do a girls day? Shopping, maybe pedicures, really self indulgent coffee…”

Betty is surprised by the offer. After all, Veronica has only just met her, and Betty is pretty sure she would have no shortage of friends to do a girls day with. Nevertheless, she's in no position to refuse friends, and Veronica has been nothing but nice to her. So she accepts.

“Yeah, that sounds great!”

Veronica smiles at her again, and Betty can't figure out if the vaguely devious look in her eyes is intentional or just part of her overall facial expression. She picks her phone up from the coffee table and hands it to Betty. “Put your number in here. I'll pick you up around 9:30, if that works? We can get breakfast, too, Sorry Jughead,” Veronica adds, turning to speak in his direction. “You'll have to eat Rice Krispies instead of your regular feast.”

“That's where you're wrong,” Jughead says, his face and voice contorted with concentration. Suddenly, his fingers move fervently on the controller, legs clenched and partially elevated, then he drops it and pumps his fist with a shout of victory. “Yes! Always the victor! Take that, Archie!”

Archie is grinning at Jughead. “You're a really good winner.”

“I know, humility is one of my top attributes.” Jughead pretends to brush off his shoulders, then turns to look at Veronica. “Sorry. Where was I? Oh yeah. Betty made emergency waffles and froze them for when she’s gone, so I'll eat those.”

Veronica looks at Betty with a raised eyebrow. Betty thinks she’s supposed to feel awkward about it, but she shrugs. “I like cooking.”

“A match made in heaven,” Archie jokes. “Jughead loves eating.”

Betty can’t stop the laugh that comes at those words. “That's funny, Jughead said the same exact
thing when I told him that.”

Jughead looks at her, and he’s actually smiling for once. Betty pauses momentarily, trying to take in the image. He actually has a really great smile, she thinks, he should do it more.

“Archie and I are almost in the final stages of actually becoming one another,” Jughead says seriously. “Next week my hair turns ginger.”

“Yeah? When do you start lifting weights?” Archie teases, dodging the fist that flies in his direction.

“Same day you start reading something other than Sports Illustrated.”

Betty smiles in their direction. It’s a little unusual to see Jughead so animated. She’d thought he was just the quiet, sullen type, but maybe it was also partly the company he was with. Clearly she alone was not sufficient to bring him to this level. She’s been trying to win him over the only way that seemed to work - food - and it had appeared to be successful, at least to her. But now seeing this Jughead … clearly, she has a long way to go with him.

Veronica is looking at her when Betty turns back. She rolls her eyes and tilts her head in the direction of the boys. “They get a little ridiculous over X-Box. But they’re cute, I guess. So, 9:30?”

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At exactly 9:30 on Sunday morning, Betty is standing in at the front of her apartment building, clutching the strap of the purse she’s slung over her shoulder. She's wearing a short sleeved dress in an olive green tone, partly because it's a beautifully warm late September day and partly because Veronica seems like a fancier type of person. Betty had googled Veronica immediately after their first meeting - daughter of an outrageously wealthy real estate mogul, socialite - and if she's going to be hanging out with her, Betty wants to look the part.

What she hadn't understood was what precisely Veronica had meant by “pick up”. Betty had yet to meet anyone in New York who had a car - there was no need - so she had ruled that out as an option. She thinks perhaps she was supposed to meet Veronica at the subway and considers running over to see if she’s there, but Betty decides against it as the clock on her phone turns 9:31. She wasn’t late yet.
Her answer comes a minute later, as a big black car pulls around the corner and stops at the curb. The driver, an older man with a kind face wearing a suit and hat, gets out and opens the rear door. “Ms. Cooper,” he greets with a head nod, gesturing to the back seat.

Veronica’s head pops out. “Hi Betty! Get in!” she chirps, waving.

Betty stares for a moment. Rich. Right, she thinks. She’d almost forgotten. She smiles politely at the driver and thanks him as she slides into the backseat beside Veronica.

“Hi Veronica. I didn’t expect a car and driver!” she marvels, looking around at the dark leather interior. It’s easily the nicest car she’s ever been in. So this is how the other half lives, she thinks, sitting back on the impossibly comfortable seat. “I love your skirt,” she compliments, gesturing to the purple pencil skirt Veronica wore.

Veronica smiles. “Thanks! Your dress is super cute too. I hope you’re hungry, we’re going to my favourite breakfast place ever. I guarantee you, you won’t be disappointed.”

Twenty minutes later, Betty is knee-deep in the most incredible eggs benedict she’s ever had in her life. The eggs were perfectly done, and the hollandaise - there were no words to describe it. Even the english muffin is fluffier than normal, somehow, Betty thinks. Of course, it’s going to cost her $25 instead of $10, and the $7 latte she’d also ordered wasn’t going to help.

Betty liked New York a lot so far, despite it also sort of scaring her, but damn, was it expensive.

She had a significant amount of savings from working throughout her undergrad and living inexpensively on campus in a small town, and NYU has funded a significant portion of her graduate studies, but she still predicts to run out of money at some point before she graduates. Back home, she’d worked in a florist’s shop, but the hours required for her graduate program here are erratic and variable, so Betty thinks something in the service industry will likely be more suitable. She hasn’t waitressed since she was in high school, and even then it was only at the local diner, but on some level she figures it must be like riding a bike.

Betty informs Veronica that she has a couple of interviews lined up the following week. One is at a restaurant a few blocks from the Brooklyn Bridge, and the other is at a bar somewhat closer to her apartment. She’s not actually sure which she would rather get. The restaurant will likely be full of high-roller types and Betty can practically already feel herself getting stressed about it, but the environment in some bars reminds Betty a little too much of some dark moments in her past that she’s been trying to forget for almost a decade, so that might not be ideal either.
(Some days Betty feels like she can do anything, like the world is her oyster - and still others, it seems like the only thing she’ll ever be good at is organization, having peaked after planning her small-town high school’s homecoming dance.)

“You should definitely pick the bar job,” Veronica advises, giving her a bit of a once-over. “With legs like yours? You’ll make hundreds in tips every night.”

Betty shifts uneasily. “I don’t know,” she says, but talking about it is making her fingers twitch. “You definitely would.” Veronica takes a sip of her macchiato. “Anyway. How are things going with Jughead? For real.”

Betty looks into her latte, swirling her finger around the rim of the mug to clean off the foam she left on her last sip. “They’re good!” she says in an upbeat tone. Veronica gives her a look, clearly not accepting that response, and Betty smiles a little. “Alright. They’re … okay. He’s nice. Sometimes I get the sense that I just annoy him more than anything. I’m trying not to take it personally.”

Veronica touches her hand. Her eyes are kind when Betty meets them. “You shouldn’t,” she replies, nodding in encouragement. “Seriously.” She brings her hand back and grabs her coffee. “Don’t tell Jughead I said anything, but - he’s had a hard go of it. He can be a little closed off.”

“If ‘recently’ is his whole life, then sure.” Veronica’s eyes flick away from Betty’s and she smiles sweetly at the waiter who comes to bring the cheque. She drops a credit card on the small leather-bound folder, which is quickly whisked away. Betty watches, confused. “It’s on me,” Veronica clarifies.

“A hard go of it - how?” Betty asks, frowning with concern. “Do you mean recently?”

“I’m not, Daddy is,” Veronica chuckles. “Anyway, I know Jughead is a bit of a doom-and-gloom Holden Caulfield-type, but it’s not really his fault. I don’t really know the details, but I know he used to live with Archie and his dad for a while and that some heavy shit went on with his family. But because he’s so close with Archie, I also know that even though he’s not close with a lot of people, when he does care about someone, he cares a lot. Thank you,” Veronica adds to the
waiter, who has returned with her credit card. She quickly signs her name on the receipt, and the waiter leaves again.

“That’s really sad,” Betty says softly, feeling her eyes begin to water slightly. Her parents were a lot of things, but at least they were there for her, providing a roof over her head. Knowing that Jughead had gone through something bad enough that he had to go live with a different family - it was heartbreaking.

Veronica nods. “It’s seriously after-school special,” she says matter-of-factly. “Yeah. It took me a little while to warm up to him, and it’s not like we’re best friends even now. But him and Archie are family, and he would absolutely do anything for him. And anyone that loves Archie, I like. Plus, he’s really smart, and has obviously not let whatever shit he went through as a kid impact him now. I have a lot of respect for him. So … I guess, just - give him a chance. He grows on you.”

Betty is quiet, letting Veronica’s words sink in. She had always tried to be kind and non-judgmental, to give people the benefit of the doubt in every situation. That included Jughead. Some people were open books, ready to tell the world their story; obviously, Jughead was not really one of those people, and she’s fine with that. Everybody has secrets; Betty knows that more than anyone. So even though he’s been a bit more aloof than she’d expected, he’s nice to her and she does genuinely like him. Betty has been starting to see her relationship with her roommate as being a bit like an onion: every day, she tries to peel off another layer, whether through a friendly smile or a warm meal, and sometimes it pays off.

Because for as much as she’s vowed to stop tying so much of her self-worth to people’s opinions of her, Betty really wants Jughead to like her. She needs somebody in her corner in this giant mess of a city, after all.

“Don’t worry, I’m patient,” Betty assures Veronica. She bites her lower lip, chewing thoughtfully, then asks, “Do you mind if I ask you a question? How come you’re so concerned about whether Jughead and I are getting along?”

Veronica looks sheepishly at Betty. “Am I that obvious?” she asks, carefully folding the napkin from her lap and placing it on the table. “Come with me.” She stands, Betty following suit, and leads the way out of the restaurant.

They step onto the sidewalk, the late morning sun showering warmth across Betty’s skin. A couple of tourists walk by, marveling at the skyscrapers surrounding them. Betty smiles and watches them walk down the street. It was obviously a trip they would remember, she thinks, and is glad that New York brings some people such joy despite the anxiety it’s given her at times.
When she looks back at Veronica, she notices that the brunette has a somewhat expectant look on her face. “Um … am I supposed to be looking at something?” Betty asks, glancing around.

Veronica swings an arm wide. “I’m in love, Betty!” she exclaims dramatically, her expensive heels clicking on the pavement. “That’s my explanation.” She drops her arm and steps onto the asphalt, gesturing to the black town car that had driven them to the restaurant to begin with. Smithers pulls up to the curb and steps out to open the door for them. “Archie is worried about him, so I’m just trying to help,” she adds as she glides gracefully into the backseat. “Plus, I think I might be getting an awesome new friend out of it, so it’s a win-win. Now get in, Betty, we’ve got a lot of shopping to do.”

Chapter End Notes

The feedback I've gotten on this so far has been amazing, thank you all so much. It has inspired me to write more quickly, knowing people are waiting! I hope you enjoyed this chapter; things are ramping up from here on out :) If you could, please take a moment to leave a review!
Betty and Veronica have become friends, and Jughead doesn’t really know how he feels about it.

One one hand, he's obviously happy that Betty has found a friend. She may be positive and upbeat and always have a smile on her face, but now that they live together Jughead is around her all the time. He's around even when she's not “on”, when she thinks nobody is paying attention. He sees her eyes dull and her smile drop and he knows exactly what this is: she's lonely.

Jughead understands loneliness the way that a fish understands water. It's not painful in quite the same way that other bad things are, and in that aspect there are pluses and minuses. There’s no shouting with loneliness, no broken beer bottles, no profane screams goodbye from the steps of a dilapidated trailer. There is only silent regret, which in Jughead's experience is preferable to loud, dramatic regret. That's the kind that makes a person make hasty decisions.

(Like leaving. )

In all, loneliness has been pretty good to Jughead. Sure, it's sad, but it's the manageable kind, the kind that's almost comforting because hey, at least it's something.

A month ago, Jughead would have never guessed that Betty was ever lonely. She has the kind of personality that attracts others and invites friendship as intently as his repels it. Despite that, he hadn't met any of her friends in the time she'd been living at his apartment, and it was only through a casual comment made by Archie during a pretty intense game of Uncharted that Jughead learned that Betty still didn't really know anyone in the city except him and now, Veronica.

So from that perspective, of course, he's happy that Betty’s loneliness might subside a little with Veronica’s friendship.

Unfortunately, it also means that Veronica is over at his apartment - a lot. She'd been over often
when Archie lived there, so it's not something he's unaccustomed to, but those situations had been different somehow. Then, they'd just hang out in the living room or go to Archie’s bedroom, and while Veronica was still her same vaguely self-absorbed, outgoing self, her focus had been mostly on Archie. And generally, that hadn't involved Jughead.

But today, Veronica is over for Betty, having apparently insisted on helping to pick out an outfit for Betty’s first official day at her new job. She’d had a few training shifts at a bar a couple of train stops from their apartment, but tonight she’d have a full shift, and somehow that necessitated some Lodge fashion advice.

(Look, Jughead gets it. A pretty girl with a particular outfit plus a steady flow of alcohol equals great tips. He's not stupid.)

The real problem is that Veronica seems to want to use him as a gauge for the Male Opinion. He doesn't mind helping, and despite his loner status and general vibe he does indeed have a Male Opinion. However, Betty seems incredibly embarrassed every time she comes out with a different outfit on, and it feels unfair. Jughead can tell she's nervous enough about her first shift without needing to worry about his completely irrelevant opinion. Or anyone else's, for that matter.

“What about this?” Veronica asks, gesturing to the entrance to Betty’s room. Betty appears in a pair of navy blue shorts and a slim-fitting cream-coloured tank top that seems to cinch at the waist. The neck scoops down and the shorts are quite short, so he assumes that the main criteria are met, and shrugs.

“It's fine,” he says, noting the hint of exasperation in his own voice.

Veronica puts a hand on her hip. “That's not very helpful!”

Jughead makes eye contact with Betty, who is giving him a deeply apologetic look. He quirks one corner of his mouth upward at her, then looks at Veronica. “What?! Do you want a Vogue-style review? Two pages and an editorial spread?”

“No, but an opinion other than ‘it’s fine’ would be nice. You're the writer, Jughead. Use your words.”

Jughead rolls his eyes at Veronica. “Jesus Christ,” he mutters to himself. “Fine, she looks beautiful! But she always does.” He throws a hand up, frustrated, and looks back at the laptop perched on his knees. He hears his own words and knows he should probably feel some kind of
embarrassment for them, but it's the truth. He thinks Betty is gorgeous, no matter what she's wearing. It's just an objective fact. The sky is blue, grass is green, Betty is pretty. “She can wear whatever she wants.”

Veronica beams at him and clasps her hands together. “Finally, the response I wanted. Time to accessorize.” She skips into Betty's bedroom, leaving Betty standing in the living room.

She's fidgeting and Jughead tries to ignore her, but then a moment later she sits beside him on the couch and kisses his cheek. “Thanks,” she says in her soft, quiet voice. “She's just trying to help. But I appreciate you stopping it all the same.”

His skin feels like it's burning where she's kissed him, radiating outward in what he recognizes in a moment of horror is him blushing. “It’s just the truth,” Jughead tells his computer screen.

“Well, you're sweet anyway.” Betty places a hand on his forearm and smiles warmly at him, then stands up and follows Veronica into her bedroom.

Jughead stares at the vacated space for a moment, then shakes his head and turns back to his screen. Despite all the mysteries in all of the books he’d solved as a child, he'd never quite been able to figure out women.

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Jughead is still up when Betty comes home from work around 1:30 in the morning, watching a Netflix documentary on Hunter S. Thompson. This is normally his most productive writing time - he's definitely a night owl - but tonight he has no inspiration and his laptop lays discarded on the coffee table.

His hand is halfway to a bowl of popcorn when the apartment door creaks open and Betty slips through. She sets her purse down on the counter, then turns around as she slips off her jacket. Her eyes flash in recognition when she sees him sitting on the couch.

“I don't know why I thought you might be asleep,” Betty comments, taking her heeled shoes off and walking over to the living room.

Jughead smiles at her. “Have you ever seen me asleep before 2?”
“No, but I'm always asleep before then.” She sinks into the armchair and reaches up, freeing her hair from the ponytail with a sigh. Betty threads her fingers through her hair, eyes closing briefly.

“Long night?” Jughead guesses, turning down the volume of the TV.

Betty is quiet for a moment. The corner of her bottom lip draws into her mouth and she shrugs. “It was okay,” she says, eyes moving down to look at her hands. Jughead follows her gaze and for a moment thinks he sees something on her palm, but then she turns them away. “Lots of tips,” she adds.

“So the outfit did the trick after all,” Jughead comments, leaning back on the couch to stretch.

Betty touches the hem of her shorts and fidgets with it briefly, then stands up. “Yeah, I guess,” she answers quietly. “I'm going to go change. I'll be right back.”

Jughead frowns slightly as he watches her disappear into the bedroom. She seems… off, not as bubbly and upbeat as she usually is. It's late, of course, and she’s obviously had a long night of serving drinks to idiots in a dingy bar. Jughead isn’t a big fan of the place she’d gotten a job; he’s been there a few times, mostly because it was close, but it had a tendency to get pretty rowdy at night (although it wasn’t that bad during the early evening). To Jughead, it doesn’t seem like a place that Betty fits, but she’s also an adult who can make her own decisions. He understands the importance of a part-time job with school-friendly hours, and if she can make more in tips by working less (although slightly shitty) hours, all the power to her.

When she returns she’s wearing pajamas underneath an oversized cardigan, which she’s wrapped tightly around herself. Betty sits down beside him wordlessly and tucks her feet underneath herself.

“How’s everything okay?” Jughead asks, looking over. He’s mildly concerned about her, not having seen much of this quiet, somewhat sullen side of Betty before.

She leans over and grabs the remote for the TV. “Yes,” she says, and turns the volume up.
The following morning, Betty seems back to her regular self, and Jughead chalks up her previous behaviour to nerves and exhaustion. When he wakes up around ten, she’s eating a slice of the egg-white quiche she’d made the previous morning. Her wet hair is pulled into a messy bun on top of her head, running shoes carelessly discarded by the door, and Jughead can’t understand how she has enough energy to have gone out for a morning jog.

They both spend their Saturday working on stuff for school, Jughead writing from his favourite perch on the couch, and Betty editing clips for a class. She’s got a desk in her bedroom that she typically uses for studying, but today, for some reason, she’s chosen to work at the tiny kitchen table that nobody uses. They coexist in relative peace and quiet for much of the day, and it’s kind of comforting.

Betty has another shift that night. This time she dresses herself, leaving in black jeans and a tank top. The jeans are tighter and the top lower-cut than seems typical, but she seems a lot more comfortable as she walks out the door than she had the night previous. Jughead finds himself hoping sincerely that she has a better night than she’d seemed to yesterday.

He spends the evening writing and playing video games. As the night progresses, Jughead catches himself glancing over at the entranceway every so often, and by 2:15 he’s essentially just staring at the apartment door. It’s weird, he thinks, to expect someone again. Even when Archie had lived here, he was always in and out at all hours, especially before settling down with Veronica. But Betty has been such a creature of habit, always reliable in her routine, that this break in it has thrown even him for a bit of a loop.

She gets home just as the illuminated face of Jughead’s cell phone turns to 2:28. Jughead sits up, his back sore from a day of immobility, and like the day before, he watches her shed her shoes, purse, and jacket.

“How was it today?” he asks, scanning her face as she turns around.

Betty’s facial expression is difficult to read, mouth set in a neutral line and hands curled together, but like always her deeply expressive eyes give her away. They’re bloodshot but not red-rimmed and he knows that means exhaustion. She sits beside him and pulls her knees up to her chest.

“It was better,” she says, and he believes her.

The nights seem to get easier for her after this. Jughead doesn’t know what switched was flipped, but the next weekend when Betty leaves for a shift at the bar her shoulders are a little more square and her eyes icier. She still comes home tired, but this time she animatedly tells him all about a groom-to-be who came in for his bachelor party and left wearing a lime green minidress, and
there’s a smile on her face.

She still sits with him after, and Jughead thinks that 3:00 am might be his favourite time of day.

--

The semester rolls on, and before Jughead knows it, it’s late October. All of the trees near Jughead’s apartment are in the beautiful in-between stage where their leaves have fully transitioned to reds and yellows and oranges but have yet to fall completely away. He loves the rich colours, the way they blend together and smear in the breeze. Fall has always made him wish he was a painter instead of a writer. He thinks the instant gratification of seeing his work would be more rewarding, but every time he’s tried to pick up a brush all he do is stare at a canvas blankly.

When he looks at an empty page, however, his fingers itch for a keyboard, and the words just flow.

(If only life were like that.)

Long-winded musings on avian migration and the autumnal equinox float around the corner of Jughead’s mind as he steps off of his building’s elevator with his backpack in tow. It’s around 7:30 on a Tuesday evening, and he’s starving. Jughead unlocks the door to his apartment, hoping that Betty had kept up with the tradition she’d begun a few weeks prior and made tacos.

But when he steps in, there is no scent of ground beef or chicken, and the kitchen is empty. Jughead can see her blonde hair on the couch in the living room and ventures over cautiously, part of him anticipating some kind of emotional crisis.

Instead, he finds Betty hunched over a tiny, wriggling mass of orange-coloured fur. She raises her head and stares at him with enormous sad eyes. “Juggie,” she says, a nickname she’d transitioned to recently, “the poor sweet thing. I found it near the dumpster in the alley.” Her lower lip trembles. “We have to keep it, please.”

Jughead hesitates. “A cat? In this small apartment?” he asks, and when her eyes well with tears he knows it is the wrong thing to say. He’d always wanted a pet, but pets were for families with big houses and extra money, not kids in trailer parks and foster homes. It was part of a dream life he’d let go of long ago, one where bottles didn’t break and fathers didn’t live behind bars.
“It was totally alone,” Betty says in an almost-whisper. She’s feeding the kitten string cheese from her fingertips. “It doesn’t have anyone, Juggie.”

(He knows what that’s like.)

The kitten finishes the string cheese and mewls pathetically at Betty. She pets its tiny head gently and the kitten curls up in her lap. She coos at it, smothering it with love, and the dull murmur of the kitten purring starts. Jughead thinks that Betty is trying a little harder than she needs to - all the kitten probably wants is food and a safe place to lay its head, after all - until he realizes that love isn’t just what she gives, it’s what she is. And all of a sudden, he can’t deny her.

So he nods, “Okay. It can stay.”

They take the kitten to the vet, who tells them that it’s a girl and sells them overpriced formula. A litterbox is set up in the storage room and Betty spends the next four days doting over the ball of fluff, which barely gives Jughead the time of day.

On Friday, Betty works her regular shift at the bar. The kitten follows her to the door and mewls sadly when she slips her heeled boots on. Jughead has to give the kitten credit: she’s a smart little demon, having figured out pretty quickly that shoes meant Betty was leaving. That morning she’d perched herself inside one of Betty’s runners, trying to prevent her from going to school, and even Jughead had to admit it was adorable.

Betty giggles at the cat, crouching down to pet her. “Bye little lady,” she coos, “I’ll be home before you know it.” She stands up and grabs her purse, slinging it across herself. “See you later, Juggie.”

Jughead gives her a little salute in response. It makes her smile, then with a wave, she’s gone.

The kitten mewls at the door for a few seconds, then turns and looks at Jughead, who is settling in for an evening of video games and old cotton candy he’d bought in Central Park the day before. The kitten steps cautiously toward the couch and tilts her head as if she’s appraising him. He raises an eyebrow at her.

“I don’t bite,” Jughead says, and the kitten hops into his lap.
She turns around a few times, trying to find a comfortable position, and finally settles in the groove between his thighs, fluffy belly facing up. She begins to purr, and Jughead smiles. He extends a finger and rubs one of her tiny paws, chuckling when she pulls it away in mild annoyance.

“I knew you couldn’t stay away forever, Caramel.”

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Chapter End Notes

I know this was a bit short, but there are some pretty long chapters upcoming (hopefully soon!).

I continue to be overwhelmed by the support this has gotten so far. Please leave a comment if you enjoyed it :)

(PS - who knew Ben from Friends would have MOVES?!)
Warning: the following chapter contains a depiction of sexual assault. It's not explicit, but if that's not something you're okay reading or if the subject matter is triggering for you I would recommend skipping it. This and the next chapter will deal primarily with specific events and fallout, so chapter seven would be likely be best to resume if you so chose.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Let me sink in the silence that echoes inside,
And don’t bother leaving the light on.

- “The Child Is Gone”, Fiona Apple

“Gin and tonic, vodka soda, and a tequila sunrise,” Betty recites as she sets drinks down in front of three girls. “Do you guys need anything else right now?”

One of the girls peers at her, clearly intoxicated. “Gin and tonic,” she slurs. “Oh! It’s right here.” She giggles and shoves a twenty dollar bill at Betty. “Guys, it’s right here,” she informs her friends.

Her friends giggle back at her, and Betty takes that as a “no, I don’t need anything else, thank you”. She tucks the tray under her arm and moves to check on her next table, mildly annoyed that the skirt she’s wearing doesn’t have any pockets for her to shove the twenty in. She’d spent quite a while developing a bar-waitress wardrobe where nearly all of the bottoms had pockets, and of all days, today was the day that she wasn’t allowed to wear any of it.

Betty places the blame for this entirely on her boss. She had already been dreading working Halloween when her boss had come up with the bright idea for all the servers to wear matching costumes so that they could be more easily identified in the crowd of people that was expected to show up. Betty had been against it largely because she knew that whatever the costume was, it probably wasn’t going to be anything she would ever actually wear in public. She’d been right: the next time she came into work, a cheerleader outfit was waiting in the back office for her to try on.
It’s a cruel irony, Betty thinks, running her hand across the costume skirt. She’d wanted to be a cheerleader so badly when she was in high school, but she’d never made the cut. Cheryl, the head cheerleader, held a grudge against Betty’s family because their siblings had dated and broken up. Or at least that was what Kevin had insisted to her was the reason. Officially, Cheryl had told her that she was too fat to be a cheerleader, and that she didn’t fit the look they were going for. The Riverdale Vixens were sexy, edgy, and dangerous - not plain, nice, and boring like Betty.

Eight years ago, wearing this costume would have made Betty so happy. And now, it just makes her miserable.

Although maybe not this exact costume, Betty thinks, because this is definitely a Halloween costume for going out and not at all a cheerleading uniform that could ever exist in a real high school. The skirt is too short, the top too cropped, her breasts too on display. No school in their right mind would let fifteen-year-olds dress like this. (Or she hoped, anyway.) The plus to the outfit was - well, it was effective for picking out waitresses, to have them in the same costume with the bar’s name emblazoned across the chest. And the tips so far are amazing; she’s already hit her Friday-night average total by nine-thirty, and she’s only been here since eight.

On the downside (and it was mostly downsides), everybody extremely drunk. Halloween seemed to bring out the worst in people, in Betty’s opinion. She’d loved Halloween as a kid, but as it turned out, she loathed it as an adult who worked in a bar. Mean Girls is a documentary, Betty thinks as taking a drink order from a girl who is essentially just dressed in lingerie with cat ears. The girls are all mostly scantily-clad (herself included, she recognizes), and the guys are all dressed either as gladiators if they’re in good shape or as some sort of half-masked superheroes if they’re not.

Betty doesn’t quite understand, but she thinks it must have something to do with the latest Marvel blockbuster. Either way, both types of guys are annoying her, because they’re both generally pretty excessively drunk. And that leads to the behaviour that she can’t handle.

Case in point: Betty is making her way back to the bar to procure the cat-girl a paralyzer and some tequila shots when a strong arm snags her around the waist. She yelps as she’s hauled against the hard body of a tall guy in chaps and a cowboy hat.

He presses his mouth to her ear to speak over the incredible noise that comes with having three hundred people crammed into a bar that is regulated for two hundred and fifty, tops. “Hey babe, can I get another Sam Adams?” he breathes, the scent of alcohol wafting past Betty.

Betty unwraps his arm from her waist, her face polite but stern. This happens on occasion - people get drunk and handsy, as their manners have lowered along with their inhibitions. She struggled a lot with it the first few shifts, not comfortable with the blatant staring and the overtly sexist comments about her legs or her breasts that would sometimes accompany a drink order. The
bouncers were pretty lax with simple commentary, but they would certainly act if it ever got physical. That had provided her a bit of comfort, but Betty figured out in the first couple of weeks of working there that she was going to have to develop a thicker skin if she was going to hack it.

And truthfully, it’s not constant. Most people on regular nights are fine and normal, and if they do anything stupid while drunk it’s typically directed at someone they’re at the bar with, not her. She doesn’t give a shit about that. Even the lewd comments are manageable. It’s the touching she can’t handle, being grabbed and yanked to place an order, and that’s already happened to her multiple times tonight.

“A Sam Adams, okay. Does anyone need anything else?” she asks the table he’s standing with, who are all also dressed like cowboys. City kids, she guesses, because Betty knows small-town farmer types, and they don’t wear cowboy hats.

She takes orders for a couple more drinks, mostly beers, and is turning to take an order from the last member of the group when a hand finds purchase on the back of her thigh. Betty whirls around in shock to see the cowboy grinning at her. He shoves his hand up her skirt and grabs her ass. “I’ll take your phone number too, if that’s on the menu,” he mutters to her, lifting his hand and then bringing it back down with an audible smack.

Betty shrieks and shoves away from him. Her head goes blank and the next thing she knows, she’s slapping him across the face. The bouncers are there in seconds to haul him away, but Betty is already halfway to the back office.

She finds it mercifully empty and slips inside, closing the door and sliding down against it to the floor. Betty curls her fists tightly and tries to breathe, focusing on the stinging pain in her palms rather than where his fingers had dug into her flesh. She hates this, hates strangers grabbing at her, especially tall men who have seventy-five pounds of muscle on her.

(It’s too familiar, the feeling of helplessness. It’s just like it.)

Betty had spent the first two weeks that she worked here second-guessing her choice to be a server. It was possible that this wasn’t the healthiest place for someone with her experiences to be on a regular basis, but the restaurant job hadn’t panned out and Betty needed money. Her funding alone was likely not going to be sufficient to live in New York, at least not in the way that she wanted, not without worrying every five minutes about the balance of her chequing account and whether she could afford to go home for Christmas. There was a posting in a coffee shop a few blocks from Betty’s apartment, and although the hours didn’t necessarily work as well as a bar, Betty had been strongly considering it.
After tonight, she’s definitely applying, she thinks.

Betty screws her eyes shut and takes three deep breathes, pretending momentarily that she’s in yoga and this is at the end of a *savasana*. Just another class, she tells herself.

(Everything’s fine.)

After another moment, Betty stands up and wipes the blood off of her hands with a paper towel. *You can handle this*, she tells herself silently. The bouncers have kicked him out. Only a couple more hours, and then she can go home and curl up on the couch with Caramel and Jughead. Maybe Jughead would let her pick out the rerun of *The Office* this time, she muses, and the thought makes her smile.

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Last call is at 2:00 but it takes until 3:00 to get everyone out of the bar, so it’s not until nearly 3:30 that Betty is even able to leave. Since it’s the end of October - now November, actually - Betty refuses to wear her cheerleader costume home, and changes before leaving. Apart from the fact that she never wants to wear it again, she’s pretty sure she’d freeze to death.

And of course, because it’s the middle of the goddamn night, the train has stopped running. Betty tightens her jacket around herself as she walks down the nearly empty streets in the direction of her apartment. If a cab passes by she’ll hail it, but if not, she’s resigned herself to walking the twenty-five minutes home. It’s not ideal but she has earbuds and podcasts, and she’ll be fine. She’s always fine.

(Until she isn’t.)

Betty’s gone a few blocks from the bar when someone suddenly appears behind her. The volume is up on her phone, so she doesn’t realize it until he’s beside her, and it makes her jump.

Betty pulls the earbuds out of her ear hastily. “Sorry, I didn’t see--” she begins, but stops when she sees who it is.

It’s *him*, the cowboy from earlier, the one who’d grabbed her and gotten thrown out of the bar. And judging by the look in his red eyes, he’s wandered right into some other bar for more drinks. She swallows, an uneasy feeling coming over her. Betty channels all of her Alice Cooper iciness
and walking forward more quickly.

He’s taller than her, significantly so, and matches her strides with ease. “Waited around for you, babe. Didn’t wanna leave without saying goodbye.”

Betty frowns deeply, and her pulse begins to race. “I don’t know you,” she says with finality, eyes scanning desperately for anyone else on the surrounding streets and finding no one. Her hand shakes as she tries to grab her phone from her pocket.

“Sure you do, babe.” He grabs her wrist, fingers gripping painfully, and Betty’s chest tightens. “You may have lost that little cheerleader get up, but I bet you’re still just as much of a slut.”

Betty tries to jerk her wrist away, but he twists it and tugs her toward him. She lets out a yelp of pain that is quickly silenced when he shoves her against the brick wall of a nearby furniture store that Betty’s been in once before. It sells cheaply made imports and vintage plumbing fixtures; a mix of new and old, like Brooklyn. For a moment, Betty is paralyzed. He grabs her other wrist and pins it above her head with the other, holding both in one impossibly strong hand. He leans in as if to kiss her, and Betty jerks her head to the side so that he only catches her jaw.

“Get off me!” she screams, trying in vain to push against his hands. His body is pressed fully against hers now, knees pinned at the side, and his free hand has unzipped her jacket. Her heart is pounding, terrified, no, how is it happening again--

“Shut the fuck up,” he hisses, knocking the back of her head against the wall roughly. Betty’s mouth opens in pain but no sound comes out, and he sneers at her with a drunken grin. “Good girl, good girl,” he chants, sliding his free hand underneath her sweater. She drops her chin, dizzy.

(And suddenly, she’s pressed against the nylon upholstery in the back of a car, the same sense of nervous foreboding lodged in her throat, the same paralyzing fear, the same ignored pleas, with a different unwelcome hand inside her shirt.)

(But this is not Riverdale, and she is not fifteen.)

“These are a surprise, babe,” he’s panting into her ear, hand fighting with her bra. The back of Betty’s head is throbbing, the pain radiating behind her eyes, and it’s hard to concentrate. “You’d never guess in this sweater, but that slutty little costume - yeah.” She manages to lift her head, eyes unfocused. His face swims in and out of view. “This ass looks just as good, though.” He grabs it, fingers reaching too closely between her legs, and in a moment of sheer panic and memory,
Betty’s haze clears.

“Get off of me!” she shrieks, finally managing to wrench her right arm from his grip. Betty tugs her arm between their bodies and desperately slams her elbow into the middle of his face, hearing a dull crunch.

He immediately lets her go and doubles over in pain, clutching his face. Betty doesn’t look, doesn’t stop try to memorize any distinct features, doesn’t wait around for help. When she runs, she doesn’t even look back to see if he’s following her, just puts one foot in front of the other at the quickest pace she can manage with a throbbing head and unfocused vision.

Betty reaches a busier street with a few cabs and people milling around, but she doesn’t stop there either. She just keeps going, past darkened subway stations and emptied storefronts, through a crowd of the last vestiges of costumed partygoers, until she finally reaches her apartment building.

It’s incredibly late now, nearly 4:00, and Betty hopes and prays that Jughead is asleep. All she wants is to get in the shower and scrub away the memories, new and old, and erase the feeling of their hands on her body.

Betty has no such luck. He’s sitting on the couch when she walks in, petting Caramel and watching TV with mild disinterest on his face. He looks up when she drops her backpack on the floor unceremoniously. Betty ducks her face to block him from seeing what she assumes must be tear stains and shame. She crosses by him in a hurry, hoping to reach her bedroom without any sort of interaction, but he stops her with his voice.

“Betty.”

She halts her footsteps but doesn’t turn around. “It’s been a long night, Jug. I’m going to bed.” She feels badly about the shortness of her tone, but she cannot do this now, can’t tell him, can’t talk about it. There’s too much. It’s too much. She steps toward her bedroom again, but he catches her wrist gently to stop her. The soreness from the abuse they took has already started to sink in, and she hisses in pain.

Jughead immediately lets go and steps in front of her, his blue eyes full of concern. “Betty, what…” he trails off, and her eyes close. He’s looking at her, and she’s terrified to open her eyes and see recognition on his face. He doesn’t know about her, about who she is and what’s happened. It’s been wonderful, to have people with that blank slate. To have him. They’re just starting to be friends, and sometimes in lingering moments, she thinks maybe there could be something more.
But that’ll be over once he knows, because nobody glues a vase back together. They just throw away the broken pieces.

“Betty,” he says again, but his voice is soft and careful. “What happened?”

She finally opens her eyes, avoiding his immediately, and glances down at herself. She can feel the stiffness of dried tears on her cheeks and knows her face must be a mess of tears and mascara, but it’s her shirt - torn across the front, she hadn’t realized - that likely gives the rest of it away. “Just an asshole after work,” Betty explains. “I’m okay.”

Jughead folds one of his arms across his stomach and raises the other to his head, hand covering his mouth. “Fucking Christ,” he swears into his fingers, then drops them to his side as he tries to choke out his question. “Betty, did someone - god, I can’t - somebody hurt you? Somebody did this.”

She’s ready to square her shoulders and nod, then march past him and ignore the rest of this whole shitty night, but when she opens her mouth she accidentally meets his eyes and all that comes out is a strangled choking noise.

(No more crying.)

It should be easy to ignore him. She likes him, sure, but they don’t really know each other that well. She’s still forgettable, still replaceable. There are more peppy blondes where she came from. But the look on his face reminds Betty of what Veronica had said a month earlier - when he cares, he cares a lot, and somehow she’s found herself in that exclusive club. There’s steely resolve behind his softened concern, and she knows he won’t drop this. So Betty just nods, wrapping her arms around herself, and looks at the floor.

“Okay.” Jughead swallows. “Did - do we need to go to the hospital?”

The words come out choked, like he can’t imagine he’d ever need to speak them, and Betty understands. Nobody wants to use the word rape. It’s not for polite company. She hates it too, hates the insinuations that come with, the automatic victimization. There’s a twitch out of the corner of her eye, and she glances over to see his hands trembling, one foot tapping nervously. He’s terrified of her reply, she realizes, and Betty finds herself feeling bad for him even though she’s the one with the answer.
“No.”

He gives a great sigh of relief, then pauses. “But your shirt--” Jughead begins, stopping again. He shakes his head, running a hand through his hair nervously.

She casts her eyes back to the floor where Caramel is nestled on Jughead’s discarded beanie, and tells him.

When she’s done, he turns away slightly, wandering over to the kitchen table. His palms lay flat on it, head dropping between his shoulders, and eventually he says, “Okay, let’s go to the police station.”

“Absolutely not,” Betty snaps, because this is the one thing in this whole terrible night that she has control over. “I’m going to shower and I’m going to bed.”

Jughead stands up, a look of alarm on his face. “What? Betty. You have to report it.”

“I don’t have to do anything,” she informs him.

He’s shocked into silence, as though he can’t believe what he’s hearing, and Betty gets it. He’s naive, like she’d been, but he will never be in her shoes. Her eyes harden, aching with the late hour and the burn of tears long shed.

“Betty--”

“If you’re going to tell me that it’s my duty, don’t bother, Jughead,” Betty interrupts, he’s silent and staring, eyes piercing at her. She breathes out quickly, but it isn’t a sigh. There is no relief here.

He’s looking at her with a mixture of pity and frustration, and he obviously doesn’t understand. She watches as his hand runs through his hair again. It’s longer than she expected, she observes silently. Wavy. Dark. Like her.

“I did that once,” Betty finally adds, taking pity on him. He just stare at her, the implication settling in, and she continues. “It made everything so much worse.”
Then she disappears into the bathroom, and this time he doesn’t stop her.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, here's the deal. I am nervous to post this, because the subject matter is very difficult for many people, and also because I am not sure that it's in line with what people's expectations for this story are. That said, I have the whole thing planned in detail and this is a critical element of what I'm trying to tell. I have attempted to handle this as carefully as possible and I hope it doesn't send too many of you running for the hills. If this chapter bothered you the next will likely be something you'll want to skip as more of Betty's past will be revealed.

My intention is not for this to be a maudlin heal-me-handsome-man sort of story. I don't find anything interesting in that. And as we know, both Betty and Jughead have some heavy shit in their histories, even in AU's. It's about coming together despite that, not because of it. So please hang tight, and if you're still with me leave a comment <3
Chapter Notes

Once again this chapter contains content which may be troubling to some readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Me and a gun and a man on my back,

But I haven’t seen Barbados so I must get out of this

- “Me and A Gun”, Tori Amos

Around 7:00am the sun begins to stream light blues through his bedroom window, illuminating the otherwise dark room. Normally on a Saturday, this is when Jughead would roll over with a groan and bury himself in his sheets to fall back asleep, but today is different. Sleep has not yet come.

All he can think about is Betty.

Last night feels like a nightmare that he hasn’t woken up from, and if it feels that way to him, he can’t begin to imagine how it feels for her. It had began like a regular weekend night, apart from the few trick-or-treaters that had come through the building around 7:00. Betty had gone to work, and he’d spent his evening playing video games over the Internet with Archie, then alone once Archie left for a Halloween party with Veronica. After awhile, it had transitioned to Netflix and kitten cuddles (his new favourite, not that he’d ever admit it to Betty), then to Netflix and mild concern as time marched forward without Betty coming home. He’d anticipated her being later than usual, given that Halloween was always horribly busy, but 4:00 am was a bit much.

But then she came home crying with bruised wrists and a torn shirt, and he forgot all about how late it was.

After unsuccessfully encouraging her to report her attack to the police, Betty had dropped a second bomb: this wasn't the first time she’d experienced something like this. That had truly silenced him, and she’d gone to shower. Jughead had wandered into his bedroom, laid down on the bed, and stared at the ceiling. He has a lot of questions and knows he's not entitled to any answers, but mostly he's just worried.
It explained a fair bit about Betty’s response to her first few nights at the bar. That environment can not be easy for someone who has been through that. God. It’s illogical and he knows it, but he can’t quit thinking about how he just did nothing. He should have tried to get her a job at the library, asked her more questions, pressed to confirm that she was okay, something. Anything.

“Fuck,” Jughead swears, rolling over angrily and grabbing his sheets in his fist. Obviously, he doesn't think anyone could possibly deserve for something like that to happen to them, but Betty…

Noise from outside in the hallway interrupts his thoughts, and he hears the telltale signs of Betty feeding Caramel and then putting her running shoes on. Jughead sits up on his elbows and debates going out to tell her that it's foolish to be going for a run on less than three hours’ sleep. Then he remembers that she knows exactly what kind of night she had, and he lays back down. He can’t pretend to know she might be going through. If her regular run helps, he’s all for it.

The apartment door closes, and a few seconds later, Jughead’s partially closed door is pushed open slightly. Jughead doesn’t even bother looking over, because two seconds later the furry intruder hops on his bed and settles on his chest. Jughead sighs and places his hand on her little back, petting her lazily. “Hi Caramel.”

Caramel flicks her fluffy tail at his face and begins to purr. Jughead smiles despite himself. His phone buzzes, and he reaches for it with mild confusion. Nobody he knows texts him at 7:00am on a weekend. He swipes it unlocked and sees a waiting email in his google account. Frowning, Jughead clicks on it.

It’s from Betty. He sits up immediately, ignoring Caramel’s mewl of irritation. She hasn’t actually written anything in the email, but there are three links beneath the empty subject line. He clicks on the first one.

It’s an old newspaper article dated seven years prior. He notes the same about the others before returning to read the first in its entirety, eyes scanning rapidly on the small screen of his cell phone. The article is from a small town in upstate New York called Riverdale. Jughead recognizes as the name of the place that Betty grew up, but it’s the headline that really catches his eye: Star Quarterback Accused of Rape. His stomach churns at the words, and he looks away for a moment to gather the courage to continue.

The article is fairly short and focuses mostly on the accused, a high-school quarterback with several prominent college football offers, and provides only high-level details on the allegations. The gist of it seemed to be that the quarterback and the victim had gone on a date, and on the date he had allegedly sexually assaulted her. Neither he nor the victim are named, noting that both are under the age of eighteen, but Jughead knows in his gut that this is about Betty.
He feels sick to his stomach at the thought, and starts to think about every time he’s read similar stories. It always seemed like something … else, something abstract. Until now. It gets worse with the second article, which is dated months after the first. He’d expected to read about court proceedings, guilty pleas, and prison sentences. Instead, he learns that the accused admitted they’d had sex, but insisted that it was consensual. Charges were dropped for lack of evidence, and with that the justice system had apparently absolved itself of any responsibility.

On the surface, the third article seems unrelated to the first two. It’s a small piece about a local small-town kid done good, a football player named Chuck Clayton who’d received a full-ride scholarship to Notre Dame. But in the context of the other pieces Betty had sent, it feels like a kick to the gut. Jughead closes the article and after a few seconds on Google, discovers that Chuck Clayton is now playing for the Tennessee Titans. Not one of the better NFL teams, but - still, an NFL team.

Jughead is horrified. There were really no consequences. He gets to go be a professional football player, and Betty - well, Betty is left to pick up the pieces. He thinks about the way she’d looked last night, her devastated tearstained expression, and his heart breaks for her all over again. He never wants to see that look on her face again, and feels a strong urge to pummel the person who put it there into the ground. Noting that that isn’t possible, Jughead racks his brain, trying to think of some other way he could possibly help.

He comes up empty, and he lets out an angry huff of frustration. She’d looked pained and heartbroken when he’d stopped her in the hallway, which in retrospect was expected. What he hadn’t anticipated - what he still doesn’t fully understand - is why she looked embarrassed, too. It was clear that she hadn’t planned on him finding out about this, probably never, but especially not in this way. Jughead fully understands wanting control of one’s own narrative; he’s had his share of shitty things happen in his life, and he likes to choose who gets to know about it. But he’s not ashamed of his past, not anymore, and he hates that she’s still in that place.

Jughead tugs Caramel toward him with a palm under her soft belly, tucking her into his neck as he rolls to one side. Her purrs intensify as he closes his eyes, and he sails that sea into darkness.

--

He wakes up just after noon. Caramel has abandoned him, so Jughead knows Betty must be home. He gets out of bed and glances across the short hallway to Betty's room. The door is closed, but there’s quiet music playing, and if he listens hard enough Jughead can hear Betty singing along softly.

It makes him smile.
He takes a quick shower and makes himself a ham sandwich. It's tremendously basic, but Jughead doesn't mind. He loves Betty's cooking, but before Betty there was takeout, and before takeout there were ham sandwiches in his parents' old trailer. Of course, they also came with drunken arguments, broken bottles, and disappointment, but that kind of pain is like an old friend to Jughead. It's oddly comforting, like stale bread and expired soup. Or ham sandwiches.

He's eating it on the couch when the door to Betty's bedroom opens. She comes out wearing black sweatpants and a long-sleeved grey shirt. Her eyes are puffy but she's not crying, nor does she look devastated in quite the same manner that she had the night before.

She does look incredibly apprehensive, though, regarding him with what may even be a slight fear. Jughead sets his plate down on the coffee table as soon as he sees her.

“Betty,” he says, her name coming out somewhat choked as he rushes to swallow the last bite.

Betty walks around the coffee table, glancing at the black screen of the TV, and sits beside him on the couch. “Hi. Did you get my email?”

Jughead nods. “Yes.”

“Okay,” she responds, and leans over to grab the remote. Betty turns on his Netflix and starts an episode of The Office. Jughead recognizes it immediately as the premiere to season three, when Jim has just transferred to Stamford. She seems pretty immersed in it, but Jughead can't focus. He’s still stuck on the look she'd given him, like she wasn't sure how he'd react now that he'd found out all her secrets. It was a defensive move, he realizes, a reflex.

But she doesn't have to defend herself from him, and he needs her to know. So he starts talking.

“When I was eight, my parents got divorced and my mom moved away. Allegedly to Toledo, but for all I know that isn't actually true. She took my little sister with her.” Jughead chews on the inside of his cheek. He glances at Betty, who has turned away from The Office and is watching him. “For the first little bit, we talked on the phone, but after a while it became harder to get a hold of her, and by the time I was ten I only got birthday cards. The last one of those that I got was when I turned thirteen.”

“Juggie,” Betty begins, but Jughead holds up a hand to silence her, and she obeys.
“For a while it was me and my dad, but he's been an alcoholic my whole life and honestly, has not been very good at the whole parenting thing. I spent a lot of time at Archie’s. A lot. My dad was arrested when I was eleven - charged were ultimately dropped, but he spent a few weeks in prison. That was the first time I moved in with Archie.”

Jughead takes a deep breath in and then exhales. It's been a long time since he's had to recount a lot of this, and he doesn't think he's ever actually told anyone the whole story at once.

“Eventually Dad got his act together a little, and that's when we moved to New York. I told you I moved here when I was thirteen? What I didn't tell you was that a year later I moved to New Jersey to live with Archie and his dad. They'd just moved there. Because my dad was arrested again, but this time it stuck, and nobody could find my mom and sister. So after that, I lived at Archie’s in Newark. But we came to the city every weekend so it sort of feels like I still lived here.”

“Jughead.”

He turns and meets her eyes, his heartbeat quickening with the adrenaline of getting this all out on the table. “For years, I thought I was the one that drove them away - Mom, Jellybean, even my dad. Like I wasn't enough to stick around for, or to stay clean for. It took a while, but I know now that it wasn't my fault that any of it happened.” Jughead reaches out to grab her hand, but thinks better of it and ended up awkwardly placing his hand down on the couch between them. “It isn't yours, either,” he adds gently, and they both know what he means.

Betty’s eyes are wide with surprise, the green swimming in tears. “Juggie,” she says softly, reaching slightly over and grabbing his hand. “Thank you. You didn't have to tell me all of that.”

Jughead smiles at her and shrugs. “Your shit was all out there. Now mine is too.” He squeezes her hand.

Betty’s lower lip draws between her teeth, and she shuffles over on the couch until their legs are nearly touching. She doesn't say anything as she settles back into the cushion beside him, but the silence is comfortable. Jughead threads their fingers together and rubs the back of her hand with his thumb. He stares at the TV, allowing himself to focus on Michael Scott making a fool out of himself for a few minutes, until there's a weight on his shoulder and he realizes it's Betty's head.

(Now he’ll never focus on anything else.)
They watch until the episode ends, and Netflix autoplays into the next. He's never much liked the beginning of this season, missing the Jim-Dwight interaction with Jim gone, but he'd watch these episodes over and over again if he could do it with her like this.

They're three episodes deep into the season before Betty speaks again. Her voice catches Jughead off guard, and his arm twitches.

“He was a senior,” she says. “Chuck. He was the quarterback of the football team, his father was the coach, he was good looking, all-American, that whole thing. I was fifteen, and he was a senior.”

She doesn't need to do this, but he also doesn't need to tell her. Betty has a firm trip on his hand that only gets tighter as she tells her story. He keeps stroking with his thumb, stable and consistent.

“I was so excited when he asked me out.” Betty gives a quiet, empty laugh. “He was so popular and I was just this goody-two-shoes. I spent hours getting ready. I was so happy--” Her voice cracks, and she breathes out slowly.

Jughead squeezes her hand.

“I was so happy,” she repeats. “I thought maybe someone was finally seeing me as more than just that girl that organized everything and ran the paper and had internships at the mayor’s office. I was so stupid. So fucking stupid.” There's a sniffling sound, and Jughead closes his eyes against it.

“It's okay, Betty,” he says abruptly, unable to keep it in any longer.

(It's okay, you don't have to say anything more; it's okay, you're still here.)

Betty turns slightly to face his direction, pressing her forehead into his shoulder. “I want to tell you,” she whispers. “Please.”

Jughead swallows again, his chest tightening. He'd had questions, but that was before - before she was beside him, before he knew that he didn't want the answers. “Okay,” he says back, and he doesn't think his voice has ever been so quiet.
Betty turns her face back, but her head stays on his shoulder, and her hand weaves even further into his. She's silent for another minute before speaking again. “I was a bit of a late bloomer, but I'd finally had a growth spurt the summer before. And I guess... I guess that was what he was mostly interested in. We went to a movie, then on the way home he took me to the Point, and...” she trails off, her voice shaking. “I said no, Jug. I said no. But he was so strong.”

Onscreen, the Stamford and Scranton branches are merging.

“Afterward, I went to the police with my older sister and pressed charges, but...well, you know how it turned out. He had a fancy lawyer, he had a good reputation, he had money. He had all the power, and I had nothing. And the police - they made me feel like it was my fault, like because I wore a short dress of course he would want to have sex with me. They asked me so many intrusive questions.” Betty sniffs again and clears her throat. “My friends - some of them believed me, and some of them didn't, but almost all of them quit talking to me eventually because who wants to be friends with ‘that girl’? Even when I went to college, it was so close to Riverdale, the story followed me.”

Jughead’s cheeks are wet, but it's only when a tear hits his lips and he tastes salt that he notices he's crying. “But in New York,” he realizes, “that's why New York...”

“It wasn't the only reason,” Betty interrupts, lifting her head and looking at him. “It's not even the main reason. It's one of them, but - I want you to know... this isn't the only thing I've been thinking about for seven years. I've moved on, sort of. Sometimes things are hard to deal with. Sometimes I'm better at it than other times. I went to therapy. I have tools. Things that help.”

“There running,” Jughead guesses.

Betty nods, then pulls her hand from Jughead's and begins to fidget uncomfortably. “Cooking. Aggressive normality. But...sometimes other ways,” she says, voice impossibly quiet. “I'm working on those, too.”

He frowns, noting a new uneasiness in her tone. “What are you talking about?”

Betty’s eyes fall from his face to her lap, where she's wringing her hands. She begins to curl them into fists and then uncurl, as if catching herself and self-correcting, but Jughead doesn't quite understand what she's trying to tell him. Her shoulders are trembling as she finally extends them toward Jughead and faces her palms up.
There are scars littering her skin, small crescent-shaped ridges that match the curves of her nails perfectly. He's never noticed before, but her fingernails are incredibly short; it hardly even seems possible that they could have made the marks. Jughead takes her hands in his, peering closer to confirm that yes, they are definitely from her nails. This is her outlet, he realizes, she does this to herself.

_The glass_, he thinks suddenly. It made so much more sense now.

“Betty,” Jughead begins softly, but once he comes to the end of her name he realizes that he isn't sure quite what to say.

“I just wanted you to know. Now I really have no secrets,” she adds with a small smile, gently pulling her hands away from Jughead.

He returns the smile, but her latest reveal is still ringing in his head. It wasn't _nothing_, it wasn't a coping mechanism, and it wasn't okay. He had no idea how he could have missed all of this in Betty, all of this pain simmering beneath the surface of a peppy smile. And despite all of it, her genuine optimism and generosity didn't seem to wane - not that he’d seen, anyway. The world doesn't deserve her, he thinks. She is too good for this.

While he's lost in thought, Betty tucks her feet underneath herself and leans to the left, once more resting her head on Jughead’s shoulder. Another episode begins, and Netflix asks its shameful question, “Are you still watching?”

Betty scoffs in a way that makes Jughead want to laugh. She clicks _yes_ on the remote and then turns to him. “It's so judgmental. Do you want to skip to season four?”

Jughead looks at her. She has hopeful eyes, rich and green, no longer the windblown shade she'd had since last night. He wonders what she's hoping for.

He nods. “Okay.”
Apologies, I had wished for this to be up earlier to closely follow the previous but something unavoidable came up so here we are.

This ends these two pieces, and now we move on with J + B. Happier times await :)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

*I felt best when I was on the move, going someplace rather than being there.*

- Jeannette Walls, The Glass Castle

“Betty, how the hell did you talk me into this?!”

Jughead’s voice is wispy and strained, the pitch higher than usual. It carries for a short while and then peters off, as if he’s far away. And he *is*, sort of - at least vertically. Betty’s head is tilted backward as she stares up at her roommate, who is clinging onto two multi-coloured holds on a wall fifty feet above her.

They’re at a trendy new climbing gym in Brooklyn, the last place anyone would likely expect to find either of them. It’s all brightly coloured walls sloped at odd angles with foot and handholds of varying size and quality, and caters to the new wave of hipsters who are all hoping to become the next Chris Sharma. It had been Betty’s idea; she’d ran past it every morning for weeks, watching the signs go up and the retrofitting being completed. She’d suggested checking it out to Jughead a few days earlier and had been shocked when he actually agreed. It had been kind of a shot in the dark: although he had a lean physique, he didn’t seem like the athletic type - and they didn’t really hang out, not outside of home. Hell, a couple of weeks prior Betty wasn’t even sure if he considered her a friend.

She knows better now.

Betty recognizes that it might have all the hallmarks of a baptism-by-fire thing - it being *them*, this new deepened friendship that they shared. She would never articulate it as such to Jughead, who would surely make fun of her for being cheesy, but Betty did honestly feel as though he’d entered a new realm in her life. Hundreds of people knew about what had happened to her, but of those only a handful had actually heard it from her, on her terms. She’d been afraid, honestly, that when he found out Jughead would be uncomfortable around her or grow even more distant - or worse, that he wouldn’t even believe her. Sending him an email about the worst day of her life had been completely terrifying.

She shouldn’t have ever doubted him, in the end. Jughead had not only believed her, but he’d
comforted her and shared his own pain. And after that, things had been different. They were bonded, two people looking to move forward.

“"I asked, and you said yes!” Betty hollers back, giving him a little more slack as she belays. ”Afraid of heights, Juggie?!“

He lets go of a hold and gives her the middle finger. Betty grins and looks back down at the rope in her hands. He’s been really supportive in what she can only describe as a casual, unsuspecting way. Truthfully, she couldn’t be more grateful. He doesn’t look at her with sad eyes and ask her how she’s doing today, if she’s putting one foot in front of the other, or how she’s managing. He doesn’t seem to pity her, at least not overtly. That said, it’s been really nice to have someone to sit down beside when she’s having a particularly difficult moment, whose shoulder she can rest her head on, and have it be someone who knows the answer without asking any questions.

Betty also knows she’s entered a new level of friendship with Jughead because he’s started to become more of an asshole, for lack of a better term, but in a harmless way. Case in point: Betty’s first day at her new job. She’d quit the bar, deciding that the environment was probably not healthy for her, and had gotten a new job at a coffee shop a few blocks from their apartment. There’s fewer tips and she has to work some weekday evenings, but having weekend day shifts actually seems to free up more time, oddly. She’s had to transition to late dinners on weekdays that she works, but Jughead doesn’t seem to have had any problems adjusting.

On her first day of training, as she’s behind the counter trying to master the art of making espresso, Jughead shows up. Betty had smiled at him gratefully, assuming he was here for moral support. Plus, she’d lived with him for months now and knew that he drank black coffee exclusively, which even she could deal with as a first-day order. But just as she was about to punch it in, he’d grinned at her with a teasing glint in his light blue eyes and ordered a twenty ounce triple half-sweet, non-fat caramel macchiato - with whipped cream.

(Shed almost killed him when she got home, and he’d thought it was hilarious.)

All in all, him finding out about her past hadn’t turned out to be the nuclear bomb she’d expected. It had actually built a bridge between them, both of them now knowing things about the other that they kept away from most people. Although, Betty realizes, she still doesn’t know his actual name.

Jughead begins to move upward again, propelling himself up to a hold that Betty hadn’t thought he would be able to reach. Climbing is new to both of them, but Jughead is unexpectedly not bad at it. He lacks a lot of the flexibility that Betty is able to bring from running and barre, but he moves quickly and lightly and seems somehow to cover more area than she can. Neither of them will be topping out El Capitan anytime soon, but he’s pretty decent for someone whose primary physical activity (she suspects) is walking and typing. As for herself, Betty learns quickly that she lacks the upper body and grip strength required to sustain a climb for any length of time, although
she does have the requisite strength in her legs to be fairly effective on the wall.

Eventually Jughead tops out, and he rappels down to Betty. She offers a high five. “That was great!”

“Thanks, Betts.” He tries to stretch his hands out, curling and uncurling. “I think I’m already sore, and I haven’t even stopped moving.”

She laughs. There were definitely some muscles burning that she hadn’t recalled ever having before, that was for sure. But it was fun, and the company was good. “Want to go to the bouldering room?” she asks, and Jughead grins.

The bouldering room was ropeless, with the floor covered in thick padding to fall back on. The walls weren’t high, but sloped very sharply with steep overhangs. Betty is terrible at bouldering, because a lot of it seems to be small holds that she can fit her fingers into but not actually hold onto, and she spends most of their time in that room on her back.

Jughead does better, likely because the maximum height is pretty low. Betty has a sneaking suspicion that he’s a little afraid of heights. He manages to skirt across a pitch and hover over her, deftly managing a move she’d fallen during.

He grins cheekily at her. “I missed my calling.”

“Yeah, the brooding writer thing isn’t working for you,” Betty comments, folding her hands behind her head as she watches him. “You should become a rock climber, obviously.” And maybe he should, she thinks. It’s definitely a good look for him. Betty finds her eyes drawn to the muscles in Jughead’s forearms as they move slowly and individually like the top of a piano. His beanie is off and his hair flops over with mild sweat. It’s not unpleasant to see. She bites her lip and watches him downclimb, hopping to the floor once at a reasonable height.

“That was actually really fun,” Jughead comments, using his hand to sweep his hair out of his eyes. He then offers it to Betty to help her up, and when she takes it he hauls her up with surprising ease.

(It’s mildly exciting, in light of his climbing prowess. She hadn’t realized he was so strong.)

After returning their equipment, they head back to the apartment. Betty showers first, and while
Jughead is in after she gets dressed for dinner. A few days earlier Veronica (and Archie, technically, but there were no mysteries about whose idea it was) had proposed that the four of them go out to dinner at a pub near their apartment in Hamilton Heights. Jughead had apparently turned them down initially, and Betty had only heard about it after Veronica texted her.

He’s trying to protect her, Betty knows, but she’s never wanted this to run her life and isn’t going to start now.

Besides, it’s not a **club**, or even a bar in the sense of the word apart from being twenty-one and over. She and Veronica had been there once for lunch during a shopping excursion. It was still a dark atmosphere that served alcohol, but it was a lot less cramped and had a far less uneasy vibe than her former workplace. Betty was willing to give it a try. So she’d told Veronica yes, they would come, and had given Jughead a reassuring smile when he’d looked at her with a mixture of surprise and concern.

As always, the pressure to be a bit fancier around Veronica is on, so Betty picks out a soft sweater in a dusty purple colour, pairing it with slim-cut black pants, her good ankle boots, and the amethyst earrings her father had gotten her for graduation. She wears her hair down for once, setting it in gentle waves, which seems to catch Jughead off guard when she walks into the living room.

“Your hair’s down,” he says, doing a double take.

“It’s not always in a ponytail,” Betty informs him. “Ready to go?”

He nods, and they make their way to the train. The air is bitter and cold, so Betty hides her face in her fluffy white scarf and jams her hands as far down into the pockets of her wool coat as she can. As they stand on the platform, Jughead is casual as always - hands in the pockets of his lined denim jacket, his flannel peeking out of the bottom. Betty wonders briefly why the hipster aesthetic has so much to do with lumberjack impersonation, makes a note to ask him later, and then the train arrives.

They find two seats perpendicular to one another, Jughead against the side and Betty facing forward. Her knees press into the side of his thigh, and when he begins to drum his fingers absentmindedly on his leg, she can feel the faint reverberation in her bones. The trip takes a while, so Betty settles back into the seat and people-watches until they break ground to cross the East River.

The last wisps of daylight peek through the window behind Jughead’s beanie as the train makes its way across the Manhattan Bridge. Betty quickly grabs her phone and snaps a picture of him...
with the dying sunlight. He immediately looks at her questioningly, mild discomfort mixing with curiosity.

“What’s going on, Annie Leibovitz?”

In response, Betty shrugs and smiles at him. “You looked like you have a little halo.” She shows him the picture on her phone, and he gives a half-smile.

“Yes, it hurt,” Jughead informs her, leaning back in his seat.

Betty tilts her head. “What hurt?”

“When I fell from heaven.” The smile spreads to a grin, and Betty dissolves into laughter. “Classic line,” he continues, “works on all the ladies.”

She smiles at him, then drops her eyes to her fidgeting hands and bites her lower lip. As far as she can tell, there are no ladies. Betty supposes it’s possible that he’s not into women - or into anyone, since there haven’t been any men either - and notes a heavy disappointment in her stomach at the thought.

When she glances up again, he’s watching her. “What?” she asks.

Jughead squints a little at her. “I don’t know, you tell me.”

Betty hesitates. It’s absolutely none of her business, she knows, and shakes her head. “No, I--”

“Betty. Say it.”

She stares at her hands intently, cheeks burning, and slips her gloves off. “You haven’t had any friends over,” Betty finally stammers. Her fingers curl into her palms, and even the temptation of pressing them further is somewhat relieving. “I was just curious, I guess.”

“About why I don’t have girls over?”
It’s completely inappropriate for her even be asking him about this, and Betty has never been so full of regret about this line of conversation beginning. She hasn’t had anyone over either, and he’s not drilling her about it. “Or guys,” she adds, and her fingers tighten.

Jughead makes a sighing sound, but Betty is far too embarrassed at herself to look at him. Not everyone is a womanizing player, she tells herself, but moreover - nobody has to explain themselves. She can’t believe she even brought this up, no matter how inadvertent. She focuses hard on trying to make the ground beneath herself open up and swallow her, eyes aching, and is caught off guard when he reaches over wordlessly and touches her hands.

“It’s girls,” he informs Betty, mild amusement evident in his voice. As he speaks, Jughead gently uncurls the fingers on her right hand from their fist, then does the same to the left hand. “And I don’t know, I’m not - I guess I’m picky. I want someone I can have a conversation with, not just look at.” He gives a slightly awkward laugh. “Plus, I don’t exactly look like Archie.”

At that, Betty glances up at him quickly. He looks embarrassed, but he’s wrong, and she wants him to know that. He’s correct in that yes, he doesn’t look like an all-American baseball player. However, Betty thinks he’s very good looking - with his cheekbones, sweep of wavy dark hair, and that great, rare smile, he’s giving off a real mid-to-late-nineties Leo DiCaprio/River Phoenix vibe that Betty knows would work very well for a lot of women. She tells him as much, and his clear skin burns red.

“Thanks Betty,” Jughead mumbles, sliding his eyes to the side shyly. It’s clear that he doesn’t get compliments often, she observes, and makes a note to do it more. Even if only because him blushing is adorable.

The station before the one they need to transfer at is announced, and the train screeches to a halt. A dozen or so people pour out of the train car and only three get on, including a small toddler clinging to her mother’s hand. She waves at Betty, who waves back with a smile.

When they reach the transfer stop, she has to pull her hand from Jughead’s, and registers a surprising level of disappointment at the loss. The next train is packed, which always makes Betty a little nervous. He guides them to the side, allowing her to lean against the clear plastic divider by the door, and stands in front of her with his back to the crowd. Jughead smirks at her and begins to mutter a series of flippant observations about some of the strange people on the train, sending her into fits of repressed giggles each time.

He places a hand on her back to guide her off the train when they reach their final stop, and doesn’t drop it until they’re off the platform and back up to street level. Once outside the
November wind hits them full force, and they walk silently with their coats pulled tight and their heads down until they reach the restaurant.

The pub is classy enough to have a coat check but casual enough that the girl working it is wearing jeans. Betty hands her jacket to her and puts the slip for it in her purse. She scans the place for Archie and Veronica while Jughead hands his over and spots them at a table near the window. Veronica waves.

Jughead notices too, and with a nod in their direction, he once more places his hand on Betty’s back. Most of the people in the pub look pretty above-board to Betty, but she still finds herself grateful for the subtle move. He leads her through the weave of tables, at one point placing himself in between her and a raucous table of guys, until they reach the booth. There is a brief moment of eye contact where it becomes obvious to Betty that he’s waiting for her to pick if she wants the inside or outside seat, and she gives him a little smile before sliding in beside the window.

“Hi guys!” Veronica greets excitedly. “Betty, I love your sweater. It looks so good on you. You can really rock the dusty pastels.”

“Thanks, V.” Betty smiles. Veronica looks flawless as always, her signature pearls resting at her neck. “I hope you guys haven’t been waiting long.”

“Nah, we just got--” Archie begins to answer, stopping when Jughead sits down with an audible groan. “You okay, bro?”

Jughead adjusts a bit more on the seat, his face frowning. “Yeah. Just sore.”

Veronica raises an eyebrow and looks around with a grin. “You? From what?!”

“We went rock climbing today at that new gym in Williamsburg,” Betty answers, smiling her thanks at the waitress who brings waters for the table.

Archie snorts mid-sip, sending water up his nose. He sets his glass down, his coughs turning to laughter. “What?”

“He was very good, too,” Betty says proudly, smiling at Jughead.
Jughead nods at Veronica and Archie with raised eyebrows. “Yep,” he says. “There was some talk of me dropping out of school and becoming a professional climber. I also am considering gigolo, though. Stay tuned.”

Betty laughs and casts her eyes to the menu as Archie and Veronica continue to probe for details. “There’s no way that was your idea,” Archie states.

“No, it was Betty’s. Hey, the jalapeno burger comes with fries - do you think they’d let me sub the fries out for another burger?”

“I doubt it,” Betty replies, glancing up when she notices Veronica looking at her, a sly smile on her face. She makes a face at her friend, who just grins wider. Betty bites her lip, then shakes her head and continues to read the menu. “Ooh, the cobb salad looks really good.”

“You eat too healthy,” Jughead notes absentmindedly. “Fuck yeah, you can add an egg to any burger! What an age we live in.”

“You say that as if we didn’t eat an entire pizza last night.”

“By we, you mean I ate three-quarters of it. And you picked off the olives.”

“Olives are terrible, Jughead, it was the only logical decision.”

Veronica holds her hand up, interrupting their banter. “Hold up, Fred and Ginger. I still need to know more about this climbing thing.”

“Yeah, same,” Archie agrees, “like Betty, how did you get him to agree to go?”

Betty looks up from the menu and shrugs at them, then glances at Jughead, who is glaring at his menu with his jaw set. “I dunno,” she says softly, “I just noticed it was opening, mentioned wanting to check it out, and we went. It wasn’t that hard.”

Archie and Veronica exchange a look, then he sits back and puts his arm around the back of the booth behind her. “Interesting,” he muses, the tone of his voice making Betty frown slightly.
“It’s not interesting,” Jughead retorts, glancing sharply up at Archie. “Let’s move on.”

Betty chews on the inside of her cheek briefly, sensing the awkwardness. She gives Jughead’s knee a reassuring tap under the table, then smiles brightly at Veronica. “So V, I hear you guys might be going to the Bahamas for New Year’s? Tell me all about it!”

“Oh, yes!” Veronica exclaims, smiling fondly at Archie and then leaning forward across the table. “One of my dad’s business partners has a villa on the beach that he lets people use, so Archie and I might fly down for New Year’s. Oooh, you guys should come!”

Betty smiles politely. Obviously, that sounded amazing, but she was on a tight student budget and definitely could never afford something like that. “Thanks for the offer, but I think right now the furthest my wallet will take me is Queens,” she jokes.

“Pshh,” Veronica dismisses. “We can take Daddy’s jet, it won’t cost you a dime. Just think about it, okay? Imagine all the cute swimsuits we could shop for!”

_Daddy’s jet_. Jesus. Clearly, Veronica lived in a different world than her.

Betty just smiles in response, rescued by the return of the waitress. They put their orders in, then Archie changes the subject to his mom’s upcoming fiftieth birthday. He solicits gift ideas from the three of them, which is quickly derailed into a discussion of men getting spa treatments. When Jughead jokingly proposes that he and Archie go and get his-and-his pedicures, Veronica takes it seriously, and he spends the next twenty minutes trying to explain to Veronica that he would never, under any circumstances, let a stranger paint his toenails.

After dinner, they encounter a man dressed in a bright yellow onesie loitering outside the steps to the train platform. Betty is a little overtired and is unable to control the fit of laughter that overtakes her. At first Jughead regards her with mild amusement, but after ten minutes on the train he begins to develop a complex backstory for the man involving the circus and a family that just loved him too much. Betty adds a jilted ex-girlfriend to the narrative, and the spirited debate that follows carries them all the way home.

She goes to sleep that night with a smile on her face, and for the first time in a long time she thinks, _what a good day._
Chapter End Notes

Off the heavy stuff, onto something a bit more lighthearted. Kind of. The train keeps rolling, but not all the stops are dead ends.
How can I explain? When I do he turns away again,

It's always been the same old story

- “Father and Son”, Cat Stevens

“Look at the size of this poop! Dude, no dog this small should poop that big.”

Jughead crouches down next to the offending dump, tearing a poop bag off the roll that Archie hands him. He scoops it up and then ties the bag before jogging a few feet back and throwing it in a garbage. He returns to his friend’s side and grins down at the little shih tzu mix attached to the leash in Archie’s hand.

“She’s weird,” Archie agrees. “But she’s ours to deal with since Mrs. Eckstein had her stroke. At least until she gets some of her mobility back.”

“Nice of you guys,” Jughead comments, watching the little white dog tread forward. They're in Central Park on a sunny Sunday late afternoon, Jughead having agreed to accompany Archie as he took his neighbour’s dog for a walk. He's also just finished a shift at work, and the park is close by, so the agreement came easily. It's not that cold out either, but the little dog is still wearing an argyle sweater and he is obsessed with it. Jughead will never admit to anyone, but dogs in clothes is his secret love.

Most of the leaves have fallen from the trees, but Central Park is still as beautiful to Jughead in late November as it was the first time he’d come to the city. The lakes are just as pretty, the people wandering on the pathways still as diverse and interesting. The sheer size and magnitude of the whole place impresses him the same way years later, and although it’s definitely a cliché to say, it's his favourite place in the whole city.

“She’s a sweet old lady,” Archie shrugs. “Plus Pepper is a good little dog, even if she shits bigger than Vegas.”

Jughead grins. “I miss that old guy. Can't wait to see him at Christmas.”
“So you're coming to my dad's like normal then?” Archie asks, pausing to let Pepper sniff a tree and then waiting while she pees on it.

Jughead raises an eyebrow, confused. “Yeah, of course. Why wouldn't I?”

Archie looks at him with a facial expression that Jughead reads instantly. It means ‘come on’, as if the reply was obvious. Archie is many things, but mysterious is not one of them. “Thought maybe you'd just stay in the city and hang out with Betty.”

God. For about a month now, Archie and Veronica have been teasing him about Betty. He'd almost hit Archie a couple of weeks previous when they'd gone for dinner and his friend had been a little less than subtle about how interesting he found the news of him agreeing to go to a climbing gym with Betty. “Come on, man, not this again,” Jughead groans, kicking a fallen leaf out of the way.

“Just sayin’. The past three times I've asked you to hang out you've turned me down so you could stay home and watch movies with Betty.”

“So we've been spending time together. She's my roommate,” Jughead retorts, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I spent more time with you when you lived there than I do with her. Maybe I have a thing for you,” he adds mockingly.

Archie grins. “Flattering, but I'm not your type, bro.”

“As if you would know what my type is,” Jughead scoffs, glad they're walking forward and not facing each other. He's pretty good at hiding his emotions when necessary - he often thought he'd be great at poker, if addictive personalities didn't run in his family - but Archie is one of the few people that can always figure out his tells.

“I know it's probably smart, blonde, and pretty, based on that I have never seen you act this way with any girl before,” Archie points out. “Not even Ethel.”

“Ugh, Ethel.” Jughead doesn't want to think about his middle school pseudo-girlfriend of four months. They'd been 12-year-old-serious, meaning they'd gone on one date a week, rarely spoke otherwise, and had been primarily together out of perceived social requirement than actual feelings. Still, she was a nice girl, and she'd been his first kiss.
“So, really nothing with you and Betty?”

Jughead pauses. He doesn't want to lie to Archie. For one, Archie could probably tell, and for two, he doesn't like to make a habit of lying to his friends without a damn good reason. Unfortunately, the line between telling Archie something had recently been blurred a little too far with telling Veronica something, and that isn't something Jughead wants. He knows that Veronica means well (usually), but the glint in her eye he'd noticed at dinner had betrayed a little too much enthusiasm for the idea of Jughead and Betty.

Which normally might work to his advantage, he realizes, but in this case - the absolute last thing he wants to do is make Betty uncomfortable. She's just been through something traumatic that had brought up old emotions about something else traumatic, and he wants to respect her experiences and how she's moving forward from them. He knows that if Betty ever for some crazy reason was interested in him also, that the process to get there would just be inherently different. And as far as Jughead knows, he is the only person she's told about it, so he can't tell Archie the whole truth.

He settles for partial truth. “Nothing has happened,” Jughead says, “and yeah, maybe I like her. She's … interesting. She's funny and smart, and beautiful obviously. But it's really complicated. So just - cool it with the jokes and insinuation around her? Veronica too. Please.”

Jughead hazards a glance at Archie, who is regarding him with a surprised but serious look. “Sure, man,” he says gently. “I mean, I can't control Ronnie, but I'll try to talk to her.”

“Thanks.” They continue walking but make a turn to the west, heading back toward the train stop where they'll part.

Jughead gets a hot dog from a vendor who's set up beside the ground entrance to the southbound platform. He gives Archie and Pepper a wave, then gets on the train with his hot dog. He takes a spot in the back of the fairly empty train and leans against the side with one foot up on the empty seat beside him. As he eats, he thinks about Betty.

Yeah, he likes her. Jughead can't pretend to be an expert on many things, but he does know himself, and he's accepted this. It's an odd feeling; he hasn't had a crush in ages, and never one that had seemed to come with this depth of feelings before. It's not enough that he likes to spend time with Betty, but now he finds himself wanting to hold her, protect her, and make her laugh just to see her smile. It's completely pathetic, and it's destroyed his self-image as a brooding loner.

But he also doesn't care, and that's maybe the biggest sign of all.
His phone buzzes when he's about fifteen minutes out, and Jughead flips it open absentmindedly. He's been waiting for an email from a professor and assumes it's finally arrived, but when he sees the notification he frowns. It's a text from Betty. It's not unusual for her to text him, especially not lately, but she knows he was with Archie after work and he'd given her a pretty specific time of when to expect him - they have a pretty rigorous schedule of *The Office* to get through this evening - so he hadn't expected her to contact him yet.

But then he sees what it says, and he freezes. A *man who says he’s your dad just showed up at the apartment.*

Jughead's brain goes blank immediately. He hasn't seen his father in at least six months, and that had been a less than stellar encounter. The last he'd heard, FP Jones was still languishing somewhere upstate with a needle in his arm and cash under his mattress. Jughead can't imagine what he is doing in New York, let alone in Brooklyn at his son's apartment. He's not even sure how his father knows where he lives, and now that he does know, a part of Jughead wants to move. When it comes to his family, he’s found it best to be untraceable - probably a trait he got from his mother. The irony that she’s also in the wind is not lost on him.

There is a swirling mess of emotions in his head: anger, relief, disappointment, annoyance, excitement. There was one that came to the forefront, the same one that was always most prevalent when it came to his father: confusion. Jughead is always six years old and always twenty-three, hopeful and jaded, angry and forgiving, full of both love and hate. He’s not sure he’ll ever really be able to settle with one end of the spectrum; his father chose drugs and crime over him multiple times, but he’s also the one that stuck around longer.

His phone buzzing again snaps him back to reality, and Jughead darts his eyes down to read Betty’s message. *What do you want me to do?? He says he won’t leave until he gets to talk to you.*

*I’m five minutes out,* Jughead finally texts, feeling a twinge of guilt for how unhelpful his reply is. He can only imagine his dad showing up at his apartment and what Betty’s reaction must have been, especially now that he’s filled her in on his messed-up family life. Jughead shoves his phone back in his pocket and stands at the doors, readying himself for the next stop. Part of him wants to hurry home and rescue Betty from what he’s sure must be an awkward situation for her, but part of him also wants to shuffle slowly so as to put off the interaction as long as possible. And there’s still another part, one that wants to just *run,* to make a right out of the train and keep going until his feet bleed.

When the train finally screeches to a halt, Jughead bolts out of the doors. He runs up the dirty concrete steps, mind still swirling, and makes a left.
He arrives at the apartment in record time, then stands in front of the door for a full two minutes without entering. Jughead hates these meetings with his dad, hates how he’ll show up and expect something, whether it’s a favour or forgiveness or both, and is angry all over again that the universe keeps putting him in this position. Then Betty’s soft voice is heard through the door, and he turns the knob.

His father is sitting at the small kitchen table, hunched over what Jughead immediately recognizes is a slice of the chicken pot pie Betty had made the night before for dinner. A cup of coffee sits near his hand, half-empty. His father looks up when he enters and they make brief eye contact before Jughead turns into the kitchen wordlessly.

Betty is leaning against the counter with her arms wrapped around herself, angled so she’s facing his father without being directly across from him. She’s got a polite smile on her face but Jughead knows her better now, and he can tell from the look in her expressive green eyes that she is tremendously uncomfortable. She glances at him the moment he enters, and her relief at his presence is evident. “Hi,” she says quietly.

Jughead grabs her forearm and tugs her further into the kitchen so they’re out of earshot of his father. He hazards a glance backward and then faces her. “Are you okay?”

“All right?” Betty counters in a soft whisper, brushing her fingertips against his jaw ever-so-slightly. She’s peering at him with big doe eyes, and if these were any other circumstances, he’d be really tempted to stay in the moment longer.

He hesitates before nodding and then shrugs. There’s no efficient way to articulate his current emotions, but she seems to get it anyway. He drops her forearm but picks up her hand and squeezes it. “Sorry about him showing up. Seriously, are you okay?”

“Yes,” Betty responds, her quiet-but-firm tone adding an unspoken don’t worry about me. She presses her lips together, uncertain, and then adds, “The neighbour let him in the building. I wasn’t sure if I should let him in here, but he was at the door and--”

And she’s Betty, and she’s nothing if not polite and welcoming. She has the kind of manners that are bred in the bone, molded through years of forced practice, and she’s really good at hiding any apprehension behind a polite smile. There was no way that she was going to leave him standing in the hallway - he would have expected nothing less than what she’d done. “It’s okay,” Jughead assures her, cutting off her nervous rambling.

She responds with a small grateful smile. “I’m going to go for a run. Give you guys some privacy.” She squeezes his hand and then slips out of the kitchen to her bedroom.
Jughead follows her out of the kitchen but stops at the small table where FP Jones sits. Caramel is nowhere to be seen; he assumes she’s hiding underneath Betty’s bed, her usual location when strangers were over. He sighs mentally, ready to stop putting this off, and looks down at his father. “Dad,” he greets.

“Jughead.” FP gestures to the chair opposite his. “Join me. I’m almost done eating. This pie is really good. Homemade?”

Jughead narrows his eyes but pulls the chair out, sitting on the edge. “Betty made it,” he answers. Like everything to do with his father, he chooses his words carefully. “What do you want, Dad?”

Before he can answer, Betty’s door opens and she comes out in her late autumn running gear - leggings, a thermal shirt under a hoodie, and a headband over her ears. She smiles cordially at FP. “It was nice to meet you.” As she slips her feet into her running shoes, Betty makes brief eye contact with Jughead. “I have my phone,” she says pointedly, and Jughead has to bite back a smile at the tactful protectiveness in her tone. Betty Cooper, undercover mama bear. He nods in response, then she leaves.

FP finishes the chicken pot pie and pushes his plate to the side. “She coming back with a SWAT team?” he comments once she’s gone.

“Dad,” Jughead says, the edge in his voice full of warning. “What do you want?”

FP sighs and leans back in the chair. “Just want to check up on you, son,” he says casually, glancing around the apartment. “Nice place you have here.”

“Do you need money?” Jughead asks forcefully, narrowing his eyes. “Just spit it out. What’s it for? Booze?”

FP shakes his head, then lifts a hand to pull his hair from his face. Jughead watches the movement, one that he mirrors everyday when not wearing his beanie. As he wonders how much of himself is nature and how much is nurture, he briefly contemplates his biggest fear. He gets his father’s darkness, understands the need for belonging that’s satisfied by the gang. He even thinks that on some level, he could learn to understand the pull of addiction. All of what happened in his father’s life - was that biology or behaviour? Is he destined to follow in those footsteps, to make the same mistakes, to crush the same dreams? Or have his different choices saved him enough to avoid that path?
“I quit drinking.”

Jughead scoffs and folds his arms across his chest. “I’ve heard that before.”

“I know you have,” FP says. He’s chewing on his lip, Jughead notices - a new habit. He wonders if it’s replaced an old one. “I don’t know what else to say, except that I did. And I wanted you to know.”

Jughead presses his lips together, his mouth now set in a thin, tight line. “How did you know where I live?” he asks, a foreboding thought suddenly coming to mind.

“What?”

“Here, where I live,” Jughead repeats, leaning forward in the chair. “How did you know where to find me?”

FP sighs. “I asked around,” he says evasively.

Jughead’s fist clenches around the edge of the table. He feels vaguely sick; obviously, somebody had to have been tailing him at some point in order to find out which building was his. That was bad enough, but if they were tailing him then they had probably also noticed Betty, and regardless of his father’s intentions there was no way that Jughead would ever be okay with that. The last thing she needed right now was some gangbangers watching her apartment building.

“Did you have one of your crew follow me?” Jughead asks. His father pauses before responding, and that hesitation is confirmation enough. He glares across the table, wide-eyed. “How long?” Jughead drops his fist on the table, heavy and loud. “Dad.”

“Just a couple weeks,” FP finally says. “Calm down, kid. I’m not putting a hit out on you. All they got was that this was your building, and that you were living with a pretty blonde girl. I found the building, and there she was in the hallway with the laundry. So I told her I was your father, asked her to let me in, and here we are.”

Jughead’s fists are aching from clenching the ridges of the shitty particle board, but all of a sudden he’s seeing red and he knows if he lets go he’ll hit something a lot less inanimate than the table.
“Betty has nothing to do with you and I,” he hisses with fierce intent, staring directly at his father. “Stay the hell away from her. Do you understand me?”

FP holds his hands up, a vague look of surprise on his face. “Jesus, yeah, I get it,” he says, clearly taken aback by the forcefulness of the demand. He recovers slightly, then juts his chin out at Jughead. “I was just trying to find you. It’s not a crime to be concerned about my son.”

“You have no right to be concerned about me, Dad. Not now.” Jughead stands up suddenly, sending the chair skidding backward. *Hilarious.* He feels like putting his fist through something, but settles for scowling and pacing into the entrance of the kitchen, then back toward the table. “I needed you to care when I was nine and nobody was feeding me dinner. Or when I was fourteen and Fred Andrews had to step in to keep me from going into foster care. That’s when you should have been concerned.”

“You’re right, son,” FP says, lifting a hand in mimed helplessness. “I agree. I was a shitty father - I still am! But I’m trying here.”

“I don’t need you to try, Dad,” Jughead continues, a frustrated lump developing in his throat. He swallows hard to push it away; he was done crying over this ten years ago. It was not going to start again now. “It doesn’t matter anymore. I’ve got an apartment. I have a job. I have a degree. I graduated in June, did you know that? Now I’m getting another one.”

At those words, his father’s face lifts. His eyes lighten, eyebrows raising, and he repeats, “You got a degree? A college degree?”

Jughead scowls, but nods.

“Fuck.” FP lifts a hand to his mouth, slowly shaking his head. “A Jones has a degree. I didn’t think I’d see the day.”

“You didn’t,” Jughead says bluntly. “You weren’t there.”

His father goes quiet at those words. Jughead gives a heavy sigh and wanders into the living room, rubbing the back of his neck. Maybe it was a little unfair - he’d been actively avoiding his father for at least two years now, and it wasn’t like he’d invited him to the ceremony. He doesn’t feel guilt for his words or his anger, but he hates the weighted, stressed feeling that holding onto it gives him. So he turns around.
“Look, Dad,” he begins, his voice purposefully more gentle than before. “I don’t think you’re a bad guy. And if you’re sober again, that’s great. I hope it sticks, I really do. But I’m not sixteen anymore. Being sober for a week isn’t good enough, not for where I’m at now.”

His father turns sideways in the kitchen chair to look at Jughead. “You’ve done really well for yourself, son,” he says, gesturing around the apartment. “Look at you. Graduate school, job, apartment, girlfriend. I guess I should be grateful that you never took after me that much.”

Jughead shifts his weight to his other foot, not bothering to correct him about Betty. “I need more time, Dad.” He takes a long breath in and releases it slowly, savoring it like an old cigar. “I need you to have more time behind this.”

FP stares at him for a long moment, his eyes darting around Jughead’s face, studying him. Jughead stares back, set in his resolve. “That’s fair,” he finally says.

Jughead exhales and nods. “Good.” He walks over to the table beside the couch and rips a sticky note off the top of a stack. Grabbing a pen, he scribbles his cell number on the paper, then walks it over to his dad. “This is my phone number, Dad. I’ll give it to you, but you will call off whoever you have following me, or we’re gonna have problems.”

FP nods and extends his hand, reaching for the paper. “Okay.”

Jughead draws it back just out of reach, not done yet. “One more thing. Unless I specifically ask you to come here, you will stay the hell away from this apartment. No showing up unannounced and intimidating Betty into letting you in.”

“You have my word,” his father agrees, accepting the slip of paper and shoving it in his pocket. He appraises Jughead again and then stands up. “Okay, I’ll go now.” He makes his way to the door, but when his hand is on the doorknob he stops and turns back to Jughead. “I don’t imagine it means much, but - well, I’m proud of you anyway. Oh and hey, your girl makes a mean pot pie. Tell her thanks for me, will you?”

Jughead gives a small nod. “Maybe I’ll hear from you in a couple of months,” he offers, his arms folded. There will be no hug. There won’t even be a handshake. This two-month olive branch is all that he can extend - for now.
“You will,” FP says. There’s a fierce edge in his voice that Jughead hasn’t heard for a long, long time, but he’s not naive enough to let it turn into hope. Not anymore.

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Jughead is sitting on the couch petting Caramel when Betty finally returns after being gone for an hour or so. Caramel had emerged not long after his father had left, and upon discovering Betty’s absence had climbed into his lap with the sort of discontent only an animal could truly express. Before Caramel, Jughead had no idea that cats could purr begrudgingly, but this kitten was a master at it.

Betty has a pizza box in one arm, which she sets on the kitchen counter alongside her keys. She tugs her earbuds out of her ears and places them and her phone beside the pizza. “Are you alright?” she asks, tilting her head in concern at him while she kicks off her shoes.

“Yeah,” he confirms, placing Caramel on the couch so he can stand up. The kitten gives a disgruntled mewl and curls into a tiny ball. “You brought pizza?”

Betty looks at the box. “I figured it was a junk food sort of night.”

Jughead nods, following her gaze. He quirks his eyebrow and gives her a quick once-over, then asks, “Out of curiosity, where exactly do you keep money in this outfit?”

She flashes him a cheeky grin. “Wouldn’t you like to know,” she replies in a sing-song voice.

He really would, but that seems like the sort of thing that he probably shouldn’t admit to, so instead Jughead settles for grabbing a plate and loading it up with a few slices. “How was your run?” he asks, wandering back to the living room and sitting on the couch.

Betty follows not long after him, carrying her own plate with a couple of pieces. “It was fine, but I don’t think that’s top of mind right now,” she points out gently. She sits down beside him, careful not to squish Caramel. “Unless you don’t want to talk about your dad.”

“Not really,” Jughead admits with full honesty. “There’s also just not much to say. He says he’s sober again. I told him to come back in a couple of months once it sticks.” He shoves a slice in his mouth and devours it hungrily, only glancing over at Betty once he’s wiped the extra sauce from around his mouth.
“Do you think it will?” she presses, hesitant and careful.

He shrugs. “I dunno. Probably not. Every six or so months he tries sobering up. Some times last longer than others. I’m not holding my breath.”

Jughead dives back into the pizza, but he can tell she’s still looking at him. There’s really not much more to say, just like there never is when it comes to his dad. There’s all the words and none at the same time; he’s tried out every combination over the years, and has found that he likes silence best. Silence didn’t put unfulfilled dreams on the table.

(There is nothing left to lose.)

Betty eventually gets up and goes into her room, coming out in a worn pair of grey leggings and an oversized cream-coloured sweater. She turns off most of the lights and sits back down on the couch, cross-legged. Betty then grabs the TV remote, sorting through the downloaded movies on their media server.

When she selects *Kill Bill Vol. I*, Jughead sits up straight. “Tarantino?” he asks in hopeful confirmation, looking over at her. He *loves* Quentin Tarantino, and has been trying unsuccessfully to get Betty to watch some of his favourite selections for weeks. Unfortunately, the only Tarantino movie she’s ever seen is *Death Proof*, which she’d hated (he does too, truthfully), and she’d avoided any related movies since.

Betty shrugs and smiles at him. “It’s been a long day,” she says by way of explanation.

Jughead smiles gratefully at her. “You will not be sorry,” he promises, and settles back happily into the worn-out couch.

They make it through the first film with Caramel snuggled between them. Betty gives it a seven out of ten, which Jughead decides to accept with only minimal protests. She gets off the couch to grab popcorn for the second volume, and the cat follows her to the kitchen. Jughead queues the second movie, noting that it’s already 11:00pm. This is no problem for him, but since Betty has stopped working at the bar, she’s reverted back to her early mornings and reasonable bedtimes. He suspects she won’t make it through the entire movie.
He hopes he never has to become a real adult. He doesn’t think he could ever sustain a lifestyle where 6:00am was an everyday feature.

“Do you want butter?” Betty calls from the kitchen. He can hear popping sounds coming from the microwave and drums his fingers on his knee in eager anticipation.

“Yeah, please,” Jughead replies, glancing at the window. It’s begun to rain outside, soft but cold, never a good sign in late November. He hopes it isn’t outrageously icy in the morning and grabs a blanket from the back of the couch for Betty, who is perennially chilly.

She returns with a bowl of popcorn, setting it on the table, and pauses. “Is that rain?”

“Yeah,” Jughead grimaces.

Betty makes a face. “Well, it isn’t snow, I guess.” She plops back down on the couch, but this time there is no space left between their legs for Caramel to wedge herself. The cat settles for the arm of the couch. “Is that blanket for us?” she asks, gesturing to the blue fabric in his hand.

“Oh, yeah.” Jughead hands it to her, feeling the back of his neck heat up slightly.

Betty raises herself on one knee briefly and tucks her legs underneath herself so that she’s leaning toward Jughead when she sits back down. He glances over at her and notices her left hand curled, knuckles whitening, the telltale signs that she’s anxious and about to press her nails into her palm. Jughead watches her hand carefully, ready to reach over if her hands tighten, and wonders what’s going through her head. His answer comes a moment later, when after a sharp inhale from Betty, she lifts his left arm and tucks herself underneath it.

She wiggles around, adjusting, and pulls the blue blanket over both of their laps. “Okay,” she says softly, “hit play.”

Fighting a ridiculous smile, Jughead leans over to the remote and fulfills Betty’s request. He leans back and settles his arm more comfortably around her, tugging her a bit closer. “Is this alright?” he asks, noting that both of her hands lay flat against her lap.

Betty turns her face into his body, and he can feel her smile against his shoulder. “Yeah. It’s good.”
**Kill Bill Vol. II** is one of Jughead’s favourite movies of all time, but this time he is barely paying attention. Uma Thurman could have morphed into Queen Elizabeth and he wouldn’t notice, because Betty is cuddled up to his side and right now that is all that matters. She’s even smaller against him than he’d thought, he observes as she burrows sweetly into his ribcage.

She falls asleep about half an hour in, and Jughead doesn’t have the heart to wake her. He doesn’t really want to, either. She’s comfortable and soft and smells kind of like vanilla - a drastic improvement compared to his previous couch companion: his laptop. He’d take Betty any day of the week, he thinks, as he settles himself back slightly to get more comfortable. He focuses his eyes on the screen and watches the familiar events unfold rapidly, then slowly, and then…

The next time Jughead opens his eyes, the grey home screen of their media server glows at his face from the TV. He’s slumped over on his side, head supported by his bent right arm. The left is still thrown over Betty, who has fallen with him and whose face is nestled in his ribcage. The blue blanket is haphazardly strewn across their knees, most of it now on the floor, and the first thing he thinks is: this cannot be comfortable for her.

She’s bent on her side at an odd angle, stretching the left side of her body. Despite his simultaneous desire to stay here forever, Jughead props his hand on the couch and begins to sit them up so he can fix her position a bit. It’s 3:00am, the time of day where they’d first bonded, and he muses silently about how fitting it is that this is also when he realizes he might be falling for her.

Betty begins to stir once she’s upright, her face contorting and nose wriggling. It’s adorable, loathe as he is to use that word, and he feels a smile spread across his face. Her eyes begin to open, lashes fluttering quickly. Jughead readies himself for her awkward realization of their position.

Instead, she clutches him tighter and burrows her face in his chest. “Nooo,” she whines. “Sleep.”

Normally, Jughead prides himself on his self control, but tonight he is all weakness. He chuckles and tucks a stray lock of blonde hair behind her ear. “Sleep soon, Betts,” he whispers. “But you can’t fall asleep here.”

Betty leans back slightly from his chest to look at him. There’s a mark on her cheek from being pressed against a crease in his t-shirt, and Jughead slowly lifts his hand to rest against her head. His thumb brushes against the mark that marrs her impossibly soft skin as his fingers curl around the side of her neck. He watches as her lower lip is drawn between her teeth and her green eyes search his face. She’s breathing a bit quicker than usual, but before he can make real note of it, it becomes obvious that he is as well.
Jughead is suddenly overcome with the urge to kiss her, but there’s a look in her eye that chokes his nerve: trust. She trusts him, despite all that she’s been through, and he isn’t sure if he’s worthy of it. Until he can process it, evaluate and do some really effective over-thinking, Jughead can’t bring himself to take that step.

So he drops his hand to her shoulder and smiles instead, taking in the sight of her slightly parted lips and pretty, tired eyes. “Bedtime,” he suggests, and she nods.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, I have been overwhelmed with the response to this so far. Please know that even when I don't get around to answering people's reviews, I still really appreciate all of them! They definitely make me write faster so please keep leaving them :)

Also, I have noticed a few people referring this fic to others on tumblr and I thank you all for including me in those recommendations as well!
Don’t look to be saved in any one thing, person, machine, or library. Do your own bit of saving, and if you drown, at least die knowing you were headed for shore.

- Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451

There’s blood around her feet.

Betty takes a step forward with closed eyes, letting the water hit her face and rain down her body. Her hands are stinging with the pain of water in open wounds, but she welcomes it like an old friend. Her shoulders vibrate with short relief, and she lets out an audible sigh.

Even before Betty’s assault, she’d long had issues dealing with stress. Her parents had high expectations, there were always too many academic commitments, and she had a reputation within the community as that overachieving girl who would always say yes to favours. Yes, she’d sit on that board. Yes, she’d help out with that kids’ rec league. Yes, she’d tutor in math.

And she was good at all of it. She had to be; less than the best wasn’t acceptable to her mother. She’d been taught from a young age that the only thing worse than disappointing herself was disappointing somebody else, and from that had followed a personal identity built around succeeding and pleasing others. Betty’s been trying to unwrap that over the last five years, but it’s been difficult. Everywhere you go, there you are.

Even lately, when more things are going right for her than at any other point in her adult life, Betty feels like she’s falling apart. School has been overwhelming. It had started pretty good, but now that she’s nearing the end of the semester there are so many different projects and end-of-term submissions due, and right now Betty has never felt less capable of anything in her life than she does about being a successful journalist.

Betty has tried coping in the healthier ways she knows. She’s ran so much in the last month that she’s lost six pounds. Cooking for stress relief takes time that she doesn’t have in between working at the coffee shop and trying to maintain relationships with the few friends that she finally has in New York. She and Jughead have grown wonderfully closer over the last month, but recently she hasn’t even had the energy to do anything besides fall asleep on him halfway through episodes of Brooklyn Nine Nine.
He doesn’t seem to mind, but the guilt eats at Betty anyway.

This is where her bad habits come in. She knows that hurting herself with her nails isn't healthy, knows that she needs to learn better ways of coping, but it's hard and sometimes she feels desperate. It brings a release that eases her nerves and helps her focus in the short term. On nights like tonight, where she's spent hours editing final submissions for two of her courses and still been disappointed in herself at the outcome, it's the only thing that helps her through.

She's also nervous about Thanksgiving, which is upcoming in a few days. Betty's parents are going to visit her sister Polly in Portland, so she's planning to stay in New York. Jughead is too; apparently he typically goes with Archie to his dad's in Newark, but this year Archie is staying in the city to do stuff with Veronica's family.

Jughead doesn't seem to care; he'd told her that holidays were more of a disappointment growing up than anything, and that he didn't mind avoiding them. Despite that, Betty had been planning to make a Thanksgiving dinner for the two of them, given that he'd never had a real one in his own home. Unfortunately, she is running out of time to get groceries and school has overwhelmed her to the point where she feels like she’d be lucky even to make it to Thursday. She knows they could always just order takeout, that Thanksgiving isn't just about turkey and stuffing and pumpkin pie, but she'd really wanted to do it for Jughead. Dropping dinner will be just another failure on her docket.

Betty finishes showering, ensuring the blood from her hands is gone, and treats her cuts with medicated cream before she goes to sleep. Jughead is still awake, but he's got his own deadlines too, and she can hear him in the living room typing away on his laptop. It's nearly two am, and she needs sleep.

Her sleep comes quickly but isn't easy, and when she wakes at six to run before class there’s more blood on her sheets. Betty momentarily assumes that she’s gotten her period early, but then she looks at her hands and she knows. She stares at her palms for a few minutes and then gets up and cleans them before heading out.

The day passes like usual - or as usual as they have been going lately, anyway. She submits two projects and attends a class, then spends the rest of the day completing filming for another project before heading to work for her 3:30-8:00 shift. By the time she’s in the elevator of her apartment building, Betty’s feet and hands are both aching. She just wants to sit down and cry out the stress of the day.

Jughead isn’t in the living room when Betty steps into the apartment. She spends a moment wondering where he could be before recalling that he had a one-off guest lecture that he was attending that evening. She assumes he’ll feed himself and bypasses her own dinner in favour of
sinking onto the couch with Caramel. The kitten wraps herself around the crook of Betty’s arm, begins to purr, and Betty falls quickly asleep.

She wakes up to the gentle pressure of a soft blanket being laid across her shoulders. For a brief, perfect moment, Betty imagines that she’s in her childhood bed back at home in Riverdale, the pillowy comforter cocooned around her, with no commitments or responsibilities or stresses to speak of. But then her eyes open, and she’s in a tiny apartment in Brooklyn with a mild headache and a sore back, and it all returns in a flood.

“Hey sleepyhead.”

Betty turns her head slightly toward Jughead, squinting against the brightness radiating from the kitchen. He moves to block the light, and in the new darkness her eyes are able to adjust. She locates his face, taking note of his tired expression and heavy eye bags. He’s giving her a half-smile, and she thinks, still cute.

“What time is it?” she yawns, rubbing her eyes.


Betty cranks her neck and spots the fluffy kitten cuddled up in the corner of the couch, almost wedged in the cushions. She smiles and then looks back at Jughead. “I meant to sit down for a minute. Guess I was tired.”

“Mm. You look it.”

Betty sits up on her elbows and quirks an eyebrow at him. “Thanks,” she says dryly.


“So do you,” Betty says, dragging her feet off of Jughead’s lap and setting them on the ground. She pulls the blanket off the floor and settles it on her knees. “Don’t think those eye bags are invisible.”
Jughead shrugs, then nods. “Yeah, there’s been some late nights,” he agrees. “Look, I get it - believe me, semester-end shit has also taken over my life. But when I do school work until two, I don’t get up at six to go for an hour-long run.” He peers at her, his hand gently touching her shoulder. “Everything okay?”

(No, the waves keep getting taller and I’ve forgotten how to swim; it’s colder and darker and I’m drowning.)

Her lower lip trembles slightly.

(Don’t complain, Elizabeth.)

Betty sits up straight so that his hand falls from her shoulder. She takes a deep breath, then gives him a wide, closed-mouthed smile. “Everything’s fine.”

--

She makes it through the next two days in a haze. They're two of the longest, busiest days of her life, but Betty has finally completed all of the filming for her major semester project. She still has a ton of editing to do, but she's got a little time to do that, so on the Wednesday evening before Thanksgiving she finds herself climbing out the living room window of her apartment and sitting on the fire escape.

It's a little precarious, given that she lives quite a few stories up and the fire escape is not exactly built for safe, comfortable sitting. It's also cold outside; the first snow has come, and the only winter gear Betty has on over her sweater and leggings is the blanket from the back of the couch.

As long as she could remember, but especially since everything had happened with Chuck, Betty had wanted out. Escape, discovery, rebirth. And particularly since she'd been in university and knew what path she wished to pursue - journalism - New York City had symbolized that for her. Moving here had been a great leap of faith, sure, but it had also seemed weirdly like destiny.

New York was supposed to be a new beginning: a place where all of her neuroses and anxiety disappeared, where nobody had predetermined expectations for her, where no one knew about her and the allegations about the night that had ruined her life. It was supposed to be a place where she could be someone completely brand new. Instead, she's only become more of herself, in all the terrible ways that means.
Betty tugs the blanket closer around herself and peers through the bars at the ground. A few people are walking around the neighborhood: a woman with a dog, a couple holding hands, a man with a grocery bag under his arm. They're all probably happy, she betts. They probably live fulfilling lives with families who love them. They probably go to farmer's markets on Saturdays and walk down the street without constantly checking over their shoulders and have normal chemical balances in their brains.

Betty knows she’s crying because tears are always hot on cold cheeks, and she's almost annoyed at herself. She isn't this girl, crying pathetically on a fire escape, jealous of perfect strangers with manufactured lives. Still, defeat has never been easy for her, and she has perhaps never posted a greater loss than the admission that she isn't tough enough to hack it here, that New York has overworked and overwhelmed her, that she has failed.

The sound of the window opening is unexpected, and Betty clutches onto the freezing metal railing as she whips around, startled.

It's Jughead, who hadn't been home when she'd arrived half an hour earlier. He pops his head out the window, frowning deeply. “Betty, what the hell are--”

He trails off, and she knows it's because she's crying. His eyes immediately soften and his jaw drops slightly so his lips can part. Jughead is a long book written in indecipherable scribbles, his mannerisms hidden and often hard to decode, but Betty is learning to speak the language. And there's no hiding now.

“Come on,” Jughead says, extending his hand through the window.

She takes it, climbing in with his guidance. When her feet hit the floor he immediately replaces her blanket with a different, warmer one before shutting the window behind her. Betty swallows, unsure of what he's going to ask her. She not sure if she can fully explain what's wrong, or if she even wants to. Jughead is in nearly the same position as she is: grad school, NYC, part time job, stressful family situation. But he seems to be managing fine; perhaps he's losing a little sleep here or there but otherwise…he's thriving.

The last thing she wants to do is show him how pathetic she truly is, but as she sinks down onto the couch beside him Betty realizes, she already has.

“Talk to me, Betty,” Jughead encourages her, his hand rubbing her upper back slowly. “Did something … did something happen?”
Betty stares at the abandoned mug next to Jughead's laptop on the coffee table. She shrugs, then glances over at his sharp intake of breath. His eyes are wide with a mix of fear and sadness, chin protruding slightly, and she realizes too late that oh, he means something else. She quickly shakes her head, placing a hand on his knee reassuringly. “No, no, not that.”

The relief is evident on Jughead's face for a few moments, then the concern returns and his hand falls to lay atop hers on his knee. “Okay, talk to me,” he repeats softly.

Betty looks down at their hands. She watches his thumb stroke her fingers calmly. “I don't think I can cook Thanksgiving dinner,” she finally says in a whisper, barely hearing her own voice.

“That's fine,” Jughead replies automatically. “I didn't think there was dinner anyway.”

“I wanted to do it for you,” Betty continues, momentarily registering a strange peace in the rhythm of his fingers moving slowly against hers. “A Thanksgiving dinner in your own home. Turkey and stuffing and potatoes.” She ducks her head, now staring intently at her lap. “But I didn't have any time to prepare or get groceries and I just don't think I…”

She trails off. I don't think I can, Betty wants to say, but it doesn't make any logical sense. She’s obviously physically capable. They can find a turkey somewhere in New York. Stores are still open. She has all day tomorrow pretty much free. There's time. It’s her mind that can’t do it. She’s mentally exhausted, her energy drained and her spirit broken. Right now not even Alice Cooper could get her to fix a smile on her face and carry forward. She takes a shaky breath in, her throat catches, and in that moment Betty lets go of all of her expectations.

She starts to cry again, but this time they are not delicate tears sliding silently down frostbitten cheeks. This is different; this is as if a hurricane of emotions and promises and fears has barrelled through and left Betty in its wake, broken and directionless. This is the Big One.

Sobs begin to wrack her body. Arms slide around her and hold her tight against something warm and hard. It takes Betty a moment to register through her blurred vision and swirling brain that it’s Jughead holding her close to his chest, rubbing her back in broad sweeps and whispering gentle platitudes into her temple. She waits for the familiar shame to sweep through, the embarrassment that once again he’s here picking up her pieces, but this time it doesn’t come.

Eventually, her tears subside, and Betty sits in Jughead’s arms while dry sobs shudder through her. She hiccups and sniffs, wondering briefly what other bodily functions could make an appearance at this point, and speaks into his cotton t-shirt. “I don’t think I’m cut out for this.”
She’s beginning to slide away on the couch because of the awkward bend of her body, so Betty folds one leg over Jughead’s knee to pull herself closer. He seems to catch on; his arm slides from her shoulders to her waist and holds her in place as she tells him about school, the crippling pressure of her own expectations, and her growing anxiety about the city itself. Walking down dark streets reminds her of the cowboy on Halloween. The skyscrapers loom over her like sealed temples. Even the newspaper stands show her the heights she cannot reach.

“New York was supposed to be a beginning,” she confesses quietly, “but it just feels like a mistake.” Betty rubs the fabric of his shirt between her fingers.

Jughead gives a small sigh, and Betty feels the press of his lips on her temple. She hazards a glance at him and meets his kind blue eyes. “Oh Betty,” he breathes, reaching a hand to her face. He brushes her hair over her shoulder and then threads his fingers through it, combing gently. “This city is intimidating as fuck. I definitely understand. It’s big and scary and yeah, sometimes terrible shit happens here. But it’s not all bad, I promise. You’re just stuck in the vacuum of semester-end bullshit. The sky will clear.”

Betty hiccups again. “It doesn’t feel like it, some days.”

“I know.” Jughead tightens his arm around her in a half-hug. “But believe me, you are way more cut out for this place than most of the people in this place! You’re incredible, Betty. You wake up everyday with a positive attitude and a smile on your face. I know from personal experience that it’s a hell of a lot easier to be unhappy and miserable everyday instead, for that to be your armour. But instead you choose to be optimistic, to be vulnerable, to care for people - that makes you way stronger than anyone else I know. You can do this,” he adds with emphasis. “If you put half as much heart into your documentary submissions and writing as you do into everyday life, there’s no way you can fail. Okay?”

Jughead’s words hit her hard and she feels the tears spring up again, but this is not an ugly cry. These tears are different. There is still some shame with them, but this time it’s because she can’t believe she’d so easily bypassed something else that had come with New York- him. And Veronica, and Archie. Over the last few months they had given her the kind of friendships that she hadn’t ever expected to get out of a place like New York, where it feels like everyone is together but maybe everyone is also totally alone at the same time. Maybe if they were behind her - maybe it wasn’t all a loss.

So she nods, sniffling, and climbs directly into Jughead’s lap to give him a tight hug. His arms slip around her waist immediately, her legs draped to one side, and Betty feels the soft impression of his face nestling in the crook of her neck.
Her arms tighten around his shoulders and she mumbles gently to the side of his head, the only part of him she can see. “Okay.”

--

The next day, for the first time in months, Betty does not wake to the sound of her alarm. She doesn’t push her feet into runners nor pull her hair into a ponytail; rather, she wakes slowly and quietly to the warm smell of fresh coffee and bacon wafting under her doorway.

Um.

For as long as Betty has lived in this apartment, she has never, ever woken up after Jughead. He is a night owl, hunting his literary prey until the wee hours of the morning, and she is an early-morning runner. The very concept of him being awake before her is puzzling, so the telltale signs of life outside her bedroom door are more than enough make her sit up in bed.

The clock reads eight-thirty. Betty had shut her alarm off on the way to bed last night, deciding that after a couple of weeks of hell, she could use a day off of six am runs. She’d also been up fairly late; after pouring her soul (and tear ducts) out to Jughead, she’d cuddled up next to him while they finally finished The Office. She reaches up to run her hands through her hair and comes into contact with Jughead’s old grey beanie. The memory returns, and Betty bites back a smile.

It was possible - okay, factual - that she’d fallen asleep on his shoulder halfway through the penultimate episode, but she’d woken up for the duration of the long finale, and when Dwight and Angela got married she may have shed a tear. Jughead had gently teased her, carefully marveling that she had any tears left to shed for Dunder Mifflin. She’d responded by stealing his beanie and wearing it into her bedroom, where she’d fallen asleep immediately without first removing the article.

Betty slides out of bed and goes to stand in front of her dressing table mirror. Yikes. Whatever makeup had survived her tear-fest the previous night had been smudged across her face, leaving streaks of eyeliner that give her a bit of a heroin addict vibe. Not exactly the goal, Betty thinks. She slips into the bathroom quickly to wash her face and brush her teeth, then shuffles into the kitchen in her pajamas.

Jughead is showered and dressed for the day, which seems to be a miracle in and of itself, but he’s also cooking eggs and frying bacon on the stove, and that is something else altogether. He looks up when Betty enters and gives her a near-exaggerated smile.
“Good morning!” he greets.

Betty can’t help but laugh a little. “Juggie, what’s going on?”

Jughead flips one of the eggs over. “I’ve had a lot of rough days in this apartment, Betty,” he says conversationally. “A lot. Some of them have been while you’ve been living here. But every time it got really bad, I woke up, and you were here cooking breakfast and smiling at me, and I felt a little better.” He slips the eggs onto a separate plate, reaching across to set it on the countertop. “You had a bad day yesterday. So, I figured you could use a little bit of your own medicine. And hey, this is the first time I have used that cliche in an objective factual way and not as precursor to revenge,” he adds with a sideways grin. “So, coffee or orange juice?”

Heat rises in Betty’s cheeks, and she feels them split with the smile that spreads automatically across her face. Three months ago, Betty would have never pegged Jughead as being such a sweetheart, but here he is anyway - also defying expectations. She’s not completely sure what he’s trying to do, but he looks so proud of himself and the food smells delicious, so she decides to let him.

“Coffee please,” Betty says, and sits down at the table.

A steaming mug of dark roast is set in front of her in moments, followed pretty immediately by a plate of eggs, toast, and bacon. Jughead slides in across from her with his own plate and regards her with what she recognizes as nervousness.

“I’m not good at cooking,” he confesses, “so I hope it’s okay.”

Betty intentionally breaks the yolk on her egg and mops up the mess with half of the toast, sliding a piece of bacon on top before taking a bite. It’s hard to screw up bacon and eggs so she has fairly moderate expectations, and it tastes really good. She tells him as much and notes the secret swell of pride at her words that seems to puff out his chest slightly.

They eat in relative silence until both plates are empty, then she sits back in her chair. “This was really thoughtful, Juggie,” Betty says appreciatively. “You didn’t have to do all of this.”

“This is just the beginning, Betts,” he informs her, reaching across to grab the empty plate from the table. Jughead stands and takes both with him, setting them in the sink to to wash. “I have other plans. You need to go get dressed - I wanna catch the nine-thirty train.”
**Plans.** Betty bites her lip curiously and watches his forearms flex over the counter. She rises slowly and only tears her eyes away when he seems to catch her staring, a curious quirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. She hurries into the bathroom to shower, shaking her embarrassment off, and blow-dries her hair straight in record time. Betty slips into her bedroom to pull on jeans and a warm sweater. She adds a quick rub of eyeliner and mascara and then reappears in the living room at exactly nine-twenty.

“That was quite expeditious,” Jughead declares from his perch on the couch, Caramel on his lap. He’s reclaimed his beanie, the grey hat back on his head, and looks somewhat normal again.

Betty shrugs. “You said nine-thirty.”

“I meant it.” Jughead stands up and smiles at her. “You look really nice, too.”

Her jeans are yesterday’s and the sweater is an old faded blue one that’s too loose on her now, so Betty knows he’s probably lying, but the compliment makes her smile all the same. She procures her winter coat and various accessories, and laces up her boots while Jughead shrugs on his coat. She waves goodbye to Caramel, who swishes her tail at them, and they slip into the hallway.

An hour later, Betty is standing at the top of Rockefeller Centre, gazing out at the frozen city. She can see the Macy’s parade from one angle, but there are so many places to look that Betty doesn’t bother trying to focus on it. She skips from one side to the other, marveling first at the view of the Hudson River and then across to the East, and beyond that to Brooklyn.

“I can’t believe I’ve never been here before,” Betty says to Jughead, who is watching her with amusement from where he’s leaning against the centre brick of the building.

“It’s a great view. Just as good as the Empire State Building,” he comments. “Plus everyone’s clamouring for the Thanksgiving Day parade, so it’s not even as busy as it usually is up here.” There is still an even shuffle of people, of course, but she has room to walk around and breathe easy, and ample time to marvel at how the city looks dreamlike from above. “Also because it’s cold,” he adds wryly, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Betty skips over to him and grabs his arm. “Come look over here, you can see the park. It looks like a winter wonderland.” She tugs, and he follows her dutifully to one side. She points, feeling a bit like a child, because obviously he can pick out the giant rectangle of frozen greenery and pathways that comprises Central Park. She stands facing the glass, her breath fogging it slightly as her teeth chatter. It’s cold anyway, because it’s late November, but the air up high is colder and
thinner and Betty doesn’t think she’s the kind of girl that is built for winter.

Once again, Jughead rescues her, coming to stand directly behind her. She has the faintest of nervous twinges at the feeling, but almost immediately his scent overwhelms her, and when his arms slip around her waist Betty feels nothing but happiness. He points out a couple more of his favourite landmarks.

“The city looks different,” Betty observes quietly, her back nestled warmly into Jughead’s thick lined jacket.

His fingers pull absentmindedly at the fabric of her gloves inside her jacket pockets, where his hands rest over hers. “Yeah? How’s that?”

Betty hesitates, trying to find the way to articulate it appropriately. “I dunno. Not quite as detailed, I guess? It looks like - it looks it sounds in songs.”

Jughead chuckles behind her. “Yeah,” he agrees. “It does.”

She takes a few photos and then they head down. The elevator is crowded, but she’s less nervous even just with Jughead beside her. As they leave the plaza, Jughead says they need to come back once the Christmas tree is lit, and Betty slips her hand into his. He doesn’t look at her but he doesn’t let go of her hand either, as he leads her across a few blocks and down to Bryant Park. Betty sees the skating rink, looks up at Jughead, and grins slowly.

“You’re going to skate with me?”

“This is a New York winter tradition,” he explains with a smile. “Let’s go rent skates, if they even have them for your tiny feet.”

They’ve been skating in mindless, peaceful circles for about an hour when Betty is approached by an Asian couple with a camera. After a minute of confused translation, she deduces that they’d like her to take a photo of them, which she immediately agrees to with a polite smile. Betty snaps the picture, then there’s another awkward minute involving pointing between her and Jughead where it becomes increasingly obvious that the woman would like to return the favour and take their photo.

Betty looks apologetically at Jughead, who shrugs. It seems easiest to just acquiesce, so Betty
hands her phone to the woman with the camera mode switched on. Jughead puts his arm around her, and with a blissful impulse Betty slides hers around his waist as well. They smile, the photo clicks, and she retrieves her phone. She glances at the photo briefly - it seems okay - but it’s not until later, when they’re on the train home, that she has a chance to really look closely.

They look happy, there’s no doubt. They’re both grinning, even Jughead, and Betty is hit all over again by how nice his smile is. She flicks her eyes up at him as he sits beside her on the nearly-empty train. He’s got his eyes closed, his head leaned back against the window, and even like this he’s handsome. Her eyes fall to his mouth, full lips gently parted, and Betty lets herself stare for another moment before her focus snaps back down to her phone. In another impulsive moment, she pulls up her rarely-used Instagram account, captions the photo “turkeys”, and uploads it.

Her phone buzzes not three minutes later, and of course, it’s Veronica. You guys went SKATING at Bryant Park?! where was our invite?!, her text demands, followed immediately by that is such a good photo, B you are stunning, and finally, okay I promised Archie I wouldn’t be ~That Person~ so if he asks, I never said this, but you and J are super cute together, please have adorable babies.

“Veronica?” Jughead guesses, snapping Betty out of her reverie. “What does she want?”

“Nothing,” she says, closing her messaging app and smiling at him. She’ll respond later. “Just wishing us a happy Thanksgiving.”

--

They stop for Thai takeout on the way home. Even though it’s not turkey and mashed potatoes, Jughead insists it’s the best Thanksgiving dinner he could have hoped for. As she sits cross-legged on the couch beside him, with her feet in warm wool socks and her mouth full of pad thai, Betty has to agree. The food itself is good and the company even better. Jughead had really gone all out for her today, trying to show her the happy parts of the city, and even though she recognizes that she’s still on a high from it, it might have worked. The magic is still there, in the streets and the lights and the people, and Betty thinks maybe some days, she just needs to look harder.

Now that The Office is complete, they start marathoning Brooklyn Nine-Nine. It’s as funny and quick as Betty wants an easily-digestible sitcom to be, with just enough geographic references thrown in to be charming (even though, Jughead discovers via Google, filmed in Los Angeles). Betty instantly identifies with ambitious overachiever Amy, but there doesn’t yet seem to be a Jughead character. She’s not surprised; the more time Betty spends with her roommate, the more she realizes there is really nobody like him.
When she’d first met him, he’d been aloof and standoffish without being outwardly unfriendly. Then somehow she’d wormed her way in, and now Betty was pretty sure she was at least halfway in love with him. She shoves another forkful of pad Thai in her mouth ("chopsticks are for people who haven’t completely given up", according to Jughead) and readjusts her legs so that her knees are leaning against his thigh. He glances down at her and Betty smiles in response. “I love pad thai,” she says happily.

Jughead smiles in amusement. “Yeah, same;” he agrees, turning back to the TV.

Betty steals another look at him. She still can’t believe the day he’d planned for her - from waking up early to make her breakfast, to taking her to the top of Rockefeller Centre, to skating and finally this, which was maybe the best part. All to help to show her that there were still endless possibilities here, that the dream was still alive, and that the city wouldn’t give up on her as long as she didn’t give up on it. And she’d made him food sometimes. It seemed like a hearty imbalance.

Betty finishes her food and puts the container on the coffee table, then sits and waits for him to be finished as well. Once his styrofoam joins hers, she shoos Caramel off of his lap and moves to settle herself against him. Jughead seems to realize what she’s doing after half a minute and stops her with a delicate tap on her wrist.

“One sec,” he says, angling his body to the side and lifting his legs onto the couch. He props his back against the side and lifts his arm up for her to slide under, smiling. “Come on in,” he chuckles. Betty blushes once again, but lays beside him and places her head on his chest. Their legs tangle together, and Jughead tugs a blanket over top of them before settling one arm around her. She freezes for a moment, heart suddenly beating nervously.

Her early, terrible experiences with Chuck and the fallout from her allegations had preempted a lot of what Betty assumes would be normal steps: find someone you like, date, have sex. Even if she’d been comfortable after Chuck, there had been nobody who had seemed seriously interested in becoming involved with her romantically - at least not aside from the assholes who pursued her in brief interludes because of her reputation, thinking she’d be an easy lay. She feels a bit like a forty-year-old virgin at twenty-three, and although she is technically neither of those things, Betty’s nerves are confused.

To his credit, he immediately notices the tension in her body, and begins to slowly and gently rub her back. “You alright?” he murmurs quietly.

Betty inhales deeply and then slowly lets it out, focusing on his hand and his voice and his smell. “Yeah,” she says. “I’m good. Sorry, it’s just, I--”
“You don’t need to explain, Betty,” Jughead interrupts, still spreading calmness across her shoulder blades. “Or apologize, ever. And, um - just let me know if it’s too much, and we can take a step back.”

She nods into his chest and burrows her face in the fabric, grateful all over again for him. Betty doesn’t know if she’s nervous because she likes him and laying with him is a decent step in the direction of him liking her too - or if it’s because her head is still not immediately able to distinguish between a body being next to hers for happy reasons and one being there to take advantage of her. She hates that this is even playing a role, because she trusts Jughead and knows that he would never, ever hurt her, but this is the hand she was dealt. She thinks it’s probably time that she learns what the cards mean.

They watch five episodes of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* before Betty falls asleep, his steady heartbeat under her cheek and his hands warm on her shoulders and back. Later, just before she trudges to bed at two am, she stops to wrap Jughead in her arms and gives him a sleepy hug goodnight.

“Thank you,” Betty tells him, and when he lifts his head from her neck to smile his response, she places a featherlight kiss on the corner of his mouth. He looks shocked but happy, and she’ll take that for now.

Then she shuffles into her room and falls asleep under the covers, and the last sound she hears is a kitten purring.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, thanks once more for all the feedback, guys. Please leave another comment on this newest chapter :)

Only a couple more left!
I feel your warmth,

And it feels like home

- Depeche Mode, “Here is the House”

“This place is so much nicer than when I lived here.”

Jughead glances over at Archie. His friend is sitting with his leg up on the coffee table, one arm across the back of the couch and the other on the arm. His fingers are drumming a beat that Jughead can’t place as he’s looking around at the living room. Jughead supposes Archie is right; when they’d lived together, video games were the primary decoration in the shared space. Now, the video games are confined to one area, and the rest of the living room is decorated with - well, Jughead isn’t really even sure where it all came from. Pictures, vases, flowers, knickknacks. All Betty things which had somehow found their way into Jughead’s life - just like Betty herself.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “Betty is cleaner. And has apparently a better eye for interior design than we do.”

Archie smiles. “What do you think they’re doing in there?” he asks in a lower voice, nodding toward Betty’s bedroom.

The girls have been in Betty’s bedroom for at least forty-five minutes, and Jughead has given up wondering what’s actually going on. He assumes in reality that it has something to do with hair and makeup and the long wardrobe bag Veronica had under her arm when she’d appeared at his door. Stepping away from reality a bit, however, he finds it much more interesting to hypothesize that they’re actually plotting world domination or revenge on an enemy Tarantino-style, or possibly reviewing each other’s notes on the compatibility of neoliberalism and free trade.

(He thinks Betty, at least, probably actually has opinions on the last one, but the first two remain a pie-in-the-sky dream.)

Jughead shrugs. “Go look.”
“I don’t want to know how the sausage is made, bro.” Archie leans forward to the coffee table and takes a swig of the beer Jughead had offered him when they’d arrived. Jughead doesn’t really drink that much, typically - Betty doesn’t seem to either - but he keeps some in the fridge for entertaining, and he’ll usually have a few if there’s a special occasion.

Jughead snorts and looks out the window at the dark evening. He’s a little nervous for tonight, honestly. Once the girls are ready, they’re all going out to a nearby bar for the birthday of one of Archie’s friends, Moose. Jughead knows Moose as well - the three of them had met attending high school in Newark - but like with most people, he’d never really gotten close to him. Jughead didn’t really want to go, but Veronica and Archie had ambushed he and Betty while out for drinks in the Financial District (a geographic compromise) the prior week, and he hadn’t been able to come up with a good enough reason.

(Apparently, “I don’t want to” was not an acceptable Veronica Lodge-recognized excuse.)

Jughead is not big on birthday parties and even less big on birthday parties held at bars. This is now doubly true because of Betty, who he had assumed would have zero interest in attending the birthday. She’d eventually agreed to go, but he could see in her face while talking to Veronica that she was nervous. It was one thing to go to a pub for dinner with a handful of people she trusts, and another thing altogether to go to a crowded bar with a bunch of drunk guys she didn’t know who were all celebrating the arrival of the holidays and the end of the fall semester.

He’d told her later on the train home that she didn’t have to go, that they would stay home and make up some excuse, but Betty had declined and said that she wanted to try. “If it’s too much for me, I’ll say I’m sick and go home,” she’d said, and he’d accepted that. Jughead trusts and supports her fully, and if she wants to try to go he is all for it. She is the only person who will know the limits of her own comfort, and he is not interested in prescribing them for her.

Still, Jughead is annoyed at Veronica (and by extension Archie) for how pushy she’d been, even though he understands that there’s no way Veronica could know the real reason why neither of them is lining up excitedly to go. He’s decided to let himself have this for a little bit.

On the upside, the semester is finally, finally over, and both he and Betty have submitted their last assignments before Christmas break. It’s been a tough semester for both of them, far busier than he anticipated, and he can’t wait to have a few weeks to relax with no projects immediately looming over his head.

“So … how are things going with you guys?” Jughead asks Archie, gesturing to the wall that separated Betty’s bedroom from the living room. “Is she still coming to your dad’s for Christmas with us?”
“Yep.” Archie nods. “Things are going really well, Jug. I’ve never felt like this before.” He grins earnestly, leaning forward a little in his seat, and Jughead can tell he’s truly excited.

It makes Jughead smile and brings him right back to five years old, long before Veronica or Betty, when a redheaded boy on the playground came up to the weird new kid excitedly and asked if he wanted to play on the slide. Jughead had agreed, and eighteen years later they were still best friends. It might be a cliche, but he does truly only want happiness for Archie, regardless of whatever temporary frustrations he may have with him. And judging by the smile on his friend’s face - well, Veronica is what does that.

So he decides to let go of his annoyance at Archie and Veronica; they both mean well, and he supposes it won’t really help Betty for him to be irritable all evening. “That’ll be good,” he comments, and Archie nods eagerly.

The door to Betty’s bedroom opens, and the girls walk out. Veronica is in some sort of a fancy green dress that seems to be piped with what he really hopes are not real diamonds. She looks nice, but just to the left of her is Betty, and his eyes won’t move anywhere else. He doesn’t recognize any of what she’s wearing and assumes it must belong to Veronica, but regardless, she looks incredible. She has on a black long-sleeved shirt tucked into a dark red skirt that even Jughead can identify as being made of suede.

The skirt is tight to the waist and emphasizes just how tiny Betty is, a fact he’s become more aware of recently as they’ve become increasingly more physically affectionate with one another. It comes down to mid-thigh, and because it’s winter her legs are covered with sheer black tights. Her hair is down in messy, effortless waves that he suspects actually took a tremendously long time to set. Her eyes are different, too; brighter somehow. He thinks it must have something to do with the dark, sooty lashes framing the vibrant green, and is contemplating what else seems different when a throat clearing interrupts his thoughts.

“Earth to Jughead,” Veronica says in a sing-song voice. She’s standing beside Archie, who has his arm around her and seems to be trying to get her to stop talking. She pokes his side hard in response, and he winces. “I guess that means he likes it, Betty,” she says to her friend.

Betty is blushing when he looks back at her, her eyes cast downward to where her hands are fidgeting with her skirt. Jughead makes desperate eye contact with Archie, who tugs Veronica over to the kitchen under the guise of needing better light to evaluate a zit on his face. It’s pretty quick thinking for Archie, and Jughead takes a brief moment to be proud of his friend before he stands and goes over to Betty.
“You good?” he asks quietly, placing a hand on her elbow.

Betty’s eyes raise to meet his. “Yeah,” she says with a smile, cheeks still flushed pink. “This was outfit number seven of Veronica’s approved options,” she adds wryly.

“I’m sure the first six were just as nice,” Jughead assures her. He can’t pretend to be a fashion expert, but much like months prior when Veronica had been helping Betty get ready for her first shift at the bar, he’s struck by how gorgeous she is - in anything. He opens and closes his mouth, unsure if he should say it. In a soft voice he ultimately adds, “You’re so beautiful, Betts.”

Betty lets out a short, high-pitched noise that sounds suspiciously like the initial lilt of a giggle. She draws her lower lip between her teeth and grabs his hand, briefly touching her forehead to his shoulder. “Thank you,” she says with a quiet smile. He threads their fingers together and squeezes in response, looking up once Veronica begins to speak from around the corner.

“Archie seriously, you need to start using that face stuff I got you, or you’ll just get more of these,” Veronica says, the volume of her voice unintentionally announcing her impending presence. “Lucky for you I love popping zits.”

At her words Jughead exchanges a look with Betty, and both of them appraise an embarrassed Archie with amusement when he appears around the corner after Veronica. Fighting a grin, Betty asks, “Veronica, do you take appointments? I’ve got this zit on my cheek that won’t go away. I figure it’s time to consult a professional.”

“Ha ha, B,” Veronica says with a dry smile. “As if acne would dare to cross your flawless skin. Now if you guys are done mooning over each other, we’re going to be late.”

Jughead ducks his head and rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. As long as he can remember, emotion has always been a challenge for him - the likely byproduct, he knows, of a childhood spent in careful management of his feelings. Real happiness was always elusive and love even moreso; over the years, it came to the point where anger was the only safe harbour. And he’d dove into that headfirst. But the anger isn’t there when he’s with Betty. Instead, there’s a flipping feeling in his stomach and a strange warmth that spreads across his chest and makes his face change colour.

Jughead is still learning how to navigate these particular waters.

He catches Archie’s eye in a lightning-quick moment, then Archie protests, “Ronnie, you told me
specifically that we had to be late.”

“Fashionably late, not rudely late,” Veronica explains, sliding her arms into the expensive-looking navy coat that Archie holds up for her.

Judging by the clear exasperation in Archie’s voice, they’ve had this discussion before. “What is the difference?!?”

Betty’s hand comes to rest on his back momentarily, and her touch seems to calm his nerves. She gently scratches at one of his shoulder blades, and when he looks down at her she reassures him with a small smile. He returns it, then they both shrug into their coats and follow Archie and Veronica out the door.

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Moose’s birthday is being held at a bar one stop over from Jughead’s apartment. They take the train because Veronica refuses to wear winter-appropriate footwear, so it only takes them ten minutes to arrive. It’s a smaller place with a brick and wood interior and soft leather bench seats that span the entire length of one wall. Moveable two-person tables sit along the line with additional wooden chairs off to the side in order to allow large groups to reconfigure the arrangement as needed.

It’s along the bench side that Jughead drops his jacket upon arrival, with Betty shoving hers next to his and Archie and Veronica claiming the chairs across from them. Moose and several of his friends are already there. Jughead recognizes many of them, although there are a few he doesn’t know, and there is a girl on Moose’s arm that he doesn’t think he’s ever seen before.

Moose is a tall, big guy built like a linebacker - physically imposing, but with the kind of easy, good-natured smile that makes it immediately obvious that he is a teddy bear at heart. He grins widely when the four of them walk in the door, and as soon as their jackets are discarded, Archie leads them over to greet him.

“Hey guys!” Moose exclaims. “Arch! Jug! C’mere!”

Jughead is immediately pulled into a three-man bear hug. He pats Moose’s back awkwardly but smiles when he’s released. “Happy birthday, man.”
“Thanks.” Moose grins, then turns his attention to the girls. “Veronica! You look gorgeous. Still slumming it with Andrews, I see.”

Veronica laughs and gives Moose a one-armed hug. “Happy birthday!” she says. “What are you drinking?” She looks around for the waitress and makes eye contact, then points at Moose. “Another of whatever he’s having, on me!”

“Thanks, Veronica.” Moose turns and looks just beyond Jughead. “I don’t think we’ve met before?” he asks, tilting his head curiously.

Jughead steps slightly to the side to look at Betty. She’s smiling politely, but her eyes show slight nervousness. “I’m Betty,” she says, shaking Moose’s hand. “Nice to meet you. Happy birthday.”

“Good to meet you too. And thanks!” Moose looks over his shoulder and calls, “Midge! C’mere,” before turning back to face Jughead and Betty. “Guys, I want you to meet Midge.” A pretty dark-haired girl with a short, edgy pixie cut suddenly appears beside him and places a delicate hand on his enormous bicep. She gives a short wave at the four of them, then smiles up at Moose lovingly when he kisses her head. “Midge, this is Archie, Veronica, Betty, and Jughead.”

“Jughead?” Midge repeats.

He sighs and nods, very familiar with this particular interaction. He gets it; Jughead is a stupid nickname, but it’s the one he’s had his whole life. “Yeah. The real thing is worse, believe it or not,” he informs her dryly, and that’s not a lie.

Moose squeezes Midge’s shoulders. “Midge and I met at work. Took me a few months of begging and pleading, but she finally agreed to go out with me.”

Midge’s expression changes to one of amusement, and she makes eye contact with Betty and Veronica. “I was playing hard to get,” she informs them in a mock-secretive voice. “Nice to meet you. Thank god there are some more girls here, the testosterone was getting to be a little much. Come get drinks?”

“Absolutely!” Veronica beams, and with a tug on Betty’s wrist, the three girls walk over to the bar.
Betty shoots Jughead an apologetic look over her shoulder. He gives her an amused shrug in response, but watches her hands for a few moments after she turns away. They’re not curling or fidgeting, and her shoulders seem relaxed, so he turns his attention back to Moose.

“Jug, man, I didn’t know you had a girlfriend!” Moose says, giving him a friendly punch on the shoulder. “Congrats dude, she seems nice.”

Jughead hesitates. “She is. But we’re not - uh - it’s complicated?” he offers, because despite how stupid and immature that sounds in his head, it’s the closest thing to the truth. He and Betty have never had a specific conversation about labels so he is hesitant to thrust one upon her, but at the same time he also doesn’t think that “just friends” has really applied lately.

“Well, make it uncomplicated,” Moose advises. A gust of wind sweeps in as the door to the pub opens, and a few more guests pour in. He smiles past Archie at them quickly, then turns his attention back. “Hey, I’m glad you guys could make it out. Excuse me.” He claps a large hand on each of Jughead and Archie’s shoulders, then strides past them to greet the newcomers.

Jughead and Archie sit down at their table. Archie grabs the drink menu to flip through, and Jughead cranes his neck toward the bar to see which beers they have on tap. His plan is to order one and nurse it all night, but just as he’s contemplating varieties, a golden-coloured pint is set in front of him.

He looks up to Betty, who smiles and slides onto the bench seat beside him. “It’s an IPA,” she explains, “you like hops right?”

“Yeah.” Jughead nods, surprised. She has a cocktail in her hand, something likely white rum or vodka-based judging by the clarity of the liquid. “Thanks, Betts.”

“You’re welcome.” Betty pulls the sleeve of her coat out of the way from where it rests between their legs on the seat, then slides a few inches closer to Jughead so there is no space between them. He fights back a smile at the move, because Veronica is watching them with a grin that’s a little too wide, then casually slings his right arm behind her along the back of the bench and nudges her shoulder with his thumb.

Then, Betty sets her left hand on his leg, and Jughead completely stops paying attention for a few minutes.

When he does snap back to reality, Veronica is talking. “Midge is awesome,” she’s saying, more
to Archie than anyone. “I told her that she and Moose should come to the Bahamas with us but they’ve got tickets to an event uptown, apparently.” She suddenly snaps her head across to Betty, and if Jughead hadn’t already been sort of looking at her, he would have jumped. “You guys. I told you to think about it. Have you decided?”

Jughead immediately looks at Betty, who grimaces uncomfortably. “I don’t know, V,” she says. “I can’t afford to, and I know you said your dad has a plane, but I feel weird accepting something like that.”

Veronica turns her head toward Jughead, and he’s reminded fleetingly of The Exorcist before she raises her eyebrows expectantly at him. “Jughead?”

“I’ll do whatever Betty wants.”

Veronica huffs and crosses her arms. “I’m not done with you two,” she informs them, but thankfully drops the subject. She stretches her neck around the room, scanning for the waitress. It’s gotten busier as more people have poured in to celebrate Moose’s birthday, the end of term, and the start of holidays, so all the servers are occupied. “Hm. Let’s just go up. Archiekins?”

“Sure.” Archie rises obediently and follows Veronica to the bar, one hand on her lower back.

As soon as they’re gone, Jughead angles his body toward Betty and curls his right hand around her shoulder. “You doing okay?” he asks quietly, sliding his left hand onto hers over his leg.

“I feel a little anxious,” Betty admits, turning her palm upward so their fingers can lock together. “But everybody is really nice, and I think as long as we just stay here I’ll be fine.”

He watches her face as she speaks and sees the honesty in her expression. “Okay,” Jughead says, squeezing her shoulder. “But let me know if you wanna go, alright?”

“I will.” Betty smiles gratefully at him. “It’s different, with people I trust. I don’t think I’d want to be here alone, but with you guys - I’m having a good time.” She bites her lip and then flips her eyes quickly down and back up, looking at him through sooty lashes. She’s quiet for a beat, then adds, “Midge assumed we were together.”

There’s nervousness in her eyes now, her green irises sharp in the darkness. Jughead feels a tightness in his own chest that he recognizes as the same emotion, and he swallows. “Yeah, so did
Betty’s hand tightens around his. She shoves the other one underneath her thigh. Jughead watches and frowns, having a feeling that he knows what she’s trying to prevent herself from doing, and is in the middle of figuring out how he can casually hold both of her hands when she speaks again. It’s so soft that he can barely hear her over the music and the din of the crowd.

“I didn’t want to correct her,” she says.

Jughead’s gaze immediately snaps back to Betty’s face, where her eyes are full of hope and nerves. It’s like in a goddamn movie, he thinks, as his heart starts to beat faster and his palms sweat. He had no idea that stuff like that actually happened in real life. He opens his mouth to reply, and just as he’s about to tell her that he too would support no corrections, Veronica and Archie return with more drinks. Veronica is somehow already one-third of the way through telling a story about a crazy girl with blue hair at the bar who had hit on Archie with a pickup line specifically tailored to gingers, so Jughead gives Betty an apologetic look and squeezes her hand in response instead.

Betty leans further into him, and Jughead wears a stupid smile for the rest of the evening.

They get home around one in the morning, having slipped out before last call in order to catch the last train back. Veronica and Archie are too tired to make the trip back to Manhattan and decide (rather impulsively, Jughead thinks) to crash at Jughead and Betty’s instead. Jughead is mildly horrified when they disappear into his room and close the door, ignoring his protests. He makes a face at Betty as he sinks onto the couch, where he will apparently be sleeping tonight.

Betty sits next to him and pulls her feet out of the heeled ankle boots she’d worn all evening. “I’ll help you bleach it afterward,” she promises with a giggle, clearly finding the situation more amusing than he does.

“I think I might be better off just boarding the room up permanently.”

“Like when someone is murdered in a creepy old house?” Betty chuckles.

Jughead nods seriously. “They’ve murdered my innocence.” He shudders. “Well, maybe they won’t actually have sex in there.”
As if on cue, Veronica shrieks, “Archie!”, followed by a giggle and some further indistinguishable, muffled dialogue. Betty claps a hand over her mouth, suppressing laughter, and quickly begins to play quiet music from her phone to drown out some of the noise.

“Sorry, Juggie,” Betty says, patting his leg. “Try to look at it this way - you should feel honoured that they chose to christen your room.”

Jughead makes a face at her. “Gross. But you know, your room used to be Archie’s room. They’ve still had sex in your room way more than in my room.”

Betty looks mildly disgusted for a moment, then grins brightly. “Different mattress,” she teases, flipping Jughead’s beanie off his head.

He watches it fall to the ground near to where Caramel has settled for the night, then looks at her with feigned offense. “How dare you carelessly toss my belongings onto the floor!” he exclaims.

In response, Betty giggles and shrugs innocently. Jughead stares at her briefly, caught off guard once more by how pretty she is, how her smile seems to lift the whole mood of a room, and is then struck by the sudden reminder that she likes him. He swallows and then holds his hand out for her.

“C’mere,” he says softly.

Betty quirks an eyebrow curiously at him but slides closer on the couch. He puts his arm around her waist and she leans into his side almost immediately. “I’ve arrived,” she smiles, her voice quiet.

Jughead lifts his right hand to her face, curling his fingers around the side of her neck slightly and rubbing her jaw briefly with his thumb. “Betty,” he begins, taken slightly aback by the sudden throaty tone in his own voice.

Her breath seems to catch, because when she speaks her voice is pinched. “Yeah?”

For perhaps the first time in his life, Jughead can’t think of the words to say. He swallows hard, then leans in and presses a featherlight kiss to her lips. It’s brief; he’s intentionally not left enough time for Betty respond, so that she can pull back and slip away from him if she isn’t comfortable. When he works up the nerve to look down at her face, Jughead sees that her eyes are still closed,
lips frozen in a half-pucker.

He doesn’t realize that he isn’t breathing until Betty suddenly exhales. The corners of her lips quirk and turn upward in a small smile, and when her eyes open to meet his he can tell immediately that it was a good move.

“Jug,” she breathes. Something brushes his side, and Jughead looks down to see her hands moving up his chest and around his shoulders. Betty suddenly hauls herself into his lap, sitting sideways with her ankles crossed.

Jughead opens his mouth to make a joke about the ladylike perch, but she leans in and cuts him off with a kiss. He responds immediately, sliding his hands up the sides of her waist and settling there to let her set the pace. One of her hands finds its way into his hair, and he tries briefly to recall if today was one of his hair-wash days before she slips her tongue into his mouth and he stops thinking altogether.

They kiss lazily for a few minutes, stopping only momentarily to breathe. His hands stay on her back and waist until she eventually grabs one and puts it on her knee, pressing her body closer to his. Jughead squeezes her knee but gives Betty control over the movement of his hand, letting her pull it upward a few inches until his hand rests on her thigh just shy of the hem of her skirt. Betty breaks the kiss at the same time, and as he’s catching his breath he feels her trembling.

Jughead immediately pulls his hand away. She buries her face in his neck, arms wrapped tightly around him, and breathes slowly into his collarbone. He holds her loosely, unsure of what she’s comfortable with, his cheek resting on her shoulder. His body is excited and frustrated, but he wills it to remain under control. Jughead has a feeling he will become well acquainted with this type of physical confusion, but he also knows he’s willing to wait forever for Betty if she needs it.

After a while she lifts her head and appraises him with a resigned, yet hopeful expression. “Hi,” she whispers.

Jughead sweeps the curtain of blonde hair away from her shoulders. “Hey,” he replies, smiling at her. “You okay?”

Betty nods, biting her lip. “Yes.” She sits up in his lap, arms pulling away from his shoulders, and picks at one of her nails as she speaks softly. “Will you stay with me tonight?”

His thumb swipes at the nervous tear under her left eye. “You sure?” he asks, searching her face.
Betty nods again and repeats, “Yes.” She stands up and holds her hand out.

Jughead takes it and lets her pull him to his feet. He flicks the lights off as she leads him into her bedroom, Caramel following. He sheds some of his layers and gets into the bed wearing his boxers and rumpled undershirt, then turns his back to her while she changes. When he’s allowed to look he’s unable to suppress a smirk at the bright red and green pattern of her Christmas pajamas.

“Don’t make fun,” Betty tells him, climbing into her bed beside him. She’s trying to joke, but Jughead can read the frozen fear in her voice, and he sits up.

“Betty,” he begins, but she cuts him off.

“I’ve never shared a bed with a man before,” she blurts, her cheeks reddening. “Even _it_ was in a car. I - this is--”

She doesn’t have to finish, because he understands. Or at least, he understands the implication - Jughead can’t even begin to understand her fear, although he respects it. She’s never had anyone physically larger and stronger than her sleeping so close, and although they’ve fallen asleep together on the couch, he acknowledges that the bed feels different, somehow.

It feels different to him, too. For a great many reasons, he’s not going to take this for granted.

Jughead knows that this is a big step for Betty. He registers some concern that they skipped through kissing and bed-sharing in one night, but he defers to his respect for her instincts and her control. He is at her disposal, a fact which she seems to implicitly understand.

She slides down on the pillows until she’s horizontal, and when Jughead follows suit Betty rolls over until she’s sidled up against him. He places an arm around her, still loose, and rubs her arm with his thumb until her body relaxes and her breathing evens out. He waits for her to fall asleep, then allows himself a few moments of cliched bliss before doing the same.
As happy as Jughead is, he can’t help but think that he and Betty have terrible timing.

Three days after Moose’s birthday, Betty is on a bus travelling upstate for Christmas with her family. Things had been different with them since he’d woken up in her bed, her watching him shyly. The three days in between were filled mostly with her baking mountains of Christmas cookies, some of which he’d been given to bring to New Jersey. There were more kisses between them, but none had really escalated beyond the simple act itself, and he’s okay with that.

(He’d accompanied her to the bus station and they’d kissed before she departed. Jughead had been left waving at the retreating windows of the bus, feeling mildly like a 1940s wife sending her husband off to war.)

He’s in Newark now with Archie and Veronica, back in the spare bedroom he’d lived in off-and-on for a few years as a troubled teenager. It gives him weird flashbacks, because the decor hasn’t changed much and neither has he - at least physically, apart from a mild level of definition on his lanky torso. Mentally and emotionally, Jughead hopes he’s made some strides.

A fluffy kitten, now beginning to elongate and in a sort of weird teenager-phase, peeks out from under the bed. Jughead glances down and smiles at her. “Hey Caramel,” he says. “Come on out.”

Caramel seems to consider it, but then the door opens and she immediately bolts back under the bed. Jughead shakes his head in her direction and looks up to see Archie standing in the doorway. “Hey man. Almost supper, just checking to see what you’re up to.”


Archie sits on the floor, leaning his back against the side of the bed, and tries in vain to coax Caramel out from under the bed. “I know what you mean. This time last year, I was still living with you, Ronnie and I were just starting to get serious, you didn’t have a pet with your live-in girlfriend...”

“She’s not--” Jughead begins, then stops. She is now, he thinks, but they haven’t talked about what to say to other people. He presses his lips together. Archie is his brother, the same guy that dragged him back to Newark to live in this very bedroom when he discovered that he’d spent the night alone in a homeless shelter in Queens after being evicted. To him, Archie doesn’t register as ‘other people’. So he laughs, still somewhat uneasily. “I guess, yeah. She is.”

Archie looks over immediately with raised eyebrows. “Dude, I was totally just teasing - is she
“I guess since Moose’s birthday, when you guys came back to our place and defiled my bedroom,” Jughead says pointedly. Archie has the decency to look somewhat ashamed, but can’t stop himself from grinning at the same time. “But don’t say anything to Veronica, okay? I haven’t really talked to Betty about the specifics.”

“Yeah, no problem.” Archie nods seriously, then smiles again. “Aw man, that’s awesome. You guys seem great together.” He bends down to look under the bed again and makes a kissy noise. To Jughead’s surprise, Caramel actually tiptoes out. She looks at Archie and climbs onto his lap, rolling on his knees until she finds a comfortable position.

“Weird, she doesn’t like a lot of people,” Jughead observes. “She must know you’re family.”

Archie smiles at that. “You’re my weird emo brother,” he agrees, dodging the pillow Jughead throws at him.

Purposeful footsteps can be heard in the hallway, and Jughead only has a moment to brace himself before Veronica appears. “Archiekins, Jughead - dinner is ready!” she announces.

They traipse downstairs, where the table is set and already laden with Christmas Eve dinner. Jughead slides into his old seat across from Archie and begins to load up his plate. He takes potatoes, then turkey, then ham, rotating the plates to Fred once he’s claimed his portion.

“Looks awesome, Fred,” Jughead tells the older man, who he considers a psuedo-stepfather of sorts. After all, it had been Fred who had fed Jughead more times than he could count, Fred who had told him some of the only good stories he knew about his father, and Fred who had ultimately taken him in as his temporary guardian. “You’ve outdone yourself again.”

Fred gives his signature half-smile. “Thanks, Jughead,” he replies, dropping a spoonful of potatoes on his plate before also passing them onward. “Veronica had some tips for the stuffing this year so we can hopefully avoid repeating last year’s horrible dry-bread incident.”

That would be a first, in Jughead’s experience. “Veronica, I didn’t know you cooked,” he says to her, raising an eyebrow teasingly.

Veronica beams across at him. “First, thank you Mr. Andrews, I do try to contribute. And second,
yes Jughead, you’ve caught me. I may have texted Betty for some advice, and passed that along.”

There it was. *That* made sense to Jughead. He snorts but takes extra stuffing. If it came from Betty’s mind, it was bound to be delicious. He grabs his water glass and tips it back.

“Who’s Betty?” Fred asks curiously.

“Betty is Jughead’s soulmate,” Veronica declares matter-of-factly, and Jughead chokes on his water.

“Ronnie,” Archie says sternly, peering across the table. “You okay, bro?” he asks Jughead, who is still sputtering.

Jughead coughs; his throat still burns but he can breathe again. He’ll live to see another day. He nods. “Yeah, fine.”

“Soulmate, huh?” Fred presses, clearly amused by Jughead’s reaction. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you with a girl, not since you ran over here terrified because the Muggs girl had cornered you and kissed you.”

Veronica immediately claps a hand over her mouth and begins to giggle at the image. Archie leans over to her, a teasing grin on his face. “The story is even better than that. They actually ended up dating, but I don’t think they ever spoke to each other or really were even in the same place at the same time.”

“We were kids.” Jughead shoots daggers at both of them. “I hate you.”

“Love you too bro,” Archie says cheerfully. “Anyway Dad, Betty is Jughead’s new roommate. She moved in after I left to live with Veronica.”

“Oh, right.” Fred nods. “I remember you saying that. So there’s some sort of love connection there, is there Jug?”

Jughead squirms in his seat. “I don’t - I guess so,” he says, giving in. “It’s new.”
Fred takes a forkful of stuffing and chews it slowly. “Well, if she can cook like this, she’s welcome anytime. Hey, I’ll keep that extra chair over there out for Easter, huh?” He winks at Jughead, who ducks his head and shakes it slowly, trying to hide the smile that creeps across it.

Family.

After dinner, Jughead barricades himself in the spare room so he can Facetime with Betty. He, Archie, and Veronica are returning to New York on Boxing Day so Archie can attend events with Veronica’s family, but Betty isn’t scheduled to come back until the 29th, so he won’t get to see her for at least another five days. It’s weird, he thinks - five days had never seemed like a long time before, but now, it may as well be a month.

Betty answers the call after a couple of rings. Her smiling face fills phone, and Jughead can’t stop himself from grinning at her. “Hey you,” he says. “Merry Christmas Eve.”

“Merry Christmas Eve,” Betty replies happily. “How’s my furry little baby?!”

Jughead reaches over and scoops Caramel up from the pillow with one hand. He lifts her into frame. “She’s hiding out in the bedroom here. Vegas loves cats and really wants to be friends. And as it turns out, Caramel is terrified of him. But don’t worry, Vegas wouldn’t hurt a fly. It takes way too much energy, and Vegas’s primary goal in life is sleep.”

Betty laughs, her eyes softening. “Aww. Poor Caramel.”

Jughead sets the cat back down. “She’s surviving. What about you? How are things going?”

Betty’s face changes, and she immediately sighs. “They’re okay. My parents are still my parents. I’m trying not to let them get to me. At least Polly is here with her kids, and I got to see Kevin a couple of times already, so that’s been good.” She chews her bottom lip. “I miss you guys, though.”

“I miss you too,” he says honestly. “Like, a pathetic amount. I’m that guy now, Betty. You’ve done that to me.”

She giggles. “Oh no. I’ve ruined your stoic exterior.”
“Yep.” Jughead leans back on the bed until he’s propped against the wall, and smiles into the phone. He has to hand it to Betty: he’s spent his life not forming attachments with any more people than was absolutely necessary, avoiding connection and commitment. Life was simpler that way. Attachment meant caring and caring meant that there was something to lose. But then a blonde girl had moved into his apartment and four months later, he’s not sure what his life was ever like without her.

“That’s too bad,” Betty continues. “The brooding, tortured soul thing was the main turn-on for me.”

“Well, we had a good run.”

Betty nods seriously. “I agree. Almost a week, my new record.”

He grins. “Hey, by the way. At the risk of being that guy again - Archie referred to you as my girlfriend, earlier. Not around Veronica, just us, but … I didn’t correct him. Is that okay?”

Betty raises an eyebrow at him. “Well I should hope you didn’t correct him, because I’ve been rambling to Kevin all week about my hot new boyfriend.”

He’s blushing again, but this time he doesn’t mind. He opens his mouth to reply, but the door opens again, and he glances up. It’s Veronica.

“Is that Betty?!” she asks excitedly. Jughead figures there’s no point in fighting whatever this is, so he waves her over. Veronica hops beside him and shoves her face in frame. “Hi B!”

“Hey V!” Betty replies, just as excitedly. “Merry Christmas! How is it going over there?”

“Smelly,” Veronica replies, “too many dudes.” Jughead assumes he must have made a face, because Veronica giggles and shoves his arm lightly. “Lighten up. Jughead is the cleanest one, though. For sure.”

Betty makes a face. “If Jughead is the cleanest one…”
“Hey!” he protests.

“Just kidding.”

Veronica laughs, then presses her hands together. “So hey listen. I was gonna tell Jughead and then call you, Betty, but since I have you both … Archie and I are for sure going to the Bahamas to my dad’s friend’s villa for New Year’s. We’ve arranged his jet and everything. We really want you guys to come with us. It would be my Christmas gift to you guys. Please. I will not take no for an answer.”

Betty sighs again. “Veronica.”

“Betty.” Veronica takes the phone from Jughead’s hand, leaving him now staring at the blank wall across the room and wondering how his Facetime date with Betty had been so easily co-opted. “The jet is costing the same with or without two extra people. What are you guys gonna do instead? It’ll be so much fun, and so relaxing. You guys have had such a busy last few months, both of you. You deserve some beach time before it starts up again.”

That seems to quiet Betty, and after almost a minute of silence, she relents. “Okay.”

“Yay!” Veronica cheers, thrusting the phone back at Jughead so she can clap. “I’m so excited. Okay. We’re leaving on the 30th bright and early. That work for you?”

“I’m supposed to get back on the 29th, but I’ll change my bus ticket. A few less days with my mother will be good for both of us anyway,” Betty adds wryly.

“Awesome. Okay, you guys can resume your adorableness now. Sorry for interrupting.” Veronica blows a kiss into the phone, waves at Jughead, and flies out of the room just as suddenly as she’d arrived.

Jughead adjusts his beanie on his head, feeling a little bit like he just lived through a tropical storm. “Archie has been dating that hurricane for a year and a half now, and I swear to god Betty, I’m still not used to her.”

Betty laughs. “Aww, she means well. She’s just enthusiastic.”
“Yeah, I know.” He sighs. “So … sounds like I better dig out my swimming stuff.”

“Me too.”

Jughead leans his head against the wall again and watches her. She sets her phone down on something, adjusting the angle upward slightly, and tightens her ponytail before grabbing the phone again. He wishes she was just here with him instead of hours away. “I miss you, Betts,” he says softly.

“I’ll see you really soon,” Betty promises. She’s still smiling, but he can hear the lump in her throat. There’s a background noise on her end, and she glances away from the phone before sighing into it again. “Okay, I gotta go, that’s my mom. I’ll text you when I know my new bus schedule. Merry Christmas to everyone over there.”

“Same to you guys,” Jughead responds, and then she’s gone. He stares at his screen for a few moments, then he pulls Caramel up again and takes what he’s pretty sure is his first-ever selfie. He texts it to Betty, adding *Christmas kitty and I miss you.*

She sends a selfie back, her smiling with shining eyes. She’s written *miss you guys too* with a heart emoji, but it’s the photo he can’t quit looking at. Jughead saves it to his phone, then heads downstairs for dessert.

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Chapter End Notes

Obligatory thank you again for all the comments! Sorry for the length of this one.
One more left …
eleven

Chapter Notes

Last one! Thank you all for commenting and kudos, I hope you've enjoyed it. Even if you're reading this months from now, I always appreciate a comment left!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Just when I thought I'd had enough, and all my tears were shed

No promise left unbroken, there were no painful words unsaid

You came along and showed me how to leave it all behind

You opened up my heart again, and then much to my surprise

I found love, baby;

Love in the nick of time…

- Bonnie Raitt, “Nick of Time”

The last few days have been a whirlwind.

Two days ago, Betty was in Riverdale eating Christmas dinner with her family, giving forcibly polite answers to probing questions from her parents and playing with Polly’s kids. Then she’d changed her transportation plans back to the city and texted Jughead that she’d be home late on the 27th. She’d expected to grab a cab back to the apartment, but when she’d gotten off the bus Jughead had been standing in the arrivals area of the station, waiting for her. They’d spoken everyday that they’d been apart, but she’d still ran straight over to him and launched herself into his arms. They’d taken the long train home, his arms wrapped around her in the back of the train car, and then fallen asleep on the couch with Caramel wedged between them.

Today, Betty is standing in the swimwear section of an H&M uptown, trying desperately to pick out a few selections before taking off to the Bahamas first thing in the morning. She’d managed to arrange further time off work to take the trip, but she’d lost too much weight over the course of the fall semester, and none of her swimsuits fit anymore. She’d made an emergency text to Veronica, and an hour later she was on the train to Manhattan to meet her. Veronica had bought a few new pieces, but she was operating with a much more substantial budget than Betty, and all of hers came from expensive places like Zimmerman. Betty isn’t even on an Everything But Water budget.
“Betty, I am so glad you guys are coming with us,” Veronica gushes, holding up a pair of skimpy bikini bottoms that lacked - well, most of the actual bottom. “What about these? Sure to catch Jughead’s eye.”

Betty blushes and shakes her head. “I don’t think so, V.”

Veronica huffs but sets the bottoms back down. “You’re dating now though, right? Like, officially? That’s what I gathered from Jughead over Christmas. Seriously B, he was all gross and adorable, it was like seeing a cat walk on its hind legs.”

She smiles at that, understanding where Veronica is coming from. Jughead may wear his heart on his sleeve, but that sarcasm and moodiness is only one part of it. Betty has been so lucky to see many different side of him, most of which he doesn’t show to the world. “We are dating, yes,” Betty confirms. “But it’s new.”

“No it isn’t.” Veronica gives her a look. “Not really.”

Betty bites her bottom lip anxiously. Veronica had a point; emotionally, she feels like she’s known Jughead for years. But physically - that was a different story. They’d shared a bed a few times, but nothing had ever gone on in the bed apart from lazy kissing and careful touches. She wasn’t sure when she’d be ready for anything further, and Jughead seemed content to go at her pace. Truthfully, the prospect of being beachfront with him for multiple successive days was a little nerve-wracking. Betty had spent years trying to come to terms with her physical self after it. She’d hated her body for a long time, blaming it and that damn growth spurt for what had happened to her. It had taken long hours in a therapist’s office to get her to start to shake that feeling, but what had really helped was running and being active. Working out had let Betty feel powerful and take ownership over herself.

Letting someone appreciate that was still another step altogether. He’s barely seen her in shorts, let alone a bikini; Betty is a combination of nervous and excited about the prospect. Plenty of people have seen her in one over the years, but this is Jughead, and there is a distinct possibility that at some point he will see her without anything at all. She knows that he thinks she’s beautiful, but it’s still a big step for her.

“Betty, what’s going on in that pretty head of yours?” Veronica asks, holding up a blue and white striped top in silent suggestion.
She appraises it briefly and then takes it from Veronica to try on. “I’m just nervous. We’ve never - we haven’t done a lot of … y’know, that,” Betty admits. It feels strange to be talking about this - not because she doesn’t trust Veronica, but because until she’d met Jughead, Betty hadn’t thought that there would ever be a guy that she’d trust enough to even entertain anything like it.

“Really? With the way he looks at you?” Veronica asks, surprised. “And the way you look at him? You live together - there’s lots of opportunity.”

Betty hesitates and selects another bathing suit, this one a light yellow colour. “I - um...” she trails off, her left hand aching to curl into itself. She holds the edge of a wooden display table instead. She looks anxiously over at Veronica, who has moved closer, seeming to understand that whatever Betty is going to say is private. She opens her mouth, but a growing lump in her throat prevents words from coming out, and Betty screws her eyes shut. She is not going to cry in the middle of a crowded H&M.

“Hey never mind, we don’t have to talk about it,” Veronica says quickly, placing a comforting hand on Betty’s back. She’s frowning worriedly, but her voice is soothing and quiet. “It’s not my business.”

Betty shakes her head, then breathes deeply. “No, it’s not that. I’ve just had, um, some bad - some bad experiences,” she stammers, her heart racing. When she’d told Jughead, it had been initially over email - a quick send, followed by her taking a 15km run near the seawall. Later, she’d sat with him and told him her story, but even then the catalyst for him knowing had been something outside of her control. This, here with Veronica, is the first time she has ever voluntarily divulged the information, and regardless of how purposely vague she’s being, it feels both terrifying and sort of freeing.

Veronica’s eyes are wide and shiny when Betty meets them, a look of horrified comprehension beginning to dawn. “Oh Betty,” she says softly, immediately pulling her into a hug.

Betty swallows and blinks quickly, returning Veronica’s embrace. “Everything’s okay,” she says, more to herself than anything.

(It feels like the truth.)

Veronica pulls back, setting a hand on Betty’s shoulder. “Is all of this too much?” she asks, gesturing around. “I can cancel the trip and we can stay in the city. We can get all the different flavours of Doritos and figure out once and for all which is the best.”
“Original is the best,” Betty informs her in a light, matter-of-fact tone, self-consciously swiping underneath her eyes for the tears that did not fall. “And no! I want to go, for all the reasons you said before. Relaxing, and just hanging out with you guys - it’ll be a lot of fun. I’m okay, really.” She smiles at Veronica, squeezing her friend’s hand. “But that’s why - part of why things are slow with Jughead. He’s been really supportive, and really good about everything - but he’s never seen me in anything less than the outfits I used to wear to work at the bar. And I just - um, I want him to like it,” she stammers, face reddening now for a totally different reason.

“Oh girl.” Veronica shakes her head. “When and if he does, he’ll love it. Trust me. The boy thinks you’re gorgeous.”

Betty smiles, ducking her head. “Yeah, he tells me all the time.”

Veronica quirks an eyebrow and lets out a small sigh. “I can’t believe he’s such a closet sweetheart. The secret life of Jughead Jones,” she jokes. “Can you get him to give Archie some tips?”

“Archie loves you, V,” Betty chuckles. “He’s always going on about you.”

“I know. Archiekins is awesome. But the one thing he’s not is full of surprises,” Veronica laughs. “What you see is what you get.” She hands Betty another swimsuit to try on. “Anyway, being nervous is totally normal. But you are a total smokeshow and will look like perfection in all of these suits, if you want to wear them. Which you totally don’t have to, if that’s … We can do a burlap-sack-chic sort of thing if you want. We’ll be trendsetters!”

Betty smiles. “Thanks, V. I think I’ll stick with the bathing suits, though.”

Veronica giggles. “Good, I don’t have the complexion for khaki.” She selects a final bikini top for Betty to try - white, with little crowns on it - and hands it to her. “Jug will like this one, I think.”

Betty takes it from her and holds it up. She thinks about wearing it and then thinks about Jughead’s reaction, and a small smile creeps across her face.

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They arrive in the Bahamas around noon the next day, but it takes another hour to get from the
airport in Nassau to the smaller strip of beach outside of the city where the Lodge family friend’s villa is located. Betty watches out the backseat window of the rented van with eager anticipation, catching glimpses of beautiful clear water and perfect warm skies. Beside her, Jughead seems equally as excited. She’d discovered on the plane ride down that he’d only seen the ocean once before - when he was eleven, on a road trip with Archie’s family just before his parents had divorced.

They pull up to a large house overlooking the ocean, and the first word that comes to Betty’s mind is grand. Once through the foyer, they walk into an open living and dining room combo that extends from a modern kitchen with pristine stainless steel appliances. There are four bedrooms to choose from; Archie and Veronica immediately claim the master, which Betty figures is fair. It’s decorated in a Bali theme, and like the other bedrooms, has direct outdoor access.

“How about the coral room, the beach room or the weird basement room?” Jughead asks, wandering down the hall. “And before you start being polite, I have no preference and will take whatever you don’t want.”

Betty follows him and drops her bags in one of the rooms. Judging by the colour, she imagines she’s chosen the coral room. “It doesn’t matter to me either,” she says, catching his hand. She’s consciously chosen not to share a room with him at this point in an effort not to pressure herself into moving too quickly. Like with everything so far, Jughead had been completely supportive of that.

Now that they’re here, though, Betty has an image of cuddling with him near the open window, the breeze from the ocean rolling through, and well - she might just have to make an exception.

Jughead flashes her a smile and pulls Betty into the room beside it, which is decorated in tasteful blue and white patterns that remind her vaguely of old teacups. Somehow, with the ocean view just past the sliding door, the decor works. He drops his bag on a chair and walks over to the window, Betty following.

“It’s so bright,” he comments.

“Doesn’t exactly match your black-and-grey wardrobe,” Betty teases, poking his arm as she comes to stand beside him.

His arms slide around her. “Hey, I wear white, too,” he grins.
Betty giggles and kisses him, her hands sliding up to his face. She’d intended for it to be a quick kiss, but then his arms tighten around her waist and she doesn’t want to let go either. She drops one of her hands to his shoulder and touches the open flannel covering his plain t-shirt, slipping her fingers just beneath the collar and tugging.

Jughead breaks the kiss and shrugs the shirt off of his shoulders. “Good call,” he says. “I should probably put shorts on, too.”

Betty glances out at the ocean. The sun won’t be setting for a few hours, and although there’s a part of her wants to stay here and help him undress, she is also feeling a little overheated in the jeans and long-sleeved shirt she’d put on to leave a very snowy New York. “Same.” She gives him another peck and ducks out.

Once they’ve both changed - him into shorts and her into an old sundress - they meet back up with Archie and Veronica, who look suspiciously rumpled. Veronica shoots Betty a sly grin in response to the unasked question, and they begin to check out the rest of the house. Past the living room is a large covered balcony with another table and chairs, and beyond that, a pristine white deck. An infinity pool covers a fair bit of space, with a few lounge chairs running along the defined edge. Off to the right, there are five stone steps down to sea level, and a sandy path leading through a smattering of palm trees to a small private beach.

Betty exhales in shock. “Veronica, just how rich is the guy that owns this place?”

Veronica shrugs. “I’m not sure. He does pretty well for himself, though. Isn’t it nice?”

“Yeah ... nice,” Betty echoes. She’s sure that this house must be at least a hundred times the cost of her annual tuition, not to mention the added expense of getting down here in the first place.

Jughead too seems dumbfounded. He comes to stand between Archie and Betty and clears his throat as all three stare at the ocean. “Arch, remember that time you found me in the homeless shelter in Queens, and I told you that it was rock bottom?”

Archie nods. “Yeah, buddy.”

“Well, this is definitely the opposite end of the spectrum from there.” Jughead whistles. “Holy shit, Veronica. What kind of world do you live in?!”
Veronica looks mildly embarrassed. Betty gives Jughead a look, already feeling bad for her own comment earlier, and smiles kindly at her friend. “What Jughead means is, we’re both really grateful that you brought us down here. This is once-in-a-lifetime, for sure.”

“You’re welcome,” Veronica chirps in response, seemingly pleased. “So, Smithers said that they were going to leave the fridge stocked, so we should have enough stuff to make dinner later. First - you guys wanna test out the pool?!”

Betty smiles and nods along with everyone else, but inside her nerves are beginning to bite. She skips to her bedroom and pulls out one of her new bathing suits to slip on. It’s orange and not overly skimpy, but even with the classic cut of the bottoms and the supportive straps of the top, Betty feels exposed. She begins to braid her hair into a single plait, partly so it doesn’t get too tangled in the pool but mostly to stall for time, and once she’s done she peeks through the curtains of her sliding door.

Everyone else is already dressed. Archie and Veronica are splashing each other in the pool, but Jughead is standing on the side - probably waiting for her, Betty realizes. And he looks pretty damn good: all long limbs, lean muscle, and smooth olive-toned skin. She groans to herself and turns to stare in the mirror again. She’s pale all over, but her legs look long and Betty can see the added tone in her upper thighs from regular barre classes. The top gathers her breasts together a bit more than some of the other options she’d brought, and between that and the slight sheen on her skin from sunscreen, Betty thinks maybe she looks … not bad.

Still, she is not willing to have this nervous moment in front of everybody, so she opens the sliding door slightly and pops her head out. “Juggie?” she calls. “Can you come here?”

He looks and jogs over right away, slipping past the curtains. “What’s going on, Betts?”

She’s sitting on her bed wearing a robe, peeking through one of her hands. “Okay, this is really stupid. I know. But - I--”

Jughead’s previously neutral expression changes to one of concern almost immediately. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m nervous,” she says into her hands, closing her fingers together so she can’t see him anymore.

“Okay,” he says, and from the tone of his voice Betty knows he’s launching into a now-familiar damage-control mode. “Well, we can just hang out in here! Or we can go for a walk - the beach
looks really nice right now - or if you want we can go into the pool after Archie and Veronica are done.”

Betty suppresses a laugh. “That won’t exactly help,” she explains, lifting her head and resting it on her bent knees. “It’s not them I’m nervous about.”

Jughead looks bewildered, and if she wasn’t so anxious she’d find it completely adorable. “I don’t understand.”

She bites her lip and curls one of her hands, her nails finding the familiar berth on her palms. “It’s you, Juggie.”

He’s staring at her hand. “What?” Suddenly Jughead’s face changes and he looks horrified. “Betty, did I do something wrong?” he asks, taking a step back from her.

“No, no, no,” Betty says in a rush, alarmed by the heartbroken note in his voice. “It has nothing to do with that,” she adds, and right now, it’s the truth. “It’s just - you’ve never seen me in a bikini before.”

Jughead stares at her blankly for ten long seconds, then very seriously, he asks, “Do you have a bad tattoo of Mr. Potato Head somewhere?”

The prospect catches Betty completely off guard, and she gives a nervous laugh. “What?!”

Jughead looks at her with a tilted head, his eyes honest and his jaw soft. “Because unless you have a really terrible tattoo somewhere, Betty, there’s no way you’re not completely gorgeous under that robe. And even then, I can maybe look past the tattoo. Probably.”

Betty bites her lower lip and smiles, cheeks flushing pink. “Okay, I’m taking the robe off,” she decides, setting her feet on the floor. She takes a few steps toward the bedside table, then shrugs off the material and sets it on the pillow. Taking a deep breath of confidence, Betty turns around. “Ta da,” she sings weakly.

Jughead is at her side in less than a second, his hands grabbing her face and pulling her into an unexpected kiss. She lets out a squeal of surprise but responds quickly, one hand settling on his shoulder. They break for air after a few moments, and Jughead trails his lips across her chin before pulling back and meeting her eyes.
His gaze is heavy and Betty giggles out of nervous impulse. “I guess you approve?” she asks.

“You are easily the prettiest girl I have ever seen,” Jughead tells her, hands slipping onto her waist. His eyes are locked onto hers so that she can read his honesty clearly. “Every part of you.”

She blushes again and smiles into his shoulder as he tugs her closer, brushing his lips across her neck. “Thank you. Um. I was peeking at you through the window earlier,” Betty confesses. “The beach looks good on you. Really good.” His abdominal muscles flex as she touches his stomach, and his lips press a bit harder against her neck.

“I’m so glad, I bet Archie I could develop at least two abs,” Jughead remarks, sliding his hands across her back. He’s speaking into her neck and his voice is slightly muffled. “God, Betty, your skin is so soft and you smell so good. You are so fucking beautiful. Don’t mind me while I just do a stream of consciousness James Joyce sort of thing here.” He nips at her skin, and okay, if she’s ever going to leave this bedroom it’ll need to happen now.

Betty giggles and puts her hands on his shoulders, pushing back slightly. He lifts his head and looks at her with a vaguely dumb, distracted smile. “Let’s go swim,” she suggests, and leads him out of the bedroom.

As soon as her feet hit the water she makes eye contact with Veronica, who is giving her a questioning look. Betty bites her lip and smiles shyly. Just as she’s about to give her a thumbs-up, Jughead leaps onto Archie’s back and dunks him underwater. Archie throws him off easily and launches a wave of water at him in retaliation, which flows into Betty and sends her splashing water back, laughing.

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“Jug, come on.”

Betty treads water, pulling herself back to half-float on the surface, and peers up at her boyfriend. He’s sitting on the back perch of a boat that Veronica had chartered to bring the four of them out to a reef for swimming and some casual snorkeling. It would be a great start to New Year's Day, according to Veronica, and Betty had been excited at the thought. Archie and Veronica had dove in the water immediately upon arriving, with Betty following closely behind. Jughead, however, had stalled with one foot dangling in the water.
“Betty, there are sharks.”

“There’s no sharks around today, kid,” the boat captain says lazily from nearer to the bow, feet already up with a newspaper in hand.

Jughead turns on him. “The ocean isn't exactly sectioned off. They could be anywhere!”

Betty rolls her eyes and swims in a circle, still watching him. “We just looked this up at the house. If we come across any they’re probably just reef sharks and they won’t bother us. But he says there’s none around today. So come in!”

“Betty, don't take this the wrong way, but absolutely fucking not.” Jughead shakes his head vigorously, an expression of unbridled (and irrational) fear on his face.

Betty looks over to Archie and Veronica for help, but Archie just splashes water in Jughead’s general direction and hollers, “Come on!”

Betty sighs and swims up to the platform he's sitting on, grabbing onto the edge and putting her elbows on it. “Please, Juggie?”

“Not even your best sad eyes will work on me here, Betty. I am not being eaten by a shark today.”

“But you'll let me be eaten by a shark?” she questions, making a last-ditch attempt to appeal to the protective side of him she’s seen so frequently over the last couple of months.

Jughead looks at her seriously. “You've made your bargain.”

Betty groans in annoyance and pushes her feet off from the boat, paddling backward a few feet until she nears Archie. She dips her face underwater with the snorkeling mask on and takes sharper note of the teeming life below her dangling feet. The water is clear and beautiful, the sun hot and steady. She wanted to share this with him. “Jughead, if you don't come in, Archie is gonna tell me your real name.”
Panic flicks across Jughead's face briefly before he smirks and shakes his head. “Archie wouldn't do that. It's my deepest, darkest secret.”

“No it isn't,” Archie snorts, “literally anyone who ever went to school with us knows what your name is. Probably the only reason that Betty hasn't looked it up is because she's nice.”

“So you'll tell me,” Betty confirms with Archie, grinning across the clear water at an amused Veronica, who’s treading water and watching the exchange with great interest.

Archie does a somersault in the water, and when he comes up he replies, “Sure, it's F---”

“No!” Jughead yells, and in a single swift moment, he hops to his feet and jumps into the water. He splashes down near Veronica, causing her to shriek and swim quickly away.

Betty watches him break the surface. He flips his long sweep of hair off of his face and sputters water off of his mouth. Then he makes a sudden dive for Archie, who laughs and avoids him easily. He tugs Veronica to the side and they begin to float with their snorkeling masks, treading gently along the surface as they trace the reef below.

Jughead seems to realize he won't be exacting his revenge in the immediate future, because he turns toward Betty and begins to swim over. She's still mildly irritated with him; Betty understands the irrational nature of fear, but she's put herself out there more than once already on the trip, and it's only the first full day. His wild imagination needs to be put on pause, she thinks.

But then he's at her side with sparkling eyes and a cute, sheepish smile, and god damn it, she is so into him. Betty opens her mouth to suggest that he grab his mask and snorkel so they can look at the reef, but before she can speak he very suddenly grabs her arm and kicks his feet out in a panic.

“Betty, something just touched my foot!”

Two hours and much mocking later, the four of them are back at the seaside house. The seawater is beginning to make Betty’s skin itchy, so the first thing that she does upon returning is hop in the shower. The water washes over her, sending whitecaps of shampoo and conditioner into the drain underneath her feet.

It feels good to scrub the salt off of her skin, to replace it with the familiar strawberry scent of her body wash. She has a bit of mild sunburn on her shoulders, the sunscreen apparently not being
much of a match for the blistering sun on shining water, but it's nothing too extreme and Betty lathers lotion across it before getting dressed again. She pulls on simple yellow bikini bottoms and the white top Veronica had chosen that was patterned with little golden crowns, biting her lip at the thought of Jughead's reaction.

Their plans for the rest of the day are primarily to hang around the deck, swim in the pool, have drinks, and eat. Betty is particularly interested in the last one after a busy morning of swimming and splashing around in the ocean. She tugs a light blue cover up over her bathing suit. It's loose against her tired skin but also fairly open at the front, as if emblematic of the line she's trying to walk between her physical and mental comfort. The heat has necessitated less clothing, but her brain is still kind of adjusting - although Betty has to admit that the longer she stays here, the more comfortable she's becoming.

She wanders out to the kitchen and begins to make salads and sandwiches for lunch while everyone else cleans up. Veronica hadn't been lying about the stocked fridge; the night before, they'd barbecued steaks and roasted potatoes, and for tonight there were large planks of salmon waiting that Betty couldn't wait to grill. She shreds some fresh parmesan and tosses it in the bowl of communal caesar salad.

“Can I help?”

Betty looks over her shoulder and sees Archie walk into the kitchen. He looks newly clean and has different swim trunks on than before, so she assumes he’s also just showered. She smiles warmly at him. “Sure - do you want to mix the dressing into the caesar salad?”

“Can do,” he says, moving to stand on the opposite side of the island from her.

She flips her eyes up at him curiously. She likes Archie; he seems friendly, and a good friend to Jughead, although they haven’t spent very much one-on-one time together. Betty has a feeling that the four of them will be friends for quite a while, so she figures now is as good a time as any to bond a little more. “So Juggie tells me you guys have been friends forever - has he worn that hat the entire time?”

Archie chuckles as he begins to toss the salad, attempting to more evenly distribute the globe of creamy dressing he’d just poured onto it. “Mostly, yeah. He used to wear one of those paper crowns - the kind you find in Christmas crackers, you know? But then it somehow changed to a beanie, and he’s been wearing that for years now.”

Betty smiles. “For the first little bit I wondered if he was bald under there.”
“Not bald,” Archie laughs. “He actually has pretty thick hair, I think. I guess you’d probably know more about that now than me.”

Betty blushes. “It’s pretty luscious, yeah.” She spreads mustard along one side of a new piece of bread, then clears her throat. “You seem more like brothers than friends.”

“You are.” Archie shrugs.

Betty marvels momentarily at the ease of his response, as though two decades of committed loyalty and mutual support had just come easily. Which, she realizes with brief envy, maybe it had.

“I’ve known Jug my whole life, almost,” Archie continues. “And he lived with us for a while, I’m sure he’s told you. He is my brother, especially since I’m technically an only child.” He sets the salad tongs down on the counter, and Betty glances up at the noise. “He’d probably kill me if he knew I was talking to you about this, but - he really likes you, Betty. I can tell. He’s not like a lot of people - he’s sort of a lone wolf, you know, but he has a big heart.”

Betty raises an eyebrow. “Is this the conversation where you tell me not to break his heart or I’ll have hell to pay?”

Archie smiles sheepishly. Betty meets his eyes; they’re friendly and warm, and she likes the prospect of friendship that she finds in them. “Something like that.”

Jughead is probably the sweetest guy that Betty has ever met; he’s kind and thoughtful, sarcastic and funny, and it hurts her heart to recall the hardship that he’s gone through in his life. But this - it makes Betty feel happy to know that through all of it, Jughead has had a friend like Archie to support him as much as he deserves. “Don’t worry,” Betty says. She can hear rustling down the hall in the direction of Jughead’s room and speaks softer. “I won’t.”

“Good.” His voice is serious, but his jaw is softer now, and Betty smiles at him.

“So,” she says conversationally, laying turkey across the bread and layering pickles and lettuce over top, “is his real name actually that bad?” Betty hears Jughead’s door open, followed by the distinct slap of bare feet on tiled floor.
Archie grins at her. “Uh - I don’t think it’s that awful, but my name is Archibald, so I don’t really have much of a defense.”

“Is she still trying to get you to tell her my name?” Jughead asks, appearing around the corner. He comes to Betty’s side and slips an arm around her waist, brushing his lips to her cheek. “You’re persistent, I’ll give you that.”

Betty smiles when he kisses her and leans into his embrace. “I know you’re just here to steal food, you don’t need to butter me up first. Take some.”

Jughead grins and slips both arms around her. “You’re the best roommate I’ve ever had,” he says into Betty’s hair with a teasing and pointed look at Archie. His friend’s jaw drops in mock outrage, and when he laughs, Betty can feel the reverberation in her chest.

They spend the rest of the day lounging around outside. Jughead and Archie horse around in the pool while Betty and Veronica lay on lounge chairs. A cool breeze passes over Betty’s face and she closes her eyes, thinking, *I could get used to this.*

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It’s not until she wakes up two hours later that Betty even realizes she’d fallen asleep. She sits up on her elbows, lifting the sunglasses off her face, and glances over to the now-empty pool. She looks to her right, expecting to see Veronica lounging beside her, but her eyes fall on Jughead. He’s laying on his stomach but is awake and watching her, and when their eyes meet he gives her a small, lazy smile.

“Hey you.”

Betty smiles and bends one of her knees so she can lean on her side to talk to him. “Where are Veronica and Archie?”

Jughead nods his head toward the house. “They went for ‘a nap’,” he says, lifting one of his hands to form quotations in the air.

“Oh.” Betty bites her lip and feels a sudden flush of heat across her body. It occurs to her that she’s wearing the crown bikini, and judging by the look in his eye, he’s noticed. She’s seen that
look before on other people, and as a general rule, it has never meant anything good for her. But here, with him, it’s different - exciting, she thinks, although still nerve-wracking. “I could use a nap too,” she says, drawing her lower lip between her teeth.

Jughead’s eyes flick across her face, searching rapidly. She wonders, like always, what exactly he’s looking for, but he seems to find it with enough satisfaction because he rolls over and sits up. “C’mon,” he says quietly, offering his hand.

Betty takes it and lets him pull her to her feet. He leads her across the deck and past the pool to the door to his room. She steps in and walks a few feet forward as her eyes adjust to the relative darkness. Jughead follows her and closes the drapes, then sits on the edge of the bed. He scoots backward until his head hits the pillow and lays there calmly.

She crawls onto the bed and lays down beside him, tucking herself beneath his extended arm. Betty wants to relax, to close her eyes and let his warmth lull her to a restful nap, but she can’t. He’s shirtless and in blue swim trunks, she only in her bikini, and Betty has never been more aware of another person than she is in this moment. She waits for the dark anxiety to overtake her at the touch of his skin, but it merely passes through like a quick-moving cloud, and once he leans in to kiss her, it’s gone.

Betty loves kissing Jughead, she decides. He’s really good at it, for one, which is mildly surprising for somebody who doesn’t seem to have a lot of history. Kissing him also creates ripples and twinges inside her that she never thought she’d experience. She wants to bottle this feeling and keep it for the tough days, form it into pills and mix it with her prescriptions until eventually he’s the only drug she needs to rely on.

He’s always careful with her, she’s noticed. They’ve only been officially together for shy of two weeks, but in that period anything physical has always been initiated by her. Betty likes that for now; it makes her feel powerful, gives her agency, sets her up to be in control. And she realizes, suddenly - Jughead knows that. He’s giving that up so she can have it, because she’s the one who needs it more. He’s an angel, Betty decides, and moans into his mouth.

His hands are always respectful, too. They never stray from her face and neck, until she gives him permission. During previous trysts, she’s the one that has moved them to her legs, to her waist, to her sides, across her back. And today, she’s the one that grabs his right wrist and lifts his hand onto her heart.

Jughead breaks the kiss immediately, his dark eyes smouldering but controlled - careful, always careful. “Betty,” he says breathlessly, searching her face again.
Her lips are still parted, swollen with his pressure, and she flutters her eyes closed for a moment. His head drops to her shoulder and they breathe together, slowly inhaling and exhaling, until she places an errant kiss on the side of his head and tugs at his hair with her other hand. “Juggie,” she responds, trying to meet his eyes.

When she finally does, Betty licks her lips anxiously, focusing on his smell and his touch and him. Then she lets go of his wrist, leaving his hand sitting on the swell of her left breast, and smiles at him.

“Are you sure?” Jughead asks, brow furrowed. “We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

“I want to,” she breathes. “I want you to touch me.”

He lets out a puff of air and then dips his head down to kiss her again. Betty gets lost in it, in his tongue and in the swirl of everything inside her head, until he moves his hand down slightly to cup her breast and it all goes white. He doesn’t break the kiss and she doesn’t want him to; she craves the connection, the emotion, the respect that he’s showing her, because she needs to focus on what makes this time different and that’s what sets him apart.

Jughead squeezes his hand gently. Betty lets out a small whine and he does it again, finally dragging her mouth away from his to inhale a sharp breath of pleasure. “You okay?” he asks.

When she opens her eyes, he’s looking at her again. This time, though, it’s not her face; his gaze is southward, on his hand and her chest, and she has a fleeting kick of nervousness before she recognizes his look of arousal. “I wore it for you,” she says somewhat breathlessly, and his eyes snap back to hers. “This top. I wore it for you.”

“The crowns, yeah - I noticed them, um, earlier,” Jughead stammers, distracted. He drags his hand away and holds the side of her face instead, eyes refocusing. “I like them a lot.”

Betty giggles, her nerves dissipating as his seem to rise. “I’m glad,” she says, thinking back to two days prior when she’d had a mini-breakdown in H&M over him seeing her in a bikini. She wouldn’t have thought they’d be here just a short while later, although she does make a mental note that Veronica had been right.

“I’m really proud of you, Betty,” he says unexpectedly. She turns her head back to his, and notices him looking at her intently. “You are amazing.”
She doesn’t have to ask what Jughead means; she knows, and truthfully, she’s proud of herself too. Betty owes a lot to him - giving her what she needs to be okay, reassuring her, supporting her. He makes all the difference, but ultimately it’s still her out here swimming in the choppy waves. She’s proud to hold her own head above the water, and she gives herself all the credit.

Betty cuddles into Jughead afterward and they do nap briefly, but they eventually make their way back to the deck and the kitchen. With help, Betty makes dinner, and they spend the evening laughing and joking with their friends until the countdown starts and one of the neighbours lets off fireworks across the beach.

He kisses her at midnight, long and hard, and when they finally surface for air Veronica lets out a wolf whistle. Betty grins and leans backward into Jughead so they can watch the rest of the fireworks, then when it’s time to go to bed she walks down the hallway, grabs her bag, and then drops it on the floor of his bedroom.

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On New Year’s Day, Betty wakes up in the blue and white bedroom that Jughead had chosen two days prior. Beside her, stretched out underneath the fluffy white bedspread, is Jughead. His face is pressed against the pillow, mouth slightly open as he emits a gentle snore. She smiles at him, then leans over and presses a featherlight kiss on his cheek before slipping out of bed.

She sheds her pajamas and tugs on her running clothes. She double-knots her shoes and steals Jughead’s phone to take advantage of his predownloaded music collection. Then Betty finds her earbuds in the depths of her purse, twists her hair in a ponytail, and tiptoes out of the room.

Betty sets off through the front door. She flips his phone on as she jogs down the pavement. The music is located quickly, but Betty accidentally hits his photo gallery afterward. She notices that he’s saved a photo of herself that she’d sent when they were separated over Christmas, and it makes her smile.

When she reaches the end of the block, Betty turns onto the beach. Running on sand is difficult, but she’s been doing a lot of eating and drinking over the last couple of days and not much in the way of activity, so the extra effort is probably reasonable. She follows the beach down to the curve of the ocean, where the sand turns to rock, then stops and looks out at the sea.

Betty wouldn’t have guessed four months ago that this is where she’d be starting the first day of the new year. It's unclear what her prediction for herself would have been, but she knows it
wouldn't have involved a luxury home in the Caribbean. Good friends and a supportive boyfriend also probably wouldn't have featured prominently, and yet… here she is.

Betty leans down and unties her shoelaces, then rids herself of her socks. She takes a few steps into the ocean, enjoying the cool water on her already sweating feet, and wonders if maybe this different reality has materialized because she, too, is fundamentally different.

She'd noticed it first when she had gone home to Riverdale for Christmas. She'd spent all of her life in that town. All of her future dreams had involved staying, living there, having kids and going to Pop’s for dinner once a week. But Riverdale was also the setting of the worst day of her life, and ever since that point the future had always seemed muddled.

Then she'd gone to New York. New York had given her independence in a way she'd never had before. It had brought hard times, too - bad jobs, shitty nights, and the enlightening burden of grad studies. Those times had almost sent her packing back upstate, but it was something else that New York had given Betty which stopped her.

Jughead. The brooding king of Brooklyn, crown and all. He'd helped her in ways that he'd never intended, cracking open the sealed pain she'd long hid and helping her heal. She isn't done yet; that is a process she knows she'll be moving through on various levels for many years to come. Together, though, they'd poured a foundation of respect and promise that Betty knows she can build upon, both with him and independently.

She steps out of the water and puts her socks and shoes back on, then turns and makes her way back to the house. By the time she reaches it Betty is drenched in sweat, so she takes a quick shower in the coral room so as to not wake anyone up. She braids her wet hair and twists it up in a knot, then tugs on some shorts and a tank top.

Betty steps into the hallway and looks down toward the kitchen. She could make breakfast, she thinks. Brew coffee, fry bacon, cook eggs. Then her head turns to the right, and her feet take her in the opposite direction. She opens the door to Jughead's room, where he's sprawled out on his back in the bed, a great look of contentment on his face.

She pulls the comforter back and crawls in beside him, resting her head on his chest. His arms come around her instinctively, hands slipping onto her back beneath her shirt, and she closes her eyes.

Betty is asleep within minutes, and the next time she wakes Jughead is still there.
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Chapter End Notes

I am considering a couple of follow-up one-shots that would deal with specific events in this universe as they unfold... On a sort of as-I-have-time basis. If anyone is interested in that please let me know in the comments. :)

Til next time, thanks again!

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