

RIVERDALE

THE DAY BEFORE







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A prequel novel by MICOL OSTOW

SCHOLASTIC INC.

PROLOGUE

JUGHEAD

Riverdale is known as “the town with PEP!” But stick around here long enough, and you’ll start to realize just how many of those pasted-on smiles are really only covering up a Narnia-sized closet full of skeletons. Sure, every small town has its secrets. But even those of us who’ve grown up here, who’ve lived our whole lives in Riverdale, are shocked at what’s being pulled from Pandora’s box.

Trust me, I should know. Lately, I’ve realized that everyone I care about is tangled up in one Lynch-esque melodrama or another.

Riverdale’s also a town of Rockwellian traditions: the midnight pancake banquet in late winter, frost lacing the town hall windows and vapor curling from our mouths when—if—we dare to step outside. Or the Riverdale High School Homecoming weekend, a network-TV-ready

worship of the apex of Americana: football, dancing, and small-town pride.

But my personal favorite—really, the only one that’s ever really meant anything to me—has to be the annual July fourth Summerfest carnival. Typically, Betty, Archie, and I would hit up the carnival together, stuffing our faces with hot dogs and cotton candy and testing our skills at the dunk tank (Betty always did have the best arm). By evening, Archie and I would hit the road to check out the Centerville fireworks, Betty hanging back to catch Riverdale’s display with her sister Polly (she never minded being the third wheel with Polly and—more recently— Polly’s attached-at-the-hip boyfriend, Jason). The Summerfest is just what we do. What we’ve always done. Archie and I started it before we were even walking, thanks to our parents. Betty tagged along after her family moved here, some time around first grade. And it’s been a thing ever since.

Or, I should say: it was a thing.

Because this summer, everything’s different. Betty’s off in LA, honing her writing skills with an internship at Hello Giggles. (Not to mention, Polly and Jason had an epic, scorched-earth breakup on par with *The War of the Roses*.) Archie’s been busy working construction for his dad...

Honestly, I haven’t seen much of him lately. I don’t know. Don’t ask me about it.

As for me? So far, so summer-usual. I’m working nights at

the Twilight drive-in, trying to earn some cash, stay out of the house, and stay out of my Dad's way, too...

Staying out of the way is what I do best, taking things in from a distance, and write them down.

. . . Meanwhile, while none of us knew it at the time, off in New York City, a young socialite named Veronica Lodge was carelessly living out her own personal episode of "Gossip Girl," courtesy of the bottomless bank account of her daddy, one Hiram Lodge. Veronica's parents had history with Riverdale, but, hey—that had nothing to do with us.

Well, that's what we thought, anyway.

The "butterfly effect" suggests that small causes can have unpredictable—and catastrophic—effects. One action. A cascade of ripples. An outcome no one can predict.

That was us, that summer. Archie, Betty, Veronica, and me. It was July third. The holiday stretched out in front of us like a broken promise. We were separate, but intertwined in ways we'd never see coming. Small, stupid butterflies, blindly flapping our wings.

PART 1: MORNING

From: ddoiley1@AdventureScouts.net

To: [list: all_scout_mailing]

Re: overnight supplies list

To all Riverdale Adventure Scouts:

Hopefully, you're all prepared for tonight's campout. (You wouldn't be my Scouts if you didn't know to prepare for any and all eventualities!) But just in case, please be advised that this is the list of supplies you'll need for our overnight:

*external frame backpack

*tent

(Don't forget stakes, guylines, and your tent footprint! The ground in Sweetwater Woods can get very muddy. We'll sleep in pre-assigned pairs, so please coordinate with your partner to ensure you know who will provide the tent. We will take turns carrying in our packs.)

- *sleeping bag (with optional liner)
- *pillow
- *multitool – no pocketknives as per Scout Master's regulations
- *flashlights (and extra batteries)
- *swimsuit
- *stove/windscreen/fuel
(these are also to be shared with your tent partner)
- *water sandals
- *long underwear, pajamas, and socks for sleeping
- *water bottle
- *mess kit
- *trash bags
- *energy bars or other small snacks
(Meals provided by Scout Leader)
- *sunscreen
- *lip balm
- *toilet paper
- *insect repellent
- *toothbrush/toiletry kit as needed

I'll bring the first-aid kit. You may also want to bring a camera, your binoculars, and the attached field guide to Sweetwater Woods (*though you should all be familiar with its topography by now*).

You should also be prepared for two vigorous hikes: first, to camp this evening, and tomorrow morning at sunrise. Badges will be distributed to those who can correctly identify select species of flora and fauna on either or both hikes.

I look forward to spending the holiday with such capable Scouts-in-Training as yourselves! Let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,
Scout Master Dilton

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TO: JASON

Cheryl

JJ, FYI Daddy's looking for u. Warpath. Lay low, but you'll have to face music eventually.

Jason

Thanks, I'm on it. See you soon?

Cheryl

En route. Just dodged Daddy Dearest obvi. xo

CHAPTER ONE

BETTY

Dear Diary:

I can't believe it's the Fourth of July already! It's super weird to be celebrating it here in LA, away from Polly and Archie and Jughead. I can't remember the last time we missed the Riverdale Summerfest. I guess it must have been that one summer, when Archie broke his arm building a tree house with Jughead, and we stayed indoors all day reading comics and eating red-white-and-blue ice pops. Everyone's tongues turned bright purple, and Juggie ate three ice pops for every one of Archie's and mine. But that was years ago.

I miss Riverdale, of course, and my friends. But LA is AMAZING. Aunt Gertrude's house may smell a little funny (whatever it is, I seriously think the

odor's been absorbed into the walls. It's like a weird mix of garlic and old-lady soap), but she lives right on the edge of Runyon Canyon. So every day I get to hike to Cloud's Rest before work. The view is insane. It's exhilarating. There's nothing like it in Riverdale.

The weather's amazing, the barista at Blackwood Coffee knows my order by now (pour over, milk and two sugars)... Oh, and one other thing...

Yeah, I miss Polly. But being away from Mom for the first time?

Um, it's not bad.

Obviously I love her and I know she loves me, but she's so controlling. For once, I feel like I have some independence. And it doesn't suck.

I love working at Hello Giggles, too. Even if I have yet to win over my boss, aka the features editor, Rebecca Santos. I don't know if she thinks I'm some small-town hick or what, but she is just not impressed by me.

I know I'm the new girl, and from out of town, and I'm probably the one on staff with the least experience, but so far, Rebecca just has me running errands, fetching coffee, coordinating meetings, mailing packages—girl Friday kind of stuff.

I mean, I still totally love it. But the closest I've

come to actual writing is labeling files. Rebecca makes me write the labels in pencil first, and then go over the pencil with Sharpie. She may have some OCD issues. In any case, it's not exactly Pulitzer-track material.

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TO: BETTY

Polly

Hey, sis. You around? I wanna catch up. Also need more details about this 'Rad Brad' of yours. Sounds very . . . Not-Archie. Can't be a bad thing. Miss you.

Betty

You too! But you can just call him "Brad." PLEASE. :) Totally not Archie. In a good way. But also not Archie. In a bad way.

Rebecca keeps me busy, though. Which is good. For a lot of reasons. If nothing else, it means I won't be able to dwell on the one real bummer about spending my summer here in LA—being away from my friends on the Fourth of July.

Ugh, who am I kidding, diary? The bummer is being away from Archie.

"Rad Brad." That's how he introduced himself. It was so deliberately cheesy that I had to laugh,

which I'm guessing was the point.

I met him my second week out here. I was finally starting to get used to the energy in LA—the insane traffic, having to sit on the freeway for hours of the day, every day, how the weather is always the same (seriously, no one here knows what to do on the rare chance that it rains. They would **FREAK** if they had to live through a winter in Riverdale, even if we do have enough maple syrup to keep the whole city on an infinite Master Cleanse)... The fact that even the regular people kind of look like celebrities, and maybe they are just celebrities-in-waiting, after all. I still felt like the small-town girl in the big city, because how could I not? Literally all my clothes had some kind of flowery pink print on them. It was like wearing a sign on my forehead that said **TOURIST** . . . or **ALIEN**. But I was starting to adjust to the city's rhythms, and even though I felt foreign, I also felt comfortable.

Polly kept texting, asking about the guys in LA, and I kept telling her: Guys don't usually notice me. I'm the "sweet" one. The girl next door. And the one guy I've wanted to notice me for ages definitely loves me... but probably not in the way that I want. For him, I am the girl next door.

(I don't know for sure how he feels. I've always been too afraid to ask.)

So it was a summer Friday, and Rebecca had me picking up sushi for the office (rock shrimp tempura rolls, brown rice, extra spicy mayo on the side, and a hijiki salad—I knew Rebecca's order by heart already). But even though I'd called in advance, the host told me it would be a while, so I grabbed my book (*The Bluest Eye*, favorite reread, of course) and settled on the grass at Maguire Gardens, which always has great people-watching.

It was one of those days that even smells like summer: everything green and in bloom, the sky the kind of blue you only ever see in professional photographs. But this was actual, real life. Hashtag no filter.

Suddenly, there was a shadow over the page. "Doing some light reading, huh?"

I looked up. It was a guy who looked about my age, casual in a tee shirt and cargo pants, with sandy blond surfer hair. He was smiling a tooth-paste-commercial smile at me.

I flushed. "I guess it's not exactly summer escapist reading, but she's my favorite," I said. Understatement of the century. Toni Morrison is my IDOL. Hello Giggles is setting up a signing

for her this summer and I'm dying to be a part of it. I've been dropping "subtle" hints—like carrying one of her books on me at all times—since I found out.

"If that's your summer escapist reading, you're going to need another escape," he said. When he smiled, his eyes crinkled up at the corners.

"What do you suggest?" I asked. Was I flirting? Maybe LA Betty could flirt. Maybe Riverdale Betty could learn a thing or two from her.

His eyes crinkled again. "I was hoping you'd ask that. My number one suggestion is: You let me take over as your recreational director." I must have looked surprised, because he added, "Or, you know, just a dinner. Low-key. I swear I'm not a psycho killer weirdo. Promise."

"Hm." I pretended to think about it. "I mean, as long as you're not a psycho killer weirdo. I do like low-key."

"See? We're soul mates."

Soul mates. I had a flash of Archie's mop of red hair, his freckles and those deep-green eyes. But even though Archie and I eat at Pop's together on the regular, those meals could never be mistaken for dates.

"Here's my phone. Can I get your number?" He

passed it to me. Then he frowned. "Oh. Also, your name would be nice. I guess I got a little ahead of myself."

I laughed. "It's Betty. Betty Cooper." I took the phone from him, then gasped as I realized the time. Rebecca's rock shrimp tempura would be cold by now. Crap. I punched in my phone number as quickly as I could, grabbed my stuff, and turned to leave. "I'm sorry to rush away, but I have—my internship..."

"No problem. You can tell me all about it. At dinner."

I smiled, wondering if my own eyes were crinkling up at the corners, too. "At dinner."

"Oh! And by the way, I'm Brad. Or—since I'm guessing you're new to that SoCal lifestyle—you can call me Rad Brad."

I looked at him. "Okay, but can I also not call you that?" Flirty, LA Betty again! Shocking. And kinda fun.

"Betty Cooper, you can call me anything you want. But you should probably get back to work before your boss catches you picking up surfer dudes on your lunch break."

CHAPTER TWO

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TO: GERALDINE

Archie:

Found tent. Buried in the garage. All set!

Geraldine:

Can't wait. Meet here after dinner, we'll head to the woods?

Archie:



Geraldine:



[DELETE THREAD?] [Y]

JUGHEAD

The trailer is always at its most repulsive (or should I say, “squalor chic?”) early in the morning; it’s too bad I’m an early riser by nature. The small bit of rising light that struggles to creep in through the dollhouse windows of this place only ends up casting shadows across the sagging, thrift store

furniture and lighting up every last corner dust ball. It's practically an artistic homage to neglect.

Already, this morning was no different than any other. Stale cigarette smoke and the smell of cheap beer thickened the air. I peeled myself up to a sitting position on the couch—getting in before Dad last night meant I got to take the couch for myself, literally the absolute least I could do, leaving the bedroom for him—and looked around.

The place was empty. It *felt* empty, too, in that echoey, negative space way that you can't quite articulate, but you understand intrinsically. Some spaces, you can just feel the emptiness in your bones.

Getting in before Dad also meant Dad was out late. And that meant . . .

Well, nothing good.

My parents' constant fighting was awful, and it used to make my stomach cramp to watch them scream and shout in front of Jellybean, in particular, who you could tell was really upset by it. But at least when Mom was yelling at Dad, even if it was awful for Jellybean and me, it meant they were both in the same place, together.

"*It's just for a little while,*" was what she said to me, just before she loaded a beat-up suitcase into the trunk of an even more beat-up used car, strapped Jellybean into the backseat even though my sister kept insisting she was big enough to ride shotgun, and pulled out. "*Just until your father gets himself*

together.” As if “together” was something easy, some socially dictated checklist of actions my father would be able to tackle point by point until he somehow, miraculously became whole again.

As if my father had ever been whole in the first place.

It wasn't that I didn't want to believe in him. Or in them. But at sixteen, I couldn't remember a time when my dad had ever been “together.” It didn't bode well for my mother's plans.

And the fact that she hadn't asked me to come? I tried not to think about what that meant. Someone had to stay here with Dad, anyway, and keep an eye on his decidedly not-together existence. So here I was, the opposite-of-prodigal son, left behind, in Riverdale, to keep an eye out.

It would have been easier to keep tabs on Dad if he were ever around. But I guess that's the whole point.

Most kids count down the days until summer vacation. To be honest, though, I missed the structure of the school year, having a rhythm to the days (even if that rhythm sometimes involved pop quizzes and term papers and stuff). Or maybe it was just that *this* summer felt particularly formless, with Mom and Jellybean moving out, and Betty away . . . And Archie all tied up in . . . who even knows, he's never around, and it couldn't possibly be because he's working so hard doing construction for his dad. I'm not buying *that*.

Once, Archie and I were practically brothers. Our fathers

were partners, and we grew up together. But Archie’s different lately. And when I went to find him three weeks ago, to let him know what was going on with my mom—that she had left, and taken Jellybean with her? Well, he just wasn’t around. Literally. And he didn’t respond to any texts. My best friend just . . . ghosted on me.

How long is “a little while,” anyway?

I showered off some of the scuzz of the humid night and got dressed quickly, stashing my crappy phone with the cracked screen in one pocket (no messages), and my woefully empty wallet in the other. I’m working tonight, so it won’t be too empty for too long, at least. But before I hit the Twilight to get everything ready for our totally not-ironic July third screening of *Independence Day*, I wanted to hear Archie say to my face that we weren’t heading to Centerville for the cheesy fireworks and male bonding. (I know, I know—but it’s tradition.)

And that meant finding my dad, *and* Archie.

Why did I have the feeling that neither of them was going to make that especially easy for me?



I walked from the trailer to Pop’s; not ideal, but I didn’t think boosting Dad’s truck to find my dad and *ask him if I could borrow his truck* for a road trip would go over so well. (Of

course, small-town Riverdale never seems quite as small as it is when you're hoofing it.) When I left, the truck was sitting in front of our house, which meant that Dad had taken his bike (which, side note, was not really all that much better of a choice than the truck, if he'd been drinking, but that was a whole other thing that I'd think about later, if ever). Anyway, I left the car where it was and kept on walking.

I took the long way, which made no sense, unless you knew that I was walking past Archie's block, hoping to get a glimpse of him, and talk about tomorrow night. The street was hushed and still, rows of houses still dark, waiting quietly for the sun to rise in full. The only window that was lit up was Archie's actually, which was kind of crazy for how early in the morning it was. I assumed that meant he was awake. But even after waiting a few minutes, feeling like a stalker—*oh, it's just Jughead Jones, skulking away in the shadows like always, just like the freak that he is*—there was no sign of movement up there.

I sighed and fished my phone out of my pocket. You up? I texted, feeling like a creep on a booty call instead of just a regular (if mildly freaky, skulking) guy checking in with a friend. I watched the window intently, but there was nothing. And no message appeared on my screen, not even those torturous little bubbles that tell you, at bare minimum, that there's someone on the other end at least thinking about what to say to you. So after a few minutes—more than I'd

really care to admit, to be honest—I shrugged, put my phone away, and kept on walking, across town to Pop’s.

I had no idea where Archie would be at this hour. I’d say he was with his dad, on-site early for the day’s work. That would have been the easy way to rationalize his absence. But it would require pretending I hadn’t noticed that Mr. Andrews’ truck was still in their driveway. Meaning Mr. Andrews wasn’t at work. And if Mr. Andrews wasn’t at work, Archie wasn’t there, either. Even I couldn’t headcanon that cognitive dissonance.

So, where the hell was Archie, anyway?



By the time I got to Pop’s the sun had risen enough that I was sticky from the heat. It was still early enough that the parking lot was empty . . . but not completely deserted, like I would have expected. Sartre said “Hell is other people,” and you didn’t have to spend much time with me to know that I emphatically agreed.

(I mean, given that motto, you probably wouldn’t get to spend much time with me, anyway. And you wouldn’t want to if you could.)

Still nothing from Archie. It wouldn’t have been weird, given how early it was, except that *I knew* he wasn’t at home, which meant he had to be awake. Just more fodder for the

enigma that Archie Andrews had become.

The last time I even saw him in person was at Pop's, actually. A week ago to the day. It was, as they say, a dark and stormy night, and I was huddled in a booth, alone, trying to write. I've been doing more and more of that lately. I have no idea if my writing is any good—probably not, who are we kidding?—but I kind of don't care. When I'm writing, I can tune the world out, and at the same time, process things. It's the best of all possible worlds, for me.

Of course I realize that “it was a dark and stormy night” is maybe the *most* cliched way for a writer to set the stage for his story, but, you know—write your truth and all that. So: It was dark and stormy out that night. I can't help the way it was outside.

Pop teased me for spending so much time alone, in a booth, hunched over my clunky old laptop—you'd think he'd be used to it by now—but he was giving me extra grief that night, telling me if I spent any more time holed up with my writing (even if I was technically out in public), I'd turn into a character from a horror movie, like the guy from *The Shining* or worse.

I told him, “Guys like that don't live in Riverdale.” I believed it then. Though, soon enough, I'd learn differently.

It was such a mess outside that for hours, it was just Pop and me in the diner. A few people stopped in for take-out

orders but it was pretty clear Pop was keeping the place open just so I'd have somewhere to be. He's a good guy, and I didn't want to wear out my welcome. I was starting to think about packing up and heading out—wondering if I was going to go back to the trailer, where Mom and Jellybean's absence lingered like a stain that bleach couldn't completely kill, or where else I could possibly go—when the overhead bell chimed and someone walked in.

I heard Pop say it—"Archie! Look what the cat dragged in! What are you doing out in this mess?"—before I could look up and see who it was.

"Jughead." Archie's hair was clumped to his forehead with rain, and a little puddle was forming at his feet. He didn't look like something the cat dragged in; he looked like something that had been dragged through hell, and the rain was only part of it. There was a distracted look in his eyes. No, worse than *distracted*. Maybe even *haunted*.

"Hey," I said, not sure how to react to him. After a second, watching raindrops gather at his fingertips and slide toward the floor, I gestured. "You wanna sit?"

He looked hesitant, which was definitely a twist of the knife. There was a time when I wouldn't have had to ask, and he wouldn't have thought twice. And it wasn't so long ago.

One summer can change everything, I guess.

I shrugged like I didn't care and tried to make myself

believe it. He sat down. “Hey.”

“Long time no see,” I said, since apparently I was only thinking in clichés that night. “What’ve you been up to?”

“Working for my dad, you know. Pouring concrete.” He grimaced. “It’s not exactly my dream job, but Dad needs the help. Anyway.”

“Anyway,” I agreed. My dad worked for Mr. Andrews; Archie didn’t have to tell me how grueling the job was.

“And . . . you’re still writing,” he went on, nodding at the laptop in front of me.

“Trying. It’s not exactly National Book Award material. Who knows if anyone will ever want to read this stuff.”

His face went softer, like he was thinking of something far away. “Come on. Of course they will. You were always the best at making up stories. Remember, all those campouts we had in the tree house? Your ghost stories were always the scariest. I had to pretend I wasn’t terrified. Half the time I wanted to run back into the house and hide under my bed with Vegas.”

I smiled. “Yeah, I remember. And you sucked at pretending . . .”

I could read you like a book then, Arch, I thought. Still can. Construction didn’t explain why we’d drifted, why he was never around. And it didn’t explain the sad, distracted look on his face.

“Hey,” he said suddenly, looking a little eager, but also

shy. “What if I told you. . . I’d been doing some writing, too?” He glanced down at the table, like this was the most embarrassing thing he could possibly have revealed to me.

“No way.” He didn’t have to be embarrassed, but it was still a surprise. Football jock Archie writing? *Unexpected* was an understatement. “Like a novel or something?”

“Uh, more like poetry,” he said, turning a bit red.

“Poetry? You?”

“Yeah, I don’t know. More like, maybe . . . song lyrics?” Now he looked completely mortified. He waved his hand. “Forget it. Anyway.” His little moment of vulnerability was over. “What are you doing for the Fourth?”

“Independence Day at the Twilight on the third, as tradition dictates. But we’re closed on the Fourth, so I have the day off.”

“Right, of course. Nice.” He ran a hand through his hair, thoughtful.

I have no idea what possessed me to say what I did. I’d been thinking about it for weeks— hell, it was on my mind when I woke up this morning. But things with Archie felt too broken. I was going to let it go. And then I changed my mind.

Maybe it was that wistful look on his face. Maybe it was the talk about the tree house, about how far back he and I go. “Remember when we used to go down to Centerville every year to watch the fireworks?”

“Good times.”

“Why don’t we do it again this year? Take the bus down? A blast from the past.”

I had a little flash of nerves, like it’d be a punch in the stomach if he said no. But his eyes brightened. “Yeah. Yeah, that sounds like a plan! Come by my house at four?”

“You got it,” I said, and for a second it felt like everything between us was exactly the same as it’d always been.

It was sickening, how much I wanted that to be true. By the time I realized where Archie and I really stood, exactly how precarious our old, familiar friendship had become. . . . well, by then it was too late to be anything but over it.

From: KweenKatJosie@pussykats.net

To: [list: Bad_Kitties]

Re: set list for tomorrow

My most exalted goddess/sister/singers:

Thank you both for crushing it at yesterday’s rehearsal. We rule, clearly. (*Color me unsurprised.*) Don’t forget, we’re meeting at the school today at 2:00 sharp for another sesh before tomorrow night’s big show in Town Square. I’ve attached the set list we made up last night. Take a look, mark it up, and come prepared to defend any notes or changes you suggest.

You know I have strong opinions about this. (Don't worry, Mom gave me keys to the school so we'd have access to the music room. It's cool.)

Tomorrow we'll meet at the Square at 4:00 for a final dress rehearsal and sound check. Punctuality, ladies. We may not care about making it to the annual Twilight screening of *Independence Day* (does Jughead Jones think he's being ironic or something?), but in typical Pussycat tradition, we need some time to get our pre-performance party on.

Last but not least, if either of you see Reggie Mantle around today, I suggest you dodge. He's been stalking me, offering to "manage" the Pussycats or something. It would be funny, I guess, if it weren't so pathetic. *Don't* let him corner you unless you're looking for a headache today. And we can't afford headaches!

Hugs and hisses,
-J

CHAPTER THREE

VERONICA

“The early bird gets the worm, m’hija,” Daddykins always says. But honestly—what’s so appealing about that? Um, *worms*? I’d just as soon sleep in.

So you can imagine how irate I was to find Mother looming over me like some kind of incredibly beautiful, perfectly coiffed ogre, having snapped up the window shade of my cabin, shaking my shoulders gently and tapping a sensible Valentino flat against the floor. “Ronnie, we’re leaving,” she said, an impatient edge creeping into her tone. “Soon. You know your father’s on a schedule. Katie, I’m sorry, but you’ll have to go.”

I glanced at the Cartier watch I always wear—a little trinket from Daddy, of course. It was barely 7 a.m. Simply uncivilized.

“Unless, Katie—ugh”—my mouth felt dry and cottony,

my head pounding from last night's fun—"unless you want to come with? Last chance to change your mind. Are you *really* going to skip the party of the summer?"

Gingerly, squinting against the sunlight, I rolled to one side and propped myself up on an elbow. I arched an eyebrow at my best friend, who'd slept, like so many summer nights before, in the extra bed in my cabin after the previous night's festivities had gone on longer than anticipated. Katie stayed over so often she kept her own tub of La Mer in every Lodge bathroom.

Katie smiled at me, flashing blindingly white teeth courtesy of the finest orthodontia the Upper East Side had to offer.

"But, Veronica," she purred, teasing, "I *am* going to be at the party of the summer. Kelly Klein's annual Easthampton Fourth of July party is legendary. Last year she had an American flag donut wall. And supposedly Rihanna's going to be there."

I snorted. "Rihanna? Please. If you're lucky, maybe you'll spot a wayward Kardashian. You can't throw a Louboutin on the East End without hitting one. And if I'd known you were all about the themed eats, I could have custom-ordered you red, white, and blue macarons from Ladurée. You know Claude gave his personal cell to our chef."

"Don't be silly, Veronica—you know our menu has been set for months." That was Mother's interjection, a smile in

her brown eyes giving her away. Her mouth was still a firm line, though.

“Katie, dear, you know we’d love to have you. But if you’re staying in the Hamptons, it’s time to start saying your goodbyes. The Captain wants to leave in thirty minutes. At Mr. Lodge’s request.”

We all know that Mr. Lodge’s “requests” are anything but.

I groaned. “Mother, that’s barely enough time for a double-shot cappuccino—which we both desperately need.”

Katie nodded at this and batted puppy-dog eyes. “That and an industrial-sized dose of aspirin,” she said, rubbing her temples.

Mother ignored Katie’s dramatics, folding her arms across her chest. “I’ll send Marta down with coffee and Advil. And I can probably get your father to forty-five. But no promises, so”—she gave a little waving, “hurry up” gesture—“get to it.”

“Ask him for an hour. Then he’ll give you—us —our forty-five.” I grinned.

Say what you will about Daddy—and there’s plenty to say—but he does love a good negotiation.

Even more than negotiating? Daddy loves a *loophole*. So much so that he actually named his yacht the SS *Loophole*. And like any other loophole, this boat was great at getting us

exactly where we wanted to be.

Katie and I got dressed quickly, Katie shimmying out of a borrowed pair of pajamas and back into the Stella McCartney sundress she'd been wearing to last night's hang.

"I smell like a bonfire," she said, shaking her tanned arms through the ruffled off-the-shoulder sleeves.

"Girl, if you smell like last night, you know it was a good night," I said. At least she came by it honestly; Luke's impromptu Georgica Pond clambake was *epic*. Like, blow your curfew, forget all about whoever your summer crush has been until tonight, and slap another coat of lip gloss on *epic*.

We both laughed. Katie's been my partner in crime since the first day of kindergarten at Spence. Her mom's a little bit psycho—nice, but psycho—and even back then wouldn't let Katie go anywhere near a molecule of gluten. Whereas *my* mother sent me to school with a Magnolia cupcake in a plastic container, along with a gourmet PB&J from Blue Ribbon Bakery, may it rest in peace. Poor Katie looked so mournful at the sight of those delicacies that I gave her half of everything in my lunch bag . . . and sharing does *not* come easily to me, so you know it was kismet.

We've been inseparable ever since, save for my family's annual Fourth of July cocktails at our penthouse in the Dakota. Katie's been crushing on Luke Chastain's best friend, the improbably named Mac, an Australian transplant with killer abs and a delicious accent, for the last three years. And

Luke and Mac spend the Fourth in the Hamptons, silly boys, which means Katie does, too.

It's okay. It just means more for moi. And there's always texting and FaceTime to keep up-to-date on anything urgent. So, while most people were crammed onto jitneys, trains, or the interminable parking lot that is the LIE, the SS *Loophole* was speeding away from Sag Harbor port back to New York City.

I didn't blame Katie for wanting to stay out east—Mac *did* have those abs, after all—but you couldn't have paid me to join her. Kardashians and donut walls are all well and good, but everyone knows no one does a bash like the Lodges do. Our annual Fourth of July party was no exception. We'd been hosting it for as long as I can remember. Even as a preschooler, I understood the extra level of prestige that went along with the effort of coming home from your tony beach house just for the night, having scored an invite to one of the most exclusive events of the season. Being on the Lodges' list was a status symbol on par with an invite to Warhol's Factory, once upon a time. Tomorrow night I'd be clinking glasses with DuPonts, Rockefellers, Vanderbilts . . . and we'd be the most important name in the room.

I know what you're thinking: I'm a spoiled girl living a charmed life.

You're one-hundred-percent correct. And I make no apologies.

Daddy works insanely hard to provide us with this lifestyle, and if he wants to lavish the spoils of his work on his doting daughter and devoted wife, why not?

And if my life is good, then summer in New York is the ne plus ultimate. It's dreadfully hot, so steamy you can practically see the lines of heat shimmering off the sidewalk in waves. That's where Easthampton escapes come in. Daddy designed our eight-bedroom, shingle-style mansion—"Lodgehampton," as locals know it— from the ground up, with no detail forgotten. I have my own suite in the south wing overlooking the back garden and heated saltwater pool. Beyond that, it's a short wooden path to our private beach access. The house has central AC, but I usually sleep with the windows open just to hear the ocean waves crash. Who needs a white noise machine when you have the real thing?

Most summers, Katie and I would throw a few sundresses into a bag the second that school let out and decamp for Lodgehampton until Labor Day. It was easy enough to get back to the city with the boat, or if Daddy was using that, a helicopter charter. But this summer, I'd been going back and forth much more—and loving every second of it. It was the best of both worlds.

Daddy doesn't work as much in the summer, which is divine. We get to have leisurely family meals together and Le Cirque on Fridays. At home, in our prewar classic six, Marta always has a table or a highball cart prepared just so.

And this summer, I'd at long last joined the masses of typical American teens in a manner wholly unexpected:

This summer, I had a job.

Mind you, I was working at *Vogue*. So maybe not completely typical teen stuff. Technically I was a fashion intern, but after my first week on staff, I'd been scooped up to work as personal assistant to Grace Coddington.

(I know!)

I guess that woman really does recognize style when she sees it.

The job was tailor-made for me; Grace and I were so alike, I could anticipate her needs before she did (she starts her day with a matcha green tea latte, no sugar, at 9:30 a.m. on the dot, and she always drinks a decaf of the same at 3, preferably with a Millefoglie from Sant Ambroeus. She always takes calls from Anna, never from press. And woe to the assistant who shows her page layouts without proofing typos first). I had access to the magazine's infamous closet—Mecca, practically—and managed to squeeze in a little shopping of my own in between errands (Nelle at Barneys has all my sizes and cosmetics colors on file).

All that, and they're incredibly flexible about scheduling. Meaning I'm free to spend extra-long weekends at Lodgehampton, and take off afternoons to help Mother prepare for our party.

You can see why my work feels so much like play.

“M’hija, you’re grinning like the cat that ate the canary.”

“Hmm?” We were stretched out on the rear deck of the boat, cupping foamy cappuccinos to protect them from the wind as the boat cut smoothly through the water. I sat up and crossed my legs so I was facing her.

“Just thinking about how lucky we are, I guess. Looking forward to the holiday. The party. It would be hard not to smile, surrounded by all this . . .” I gestured at the expanse of clean, squishy white cushions, the brilliant sunlight, the green-blue water surrounding us on all sides. “I may be a little bit pampered”—Mom gave an uncharacteristically indelicate snort at this—“but I’m not a sociopath.”

“Glad to hear it,” she said, sincere. “We are lucky to have all of this, of course. And we should be grateful. But we have nothing if we don’t have . . .” She eyed me, prompting me to finish the thought.

“Family,” I said on cue.

“Family,” she echoed. She finished her coffee and licked a fluff of foam from her lip. “Now, for the party décor—”

“Well, I already know you’re not impressed by Kelly Klein’s donut wall,” I said, laughing. “But the macarons?”

“Well, if they’re from Laudrée, they could never be tacky, but we can be more inspired. *Quality always.*” Our motto, and I mouthed the words along with her. “In any event, I told you, it’s all mostly set. Rafe sent over the book with all the party details last week. Sparklers instead of swizzle sticks

for the cocktails. Nautical wreaths with red, white, and blue threading. Mini lobster rolls and ahi tacos in waxed paper served on the balconies.”

“Urban picnic, I love it,” I gushed. “I’ll get the book and we can go over today’s game plan.” I loved that our designer didn’t use Pinterest or Instagram; analog was his appeal. It made his creations that much more unexpected . . . and exclusive.

I slid off the cushions and padded down the deck through the saloon and down the stairs to my parents’ cabin. I stopped just outside the door, though. Daddy was on the phone, and he didn’t sound happy.

“And when were you going to tell me about this?” he was saying, his voice low but shaking with anger. He paused, listening to something from the other side of the conversation. “That’s not good enough. Those payments—”

The boat rocked suddenly, as we passed through choppy waters. I lost my balance at the same time as Daddy’s door swung open. The expression in his eyes went blank as he took me in. “I’ll have to call you back,” he said, terse, and hung up without waiting for a response.

“M’hija,” he said, turning to me as he slid his phone into his pocket, “can I help you with something?”

“I, uh, was just looking for Rafe’s book for the party. Mom and I were going to go over last-minute details, figure out the day. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you,” I

stammered. Forceful phone calls were hardly new for Daddy, but there'd been something in his voice, just now—a desperate pitch to his anger that wasn't normal.

Or was I just imagining things?

“Of course,” he said, and stepped out of my way so I could move to Mother's nightstand. As I passed by, he ran a palm over the back of my head, like I was a little girl he was tucking in at night.

I froze. “Is . . . is something wrong, Daddy?”

“Of course not,” he said, without hesitation. “There's nothing to worry about. You grab the book and get back to your mother. It's going to our most magical Fourth of July ever.”

“Okay,” I said. I tried to sound like I meant it. *You're just imagining things*, I insisted in my head.

But somehow, it didn't quite feel true.

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TO: JOSIE

Reggie:

Hello, kitty

Josie:

...

Reggie:

If you're wondering why I'm up at the buttcrack of dawn, it's for you.

Josie:

Mantle, how many times have I told you not to do anything for me?

Reggie:

Not even if I managed to score the Pussycats a primo 4th of July gig?

Josie:

Not interested. Did u miss the part where we're performing at Town Hall Square? Like we do every year?

Reggie:

Key words "every year." Bigger and better, sweetie.

Josie:

Reg, honey, read my text: In this case, size doesn't matter.

Josie:

Move along little boy. My girls & I need to focus.

CHAPTER FOUR

ARCHIE

I never thought of myself as a complicated guy. What you see is what you get: Small-town high school kid. Football, family dinners, milk shakes with my friends at Pop's after school. You get the picture.

Summers were always the same: long days swimming in Sweetwater River with Betty, movies at the Twilight with Jughead at night. Extra-long Frisbee tosses with Vegas. Dad grilling burgers at dusk—usually dropping one, which was great for Vegas, a pain for Mom and me, who were usually starving by then.

But things change, I guess, even in a small town like Riverdale where you think nothing ever does. And I should know. Because Mom left two years ago, and she hasn't come back.

That was hard enough. And this summer, things are

weird. Betty's off in LA, which is so great for her. But I have to admit, I miss her like crazy. And Jug and I . . . well, we're not really hanging out that much. It's mostly my fault, I guess. Because . . . well, because of other stuff happening that I never expected. The kind of stuff that changes everything.

When I was little, I liked to play "What if?" "*What if I'm still awake when Mom comes upstairs?*" (She read me an extra bedtime story.) "*What if I enter Vegas in that dog show?*" (That was Betty's suggestion. But he threw up on the judges, so, no prizes for us.) "*What if I try out for Little League even if I'm nervous?*" (Little Archie made shortstop!)

But as you get older, the stakes of the "what if" game get higher. What if I'd gone with Mom when she left, instead of staying with Dad? For once, I'd know what it was like to be in a big city, what life outside of Riverdale really had to offer.

But on the flip side, what if Dad didn't have me around this summer to help with his business? He pretended he was just making work for me, doing me a favor, letting me pour concrete and stuff. But I know better. I've seen him at night, hunched over the dining room table with a calculator and a stack of bills in his hands. I hear him on the phone, trying to haggle with vendors or chase payments from clients. It's a tough time for construction. Having me around means one extra pair of hands, one less salary to scrounge up.

Then there are the smaller things, the ones that have ripple effects you can't possibly see coming. What if Dad hadn't decided to clean out the garage that first week of the summer? Where would I be then?

I thought he was crazy. It was insanely hot, the kind of weather that breaks records and turns into the only thing anyone wants to talk about. But Dad didn't care; when he set his mind to something, that was that. So there we were, on a hazy June evening, my arms, neck, back burning from a ten-hour shift, holed up in the stuffy garage. It was hot as an oven and smelled like dust and gasoline.

"Do we have to do this now?" I groaned. I was collapsed into an ancient lawn chair. I could barely keep my eyes open. "I'm dead. Aren't you dead? How are you not dead?" This was earlier in the summer, before I'd started to fill out, so I couldn't keep up with the work without coming home ten kinds of sore.

Dad laughed at me. "Son, when you're my age, dead is kind of the default. You learn to push through. Try it."

"Let's not and say we did?"

"You know what they say, Arch," he said, pulling a sagging cardboard box from the corner. "One man's trash is another man's—"

"Soviet-era melon baller?" I shook my head at what he was holding up. I'd only ever seen them on TV shows set in the sixties. "Come on, Dad. Are you serious?"

Dad frowned. “Hmm. Better throw that in the ‘keep’ pile.”

“What?” He was hopeless, so I had to jump in. “Don’t be crazy. I’ll start a pile for the Salvation Army. I grabbed the melon baller out of his hands before he could argue, even though my shoulders twinged with every move.

One scooter with a broken wheel, one terrifying stuffed clown that was definitely haunted, and three stacks of musty comic books (those I kept) later, and there it was, staring at me from the bottom of a box: a photo of the whole family. Mom, Dad, and me. Even Vegas was there, his tongue hanging out of his mouth like it does when he gets excited. In the photo we were all smiling. Dad had an arm around Mom and she was hugging me.

Was that when it started? Whatever it was that told her she’d be better off without us? Was this photo a clue? Dad looking at her, but her looking straight ahead? Should we have known? Seen it coming?

“Uh, hey Dad,” I started, uneasy, “I’ve been meaning to ask . . . Have you talked to Mom recently?” Maybe they’d been in secret contact all along. Maybe she knew he was struggling with the business. Maybe she’d been planning to come back, and she was packing a bag right then.

The *What if* game again.

Dad stiffened. “She’s pretty busy. You know, she just started that job with that new firm.”

“Right.” I’d been trying not to think about that. New job meant she was planning to stay a while. Even I couldn’t pretend different. “So, I take that as a no.”

“Hey!” For a second I thought Dad was responding to me, like he was upset that I’d even brought it up or something. But when I looked over, his eyes were shiny and he was pulling something big and bulky out of a box. “Now *here’s* something worth hanging on to. My old Stratocaster.”

“Whoa.” Even I knew a vintage piece when I saw it. It was green, glossy, and evenly coated with garage grime, with a white fretboard that was scratched and worn through the mother-of-pearl inlay. Some of the strings were loose, and a few were missing. But even with all of that . . . it was a thing of major beauty. “Dad, you used to play?”

My dad was a musician, once upon a time? *How* had that never come up? It was like I had to rethink everything I thought I knew about the old man.

What if he’d been *cool*, once?

“Oh, now and again,” he said, strumming the saggy strings. They made a quiet little pinging sound that made me desperate to plug the thing in and let ‘er rip.

“That’s sick, Dad. The good sick, I mean. Can I try it?” Suddenly there was nothing I wanted more.

Dad gave me a look. “You should know never to touch another man’s guitar, Arch! Besides, I bought you your own. Remember?”

I remembered. He had given it to me for my sixteenth birthday. An acoustic Gibson in a dark wood that was solid and heavy when you held it. I played well enough . . . but never outside my own bedroom. The idea of playing for other people made me break into a cold sweat.

You could call it stage fright, but a part of me wondered. . . .was I just waiting for my inspiration? And *what if* it never came along.

But it turned out, I didn't have to worry about that.

“Earth to Archie? What’s going on in there?”

“Huh?” I blinked. The sun was coming up, lighting up Ms. Grundy—Geraldine’s—picture window. She stood in front of it like a shadow, with a confused look on her face. The sun made her hair glow. *Your hair glowing in the sunlight.* Hmm. Maybe that was a song lyric? I couldn't stop thinking in lyrics around her. She just had that effect on me. God, *I* was a character from a cheesy love song. “Oh, sorry, I guess I was just thinking.”

“Must've been some deep thoughts.” She smiled. “You were in a trance there.”

I was. Playing that *what if* game again. *What if* Betty hadn't gone to LA, and my dad hadn't asked me to come work for him? *What if* we'd never dug up that old guitar so I'd take to playing again, even if I was only playing for myself? *What if* I hadn't been walking home from work alone, that hot,

humid date late in June, when a light blue VW bug that I didn't recognize pulled up . . . ?

“Archie Andrews? What are you doing, walking in this heat?”

I squinted. The woman behind the wheel had wavy, dark blond hair and worried-looking eyes behind sunglasses. Ms. Grundy! Riverdale High's music teacher. I almost didn't recognize her, outside of school and not all buttoned-up the way she was when she was working. “Umm, building character?” It sounded silly when I said, and we both laughed.

“Well, hop in before you die of heat stroke,” she said, leaning across the seat to open the door for me.

That day, she dropped me straight at home. I didn't think much of it, except for how weird it always is to see school people out in real life. But the next day, she was waiting for me just past the construction site again, like she'd actually planned to drive me home. And then the next day, she was there again, and after that, it was like we'd just come to some unspoken agreement.

There's a part of me that will always think it was fate, running into her that day. Because suddenly I had a person to talk to about the guitar . . . and the songs I'd started writing—just scribbles, mostly, at first. She saw the guitar on my porch one afternoon and asked me if I played.

I was worried that I wouldn't be good enough for her. I tried to protest, but she insisted. I was scared she'd run away, and I'd be right back where I started, alone.

But she listened and took me seriously. She saw something in me that no one else had, not even Betty. When I played for her, she smiled at me and . . . everything made sense.

“You have potential, Archie,” she told me. “Have you considered private lessons?”

We both knew what she was really asking. And we both knew the answer to that: yes.

Eventually, we were sharing . . . other things. One afternoon, without saying a word, Geraldine took an unexpected turn on our way home. The next thing I knew, she’d parked the car down a little hideaway bank of the Sweetwater River. Soon it became our place.

Maybe—probably—a part of me knew what we were doing was wrong (she was a teacher, after all—it was probably even illegal, even though it was what we both wanted) . . . but it didn’t matter. As time went on, my feelings for her became stronger than for anyone I’d ever met before. Soon, she was the most important person in my life.

That was why I’d come running over this morning (literally, I was still in my sweaty Riverdale gym shorts, which maybe wasn’t so romantic, but it was the easiest way to get to her first thing in the morning without raising any suspicions). It was July third, the holiday was here, and I wanted to do something special with her. I wanted to be with her, always.

I turned to Geraldine now. “I was just thinking about the

Fourth,” I started, feeling a little nervous even though I didn’t know why. “Uh. . . . are you doing anything for the holiday?”

Geraldine gave a little smirk while she poured herself a cup of coffee. “Actually, I was going to go camping down by the river..” She took a sip. “Want to come?”

We both knew the answer to that, too.

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TO: JASON

DAD:

JJ, you will respond to these texts. I know you've seen Cheryl. I know you're receiving these. I need to know that you're on board.

DAD:

This is not a joke, young man. I have expectations. We all do. You have a duty to your family. You are a Blossom.

DAD:

You have responsibilities.

DAD:

Jason, there will be consequences for your disobedience.

Dad:

Stay put. The snake is on the way.

Jason:

He's late and people are here wondering why I'm here so early. Looks weird.

Dad:

Just do as you're told.

Jason:

Fine.

Dad:

Good boy.

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TO: POLLY

Jason:

Please tell me we're still on. I can't wait to be done with all of this.

Polly:

We're so close, baby . . .

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TO: JASON

Cheryl:

Darling brother, your plan is insane & so is Daddy.
Tread lightly. I'll do what I can but BE CAREFUL.
Also don't hang around Pop's much longer—
starting to look weird.

